Ties that bind the daily lives of carpet traders

An ethnographic exploration of the everyday lives of carpet traders through their kinship ties, moral economies, and acts of everyday diplomacy in Iran, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

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I take full responsibility for the quality and accuracy of the content of this project. Following the anthropological convention, pseudonyms are used throughout.

Abstract

On August 6, 2019, international sanctions on Iran were reintroduced. Through my personal quest to understand the carpet trade, written as an ethnographic exploration, this thesis follows the everyday life trajectories of carpet traders in the context of Iran, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. These life trajectories are made comprehensible based on the themes: Kinship Ties, Moral Economy, and Everyday Diplomacy. In doing this, it contributes to the understanding of global trade networks from the perspective of globalization from below. Few ethnographies are written on the social lives of contemporary carpet traders, but there are many assumptions and opinions on how the trade develops in the face of globalization and geopolitical conflict. Previous research on traders generally considered their activities based on survival strategies. Later research recognized the flexibility, creativity, and skill in their work. In times of international sanctions and the increasing influence of globalization, I use these bodies of literature on trade, kinship, morality, and everyday diplomacy, to explore how the everyday live trajectories of carpet traders are embedded in other life domains, outside the economical. By focusing on the three themes, I show how carpet traders find clever ways to handle geopolitical conflict. Besides, I explore how their actions and the maintaining of their social relations are based on identity, morality, and negotiations about trust and betrayal.

Key themes: *Iran, The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Trading networks, Carpet traders, Globalization from below, Commodity Circulation, Kinship Ties, Moral Economy, Everyday Diplomacy.*

Preface

Bright sunbeams pierced through the dusty front-end windows of the truck I was sitting in. The driver, who was sitting next to me, was talking loudly and vehemently. He used facial expressions and hand gestures to get his message across, as only a handful of English words were part of his vocabulary. He had picked me up from the side of the road a few miles ago, where I was waiting and waving with my hand-written cardboard mentioning 'Iran', signaling drivers to give me a ride. Now, a couple of hours later, I am about to reach the Iranian border in the northwest of Iran. As the old Russian *Kamaz* roars up the winding mountain road, the Iranian hills are closing in slowly. What struck me immediately, as I approached the first checkpoint, was the surprising way the border fence marked a sudden change in the visible features of the landscape. At the Armenian side of the fence, the grass was intensely green, while it was more sand-colored, almost gold-like, on the Iranian side. It was August 2018. A new country lied in front of me, with fascinating sceneries, curious languages, delicious food, astounding architecture, unmatched hospitality, and most importantly for me, its vibrant carpet business.

A friend and I had travelled to Iran several times before and we both became fascinated by the carpets we saw during our trips. During my travels, I always visited the local carpet bazaar. Naturally, when I finally reached the city of Tabriz, famous for having one of the oldest bazaars in the Middle East, I started searching for the carpet section. Already at that time, I had a fascination for these beautiful textiles and potential business interest. Carpet[1] enthusiasts are often travelers, keen observers, readers, or connoisseurs. They are curious about foreign cultures and feel compelled to learn about the political and economic circumstances that influence the production of their favorite pieces; I am no exception.

While I tried to get accustomed to the behaviors of these carpet traders and to understand the lives they were living, I soon noticed a widespread concern among these traders with their economic and political circumstances. My youthful excitement for hitchhiking soon transformed into a passion for finding out what was going on. At first, interacting with these traders was no easy matter, as I had to pierce through their smooth business talk and their unwearying friendliness, which is common in Iran. Many people have warned me not to trust carpet dealers blindly. However, after a while, they slowly revealed their stories. The US sanctions were put into effect again on August 6. The consequences for the carpet trade, their local currency, amongst other things, were feisty topics of conversation. I had heard about these sanctions and the effects it has on the business, but experiencing the frustration firsthand in the bazaar was something different. I checked the news, using a VPN, and there it was; no more Persian carpets exported from any country to the US, "the carpet pipeline will be completely dried up" (Leamy, 'Looking for a Persian rug?'). While these traders were upset, and some of them suffered in one way or the other, they were also resilient. They surprised me by stating that:

[1] The words 'carpet' and 'rug' are used interchangeably throughout this project.

“This is how things go in Iran, we are used to it. We will always find a solution and keep continue our trade. No one will ever make us not continue and take away our love for it.”

Because of these personal stories in Tabriz, amongst other places in Iran, my trip took an unexpected turn. What started as a personal fascination grew into an initial business plan for importing carpets from Iran to the Netherlands. From this new standpoint, I started to become more curious about how Dutch traders and connoisseurs would describe the trade of Persian carpets. A trader in Utrecht drew my attention to an article written in the newspaper *De Telegraaf* with the ominous title *‘Donkere toekomst voor Perzische tapijten*[2]*’.* What this article argues, is that conflicts, such as the reintroduction of US sanctions, will eliminate the carpet trade, its culture, and the unique art it embodies for good. The whole carpet trade will collapse and disappear, as there will only be ill-made carpets left. The Dutch carpet trader, who suggested me to read this article, was, however, not convinced. Instead, he made the bold claim that people, in general, are misinformed about the carpet trade and that the ways in which the media represents this sector lack nuance and depth, a claim that piqued my interest.

These news articles and the conversations I had with carpet traders in Iran and Europe made me wonder: to what extent is there an in-depth understanding of carpet traders in the literature? Half a year later, I ended up doing a three-month multi-sited anthropological study in Iran, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

Through this prologue, I want to show why and how I approached this project. Understanding my point of view from which I started this project is crucial since I was becoming a trader myself. This project was a personal quest to deepen my understanding of the social and personal aspects of the carpet trade. Being a researcher and business partner simultaneously allowed me to ask specific business-related questions I would not have proposed as a tourist, as these are daily topics among carpet traders to discuss.

Since the three months project started in an economic and political turbulent era, I had to be careful whom I approached and how I dealt with the information I gathered. It is essential to treat the personal information of these traders with the greatest care. Due to preserving the participants’ anonymity, it was not always possible to have a detailed description of the surroundings and the participants' characteristics, as they would give away specific locations or identities. Whatever my driving incentives were - being it as an anthropologist, or a business person, or both at the same time - human responsibility to take an ethical stance on the personal situation of any research participant is essential — no matter the country I met these traders. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) points out, the political dramas of the lives of people are often played out in their everyday lives. - 17-07-2019

[2] In Dutch: Dark future for Persian carpets.

Introduction

My return to Iran in February 2019 marked the start of the three-month project. I came back to Iran with the aim to outline the social life of carpet traders by way of an ethnographic analysis. Because I am becoming a trader myself, I am familiar with the technical aspects of carpets, their designs and materials, and different type of knotting, amongst other things. However, these carpets - just like all commodities - are traded in various social settings, some of which I was unfamiliar with. It is the reason why I took the opportunity to write an ethnography on the trade. There are several writings on the social lives of carpet traders, yet the social and cultural conditions in which carpets are traded are known only imperfectly. Apart from writings on traders' social lives, the carpet trade has been studied and reported about in the news purely in the economic domain. Furthermore, these economic domains are usually written from a top-down perspective: how economic globalization and economic sanctions influences the carpet-trading world. During my interviews with carpet traders, I was interested in a bottom-up perspective of how the carpet trade is involved in other dimensions of life besides the economic. Focusing on the carpet trader allows me to link aspects of daily life, culture and economy, since they are closely connected through commodity circulations, which differ in their specific locations.

Two of the three months covering this project were spent in Iran. During my first days in Tehran in February, I immediately revisited the carpet bazaar. While being in bazaars in Iran, I was lost on multiple occasions in the meandering and narrow alleys. During the first days of the project, I met many carpet traders who were willing to share their story with me. It did not take long before I rushed all over Tehran by taxi and metro to meet up with those I had established relationships with. Besides Tehran, I also visited the carpet bazaars of Ardabil, Esfahan, Hamedan, Kashan, Shiraz, Rasht, and Tabriz. Some places I visited during earlier travels.

The third month of the project was spent throughout the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium. I visited carpet shops and galleries throughout the Netherlands, though mostly in Utrecht, Amsterdam, and The Hague. Due to the contacts I had gathered in Iran, I also visited traders in Antwerp and Ghent in Belgium, and Hamburg and Berlin in Germany. Visiting carpet traders in their bazaars, shops, and galleries, I started to realize how rich and manifold the age-old Iranian carpet trade actually is. Amongst these carpet traders, many different categories can be identified. Although I recognize their different interests and business strategies, this project is focused on the everyday lives of carpet traders in general.

I am new to the carpet trade, but I am also "new" to Iran. Since my time was limited, getting in touch with someone with whom I could share my findings and perspectives, someone preferably well-versed in Iranian customs and traditions, seemed like a sensible thing to do. Hence, I tried a surprisingly effective tactic I often use while traveling: I posted on *Couchsurfing*, a website that facilitates hospitality exchange between global travelers, the following request: "I want to go together to the carpet bazaar." Shortly after, I got a response from a 38-year-old Iranian man called Pedram, inviting me to his house

near the Russian Embassy. He worked at an oil company, but his photographic work and artistic endeavors were much more fulfilling to him. It was especially through my long discussions, often late at night, with Pedram that I was able to interpret the cultural setting in which I was doing my research. He would prevent me from romanticizing the lives of carpet traders and help me interpreting their behavior. He also ensured that I behaved myself "properly." His insightful remarks on the Iranian habit of *Taroff*[3], for example, were useful. On various occasions in Iran, carpet traders introduced themselves, saying "Do not worry, I do not use *Taroff,"* before even stating their name. I interpreted those introductions as these traders being familiar with "the international environment of the carpet trade." On other occasions, I learned to politely reject "clearly too generous of offers" when introduced to people.

This project does not aim to discover the "true" story of the global carpet trade. That would be too strong a claim, considering that my research largely relies on what these carpet traders[4] told me and, perhaps more importantly, how I interpreted them. The traders' stories were all different, as they were deeply influenced by economic, social, and cultural circumstances. This project is also not a historical text, written with the intention to discuss the origin of carpets, to delve into their technical aspects, or to decipher their meaning. Instead, it analyzes the social world of how these people trade that particular commodity. As such, this research fits into the wider field of the social lives of objects, initiated by Arjun Appadurai's book: *The Social Life of Things*.

The social lives of carpet traders were first documented by Helfgott (1994) in his book *Ties that Bind*, although it is worth mentioned that this work is mainly a historical text. Helfgott's work helps us understand the intricacies of Iranian society: its economic development, gender relations, and art history. He discusses in great detail how the carpet-manufacturing industry has evolved over the years as well as the influence the West has had on it. As early as 1880, German, Russian, American, and Italian firms started carpet factories in various Iranian cities. During this period, Western investors influenced the way carpets were designed and knotted, as they still do to this day. Helfgott argues that rug merchants and scholars who lived in the early 19th century were already reacting to global demand, as they "created a nomenclature[5] that assigns rugs according to design and structure to particular groups of nomadic pastoralists" (p. 149). For example, the words "nomadic" and "tribal" are often used to characterize and sell carpets, in and outside of Iran, of which the origin is unknown.

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[3] *Taroff*, is a form of discretion and compliment in Iranian culture in which people try to show their respect. For example, when people pass an entrance, they stop and ask others to enter first. This can take a while. Usually the oldest person finally accepts to enter first.

[4] Throughout the thesis, I use the words 'merchant' and 'trader' interchangeably.

[5] Scientific nomenclature entails the systematically naming of various aspects within the same (research) field. In this way, clear names are given to plants, animals, and chemical substances. The purpose of this is to clarify communication.

What happened to the descendants of the early carpet traders discussed in *Ties that Bind*? When we look at how the contemporary carpet trade is discussed in academic literature, we see that the current debate mostly revolves around the way carpet merchants increasingly respond to global customer needs (Moallem, 2018). The literature on carpet traders is similar to that of traders in general in that it mainly focuses on the economic aspects. While the economic aspects of the carpet trade have been discussed, it is evident that the global economic success of the carpet trade has led to a change in social needs within societies, and perceived inferiority and superiority between societies (Spooner, 1988). These changes arise because of cultural borrowing, the communication and spread of cultural ideas and symbols. Although it is pointed out that the economic success of the carpet trade affects traders' social lives, the social conditions that encompass these changes are barely known. There is a lack of independent ethnography on these social conditions. There are simply few scholars that have touched upon the question of how contemporary carpet traders negotiate business within their social environments in a fast-changing, globalized world.

Before I focus on carpet traders, I first examine the anthropology of trade in general. In contemporary writing about traders, anthropologists mostly consider traders in relation to their survival strategies, processes of state formation, and movements of religiously informed anti-state militancy in "failed states." Nowadays, anthropologists understand that analyzing commodity traders solely in terms of their economic actions is simplistic (Marsden, 2016). Their activities are now characterized by their capacities for flexibility, creativity, and skill (Marsden, 2016). Still, in his ethnography on traders in central Asia, Marsden argues that the Afghan trader is often portrayed as pre-modern. Such assessments obscure the understanding of their daily aspects of morality, economics, and politics, amongst other things and how traders have realized "integration through a lively trade in various forms." In sum, the daily aspects of trading are often described in economic terms and therefore remain poorly understood in anthropological literature (Freeman, 2007; Smart & Smart, 2005).

Because the everyday social lives of carpet traders are not very well understood, there is a gap in the literature between the cultural representations, success, and commoditization of carpets in relation to their global trade. To gain a better understanding of this global scale, the local conditions of economic strategies have to be considered first. As Moallem states, "the questions of labor and capital cannot be separated from the affective collective experiences of the everyday" (2018, p. 4). The contemporary Iranian carpet trade's relationship to the world is additionally rarely captured or discussed outside of statistics or the assumption that globalization and geopolitical situations will negatively affect it. The recent geopolitical turmoil that affects Iran makes it relevant to explore globalization, since these same situations have also opened up and made possible surprising business strategies.

To fill the gap between culture and economy, my intention is to let carpet traders reflect on their work as traders. Their reflections allow me to see carpet traders as agents of globalization rather

than as the "fortunate" survivors of its destructive tendency to wipe out local entrepreneurship. Data show that carpet traders do not act the ways statistics suggest they do or how news articles describe their actions. Therefore, we cannot instantly arrive at a complete understanding of the carpet trade as a whole; there is no one story on globalization.

I aim to interpret the local actions and choices these traders make to perform their strategies, since their behavior ultimately make up the global trade. Their social and cultural relations form the basis for local relations, regional exchanges, and ultimately global commodity chains. As Mandel and Humphrey (2002) point out, the attitudes and practices, even within the same bazaar or a shopping mall, are by no means uniform. Carpet traders in Europe similarly have to adapt to a changing market and global geopolitical economic events. Isik's (2010) ethnography on carpet traders in Turkey shows that their modes of economics cannot be understood without situating the trade within a cultural context. She argues that the realm of carpet traders' economics cannot be understood outside of the social, political, and cultural realms on which they are dependable. Carpet merchants in the Turkish city of Konya rely on what she calls "relational ties and patronage" (p. 62), which are the basis of these political and economic realms. Isik shows that within the Konyan carpet industry, having a successful trade business is dependent on whether the trader is able to maintain and skillfully negotiate these relational ties within the community. These relational ties are constantly negotiated in order to influence the free competition of clientele and connections. In practice, a carpet trader must be flexible, as the negotiations can lead to success or the restriction of their business altogether.

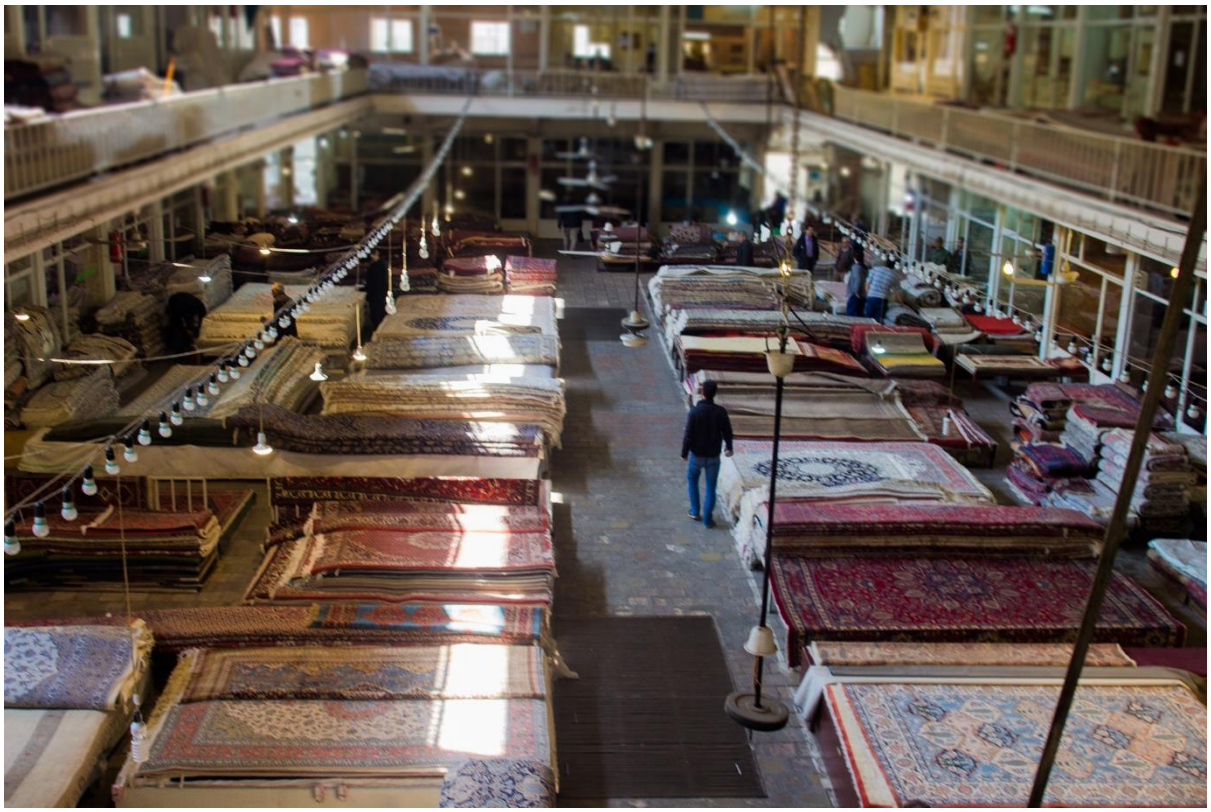
Following the "bottom-up" stories of individual carpet traders enhances the understanding of their complex, everyday lives. I followed carpet traders' everyday life trajectories in order to understand how such relational ties, described by Isik, are constantly negotiated between trust and betrayal. I am also interested in how their social and cultural lives are embedded in the economic practices of the trade. The data that I obtained and interpreted are categorized into three themes that, I argue, make up most of the carpet traders' daily trading lives: kinship ties, moral economy, and acts of diplomacy. These themes act as anchor points in this project by contributing to the local social understanding of how carpet traders participate in the contemporary globalized world. Because I am examining my participants, the carpet traders, as global agents, I create an image of the global carpet trade from the bottom up: the intimate experiences of routes, markets, and people in locations across which carpets are traded. In this context, the carpet acts as a particular commodity that plays an intermediate role between these trading networks. The social conditions that people attribute to the circulation of commodities, like carpets, are namely derived from human transactions and motivations across boundaries of countries, languages, trust, and social and cultural settings. These social conditions entail unwritten contracts and moral obligations, and they act as diplomats, negotiating bonds across different ethnicities, countries, and languages. Examining these social conditions, it becomes clear how carpet traders' networks are maintained by a thin line between trust and betrayal.

In sum, the analysis of these carpet traders' everyday life trajectories is based on the following research question: How do carpet traders value the social and cultural practices that are intertwined in the trading of carpets by following their everyday life trajectories?

Structure

The research question is answered in five chapters. In chapter one, the context of the carpet trade and the theoretical context are explained. In chapter two, I explore how kinship relations and networks play a crucial role in carpet traders' success. I more importantly reveal how these kinship ties are related to economic practices. In chapter three, I explore the moral economy of these carpet traders as it shows morality and the reflection on their work. In chapter four, I explore carpet traders' activities acts of diplomacy. Their work is characterized by their surprising skills and cleverness. In chapter five, I finally elaborate on the importance of the argument this project reveals.

Chapter 1 - Context



[6] Photo: Carpet bazaar of Tehran, photo taken by Felix van den Belt, 03-03-2019, Tehran.

1.1 Iran

This chapter provides personal context about my gatekeeper in the field, the context of the contemporary carpet trade, and an exploration of the most important theoretical concepts used in this project. I then elaborate on the multi-sited aspect of this project and my position in it.

To understand the Iranian context better, I met with Pedram, who I mentioned in the introduction. On that first day, we talked about carpets. He told me, "As a start, to understand carpets traders, one should understand the changes in Iranian culture over time. You see, everything in Iran is based on metaphors. The meaning of carpets can historically be seen in this context. Because carpets contained social and cultural representations, they were a link between the king and its peoples as they were social and cultural representations. It was a way for them to represent themselves, to transfer money, and a way of creating artistic meaning. The motifs and metaphors throughout Iran are part of that, they are everywhere, also in carpets."

Pedram continued by explaining that the carpet trade changed drastically in the time of Shah Reza[7]: "the carpet trade moved to factories, and therefore different benefits and logic hijacked it. Originally, I think that carpets were about meaning, carpets are not for excitement or enjoyment, as those will not give you the ultimate answer of life." Pedram stated that carpets refer to the interplay between the outside and inside life of Iranian culture: "Some carpet traders are aware of that. They have a certain status and are proud of their work. Others will try to abuse that trade." Pedram warned me, "The people of Iran will tell stories as if they were dreams. They will always have done amazing things in the past, or they will achieve something in the future. The present experience is a dream of great things."

Amanj, an artist and friend of Pedram, who was also present, added "I like to live in that Iranian dream. It is like bricolage. Iranians always find a way to solve things in one way or another. It is not the perfect way, but it is our way. The stories you will find are not always scientifically accurate, as they are part of that dream. Carpet traders are many things, have many incentives and motives, wrapped up in compelling and inspiring stories."

Although I am, for example, not focusing on what Pedram calls "the role carpets played between the king and its people," these conversations still influenced this project. It was through these kinds of dialogs that I began to understand how to interact with Iranian society, especially interpreting the stories of Iranian carpet traders.

[7] Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Tehran, October 26, 1919 - Cairo, July 27, 1980) was the eldest son of Reza Pahlavi, who from 1925 to 1941 was shah of Persia (from 1935).

1.2 The carpet trade

Global carpet trade continues to be significant in terms of its economic value. In Asia, millions of people are directly or indirectly dependent on the carpet trade. In 2014, Iran exported 500 million USD worth of handmade carpets annually, which dropped to 314 million USD two years later as a consequence of economic sanctions (The Financial Tribune, 2016). Other factors that define the current state of the Iranian carpet trade are global competition, lower qualities of local production, lack of local expertise, new marketing strategies, and the production of machine-made carpets (Nasrat & Karimi, 2016). Statistics have shown that the "Persian carpet" dropped from being the most crucial Iranian export product - after oil - down to the tenth (Aghdaie & Zardeini, 2012).

This decline in Iran's export of carpets is something carpet traders complain about, as I noticed the first time I visited Iran. These effects are severe and, to some traders, devastating. However, some traders have found ways to effectively bypass these sanctions, such as by using cryptocurrencies like bitcoin. In early 2019, the Iranian government had already lifted the ban on these virtual currencies. As I experienced firsthand, an increasing number of transactions between carpet merchants and their buyers are now dealt with using bitcoins. These transactions are evidently not included in the latest statistical data on the carpet trade.

Although the use of bitcoins is a potential solution to international sanctions, it remains a tricky business. The whole process takes a few minutes at longest, but it is risky because the bitcoin rate can sharply fluctuate at any given moment.

The process of following carpet traders and analyzing their unusual trading connections also allows me to criticize theories on global commodity chains, since carpets often do not travel in ways these theories assert. For example, one trader in the Netherlands pointed out that carpets - at least in the higher segments - are increasingly traded from Germany to Turkey, as wealthy Turkish collectors can quickly join online carpet auctions. This demonstrates that carpets are not just traveling from carpet-producing countries, like Turkey and Iran, to the West; they are increasingly traveling back from the West to these places. This example also demonstrates that to understand the everyday lives of the carpet traders that make up transnational trading networks, multi-sited ethnography in Iran, the Netherlands, and other places is essential. This enables me to put the characteristics of these networks into perspective on a global scale, revealing how they intertwine with layers of economic and social practices.

1.3 Politics of carpets

Nowadays, global carpet production has increased drastically due to lower production costs and the introduction of machine-made carpets, among other things. Even people with a lower socioeconomic status can afford a decent carpet. As I am told, many Iranian carpet weavers have such lower-priced, machine-made carpets in their houses on which they knot the handmade ones.

Carpets are a particular kind of commodity. Their complex status affects the manner in which they are traded. They are not simply traded in the manner of supply and demand, but their trade coincides with a supply of information about them. Spooner (1988) points out that the carpet, as an object, is not simply an artifact. It is created by particular individuals with specific materials and within a variety of unique social and cultural conditions. Carpets' complicated history and popular status have influenced their circulation, production, and consumption around the world (Mirrazavi, 2012). In this project, I use the concept of commodities - in accordance with the work of Moallem (2018) - as an object of material culture. That object is, at least in the West, invested with "Oriental"[8] value and is an object that circulates in the global marketplace.

Once carpets were produced in large numbers, they became a transportable commodity. They were subsequently transported in all types of shapes, sizes, and qualities. Many scholars have pointed out that the status of carpets and their intermediary role has led to "orient portraits" of carpets over time, as their complex status encompasses a demand for information. These portraits were meant to inform customers all over the world, including Iranians, about the region the carpet comes from, how its quality is determined, or what the symbolic interpretation of the design is.

As a result of mass production, trade is no longer based on economic value and modes of taste alone (Spooner, 1988). The accessibility of carpets to the wider audience and the demand for information leads to the problem of authenticity. Carpet traders consequently become tied up with the politics of connoisseurship and the manner in which rugs are presented to their audience. A solution to this problem is to complicate the criteria for authenticity. That very debate between craftsmanship experts, dealers, producers, and scholars, is part of that same Oriental image. As Keshavarzian (2007, p. 188) argues, and which partly inspired this thesis, it is clear that "nonstandard commodities [such as the carpet] play an intermediary role in the shaping of relations." The commodity of the carpet, therefore, becomes invested with a system of status criteria: "good taste," expert knowledge, and "originality" (Spooner, 1988).

[8] The Oriental is part of the wider concept Orientalism which a term mentioned by, among others, Edward Saïd (1978), who theorized that it is a discourse of the Other, often from the middle east, which has manifested itself mainly in the West. In entails the mystical, the dangerous, the strange, and at the same time the exotic middle-east.

1.4 Southeast Asia

The effects of globalization and international sanctions on the Iranian carpet trade are evident, but a less-discussed development could potentially influence the future carpet trade. Iranian carpet dealers are increasingly looking for new markets, as Western markets are difficult to access, and they have found new markets in Southeast Asia. Iranian carpet traders, who often act as ambassadors, travel to countries like Vietnam and Thailand to negotiate cultural exhibitions of Persian carpets. During their travels, they try to improve the cultural awareness of Persian carpets as a tradition and share their expertise, since the audience in Southeast Asia is less familiar with Iranian carpets than European or American audiences. These developments show that in response to sanctions by Western countries, Iranian carpet merchants are seeking alternative markets in the East and Southeast Asia (Erami, 2019). In doing so, their goal is to motivate people to travel to Iran and see the people and land that produce these carpets themselves.

1.5 Theoretical context

This project does not focus on political or economic factors, the driving factors of the globalization of the carpet trade, as described by Helfgott (1994) and others. Instead, as mentioned earlier, I focus on globalization from below: the human interaction with carpets as commodities and the reality of traders within cultural communities.

The debate about globalization has different meanings to different people in various contexts and disciplines. It is certain that globalization increased the mobility of production, development, and communication among nations on a worldwide scale, consisting of the political, economic, and social landscapes. Many researchers have argued that globalization has transformed the way people move and trade globally (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 2007; Ong, 2002). However, others have argued to be careful not to generalize the effects of globalization, stressing that understanding local places matters in terms of how these global changes are experienced (Chakrabarty, 2000; Ong, 2006).

This project identifies three different themes that are part of carpet traders' life trajectories and that together form an image of what can be called "globalization from below": kinship ties, moral economy, and diplomacy. "Globalization from below" is used in this project as a framework to understand how the globalization of the carpet trade is "embedded at the local level in a social, cultural and political system that finds support in traditional familial structures and other social networks" (Mathews, Ribeiro & Vega, 2012, p. 9). By doing this, I explore the bottom-up perspectives of how these carpet traders act as global agents. Recognizing the agency of these traders shows aspects of the global carpet trade beyond the economic domain. I additionally want to demonstrate how the relationship between their networks and the diverse stories of successful entrepreneurship are related to

the three themes that form that image. The first theme, kinship ties, explores the essential, ambivalent social relations needed to be a successful carpet merchant, showing that ties of kinship are not always a synonym for ties of trust. The second theme, moral economy, reveals how carpet traders' daily interactions and practices are embedded in their evaluations of their moral lives, social modes, and identities. The last theme, everyday diplomacy, shows how a carpet trader's practices can be related to the idea of "the diplomat," bringing attention to their skills, knowledge, and competences.

Mathews, Ribeiro, and Vega (2012, p. 3) argue that cities like Cairo, Salloum, Tripoli, and Yiwu function as anchoring points within the global supply line of commodities, dealing with particular geopolitical contexts. They claim that while the new Silk Road is being build, "the logic of this trading route is barely perceptible on a local level but remains fundamental to the functioning of a global network of trade." Since this project is not based on physical locations such as cities but rather on an interpretation of carpet traders' behavior, this project's anchoring points do occasionally overlap. Analyzing these behavioral anchoring points is important, because it allows me to recognize the varying levels at which trading processes unfold through routes, practices, and strategies.

1.6 Multi-sited research

To follow the carpet traders in their various contexts, this multi-sited ethnography was carried out between February 2019 and May 2019. It is multi-sited: two months were spent in Iran and one month between the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. Writing an ethnography is a methodological choice that entails a nuanced type of qualitative research. Throughout this project, I followed the daily interactions of people in the field(s) that constitute, according to O'Reilly (2012), the foundation of the data produced. This type of methodology is comprised of multiple research methods such as participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured and open interviews, and analysis of written and online materials such as documents, papers, books, and social-media pages.

An ethnography usually entails staying in a specified location for an extended period, studying a particular set of social relations. My ethnography differs, as my objective is to study social relations that extend beyond a single location (Falzon, 2016). The essence of such multi-sited research is to follow commodities and reveal connections, associations, and relationships across countries and boundaries. This involves following the life trajectories of carpet merchants as they trade carpets all around the globe. Iran, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany were chosen through the snowball-method[9] and for practical reasons, such as language and the location where I live. Moreover, because I

[9] The snowball method is a qualitative research method in which one or more key informants are asked to bring in other respondents.

wanted to make myself familiar with the carpet trade between Iran and Europe from a business point of view, these locations were logical for this project.

I agree here with what Candea (2007) argues; the multi-sited method should mainly serve to broaden the range of topics considered suitable for such an ethnographic study. While he acknowledges the promising ways to engage with social questions concerning globalization by using ethnography on different locations, he is critical to note that this multi-sided research method should be used with caution. In his view, ethnographers need to contemplate the practical and ethical difficulties that come with being in the field for such a short time. In other words, following the social world of carpet traders for such a short time in each of the locations inevitably comes at the expense of this project's research quality and validity.

Time is scarce in this type of research, but not only the element of time should be considered as a determining factor of this project's outcome. The particular place in which data were collected should also be noted. The stories told are rooted in the soil on which the narrators have spent their lives, making it impossible, even undesired, to disconnect them from the places they are embedded. To me, fieldwork as a methodology is grounded in the sense of being "away from home" and engaging with unfamiliar social environments, even when doing research in the Netherlands, Belgium, or Germany. In other words, the project entails a personal quest of being engaged in the carpet business; the usual practices of the carpet trade are already unusual to me, regardless of the locations. This ethnographic method enables the production of data through the sites in which the research is performed.

1.7 My research position

This multi-sited ethnography is unique in the sense that I am both researcher and a potential business partner for many of the people I met during my research. This surely affected my data, as well as the fact that I am European. For obvious reasons, Iranian carpet traders are interested in European contacts for economic gains. However, a more important reason why Iranians might be interested in interacting with foreigners is because contemporary Iran is, to a large degree, politically and economically isolated from the Western world. Although not all Iranians make use of cultural labels, it is possible that they acted overly friendly. It might be the case that participants in Iran provided me with incorrect information or avoided confrontation by not correcting me if I made a mistake, "just to keep a friendly atmosphere." Furthermore, research of any sort in the region is problematic, considering the geopolitical and economic tensions. It could be dangerous for carpet traders in and also outside of Iran to reveal their opinions, interests, or social networks. To make the participants aware that I was collecting their data, I usually mentioned that I was planning to write a story on the carpet trade. Thus, I purposefully avoided highlighting my connection to a university. My position as a researcher in Iran is problematic

due to political tensions. In the past, various journalists, bloggers and researchers had problems doing their job.

On one occasion, the complicated conditions under which I was doing my research became problematic. I was chatting with a carpet trader in Iran, when he started sharing detailed personal information with me. He revealed aspects of his business, thinking that he was interacting with another carpet trader. At this point, I did not share my second interest in writing a story on the trade. When I did later reveal this interest, he became upset. He argued that I should have explained all of my interests sooner. The ethical dilemma here becomes evident: Should I risk my own and his safety by revealing both my interests immediately when our conversations started? Or do I wait a little longer, first making sure who I am dealing with, while simultaneously taking the risk of that person revealing more than they would have otherwise? The logical solution is that the stories of this particular participant will not be used. As a result of similar safety concerns, all participants' names and locations remain anonymous.

While amidst these merchants in Iran, I interacted through informal conversations that allowed me to, according to DeWalt and DeWalt (2002), engage more naturally with my participants in their locations. These moments of interaction are carefully described in a detailed manner referred to as "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). A thick description is the describing of human behavior within its contexts, so that the behavior can be better understood. Geertz states that it is essential to place important data within their local contexts. In my project, the understanding of how Geertz does ethnography was of practical use. It made me aware of objects in my surroundings I normally overlook. During interviews and observations, I paid attention to details such as refrigerator magnets, the brand of car that participants drove, and even the drinking of coffee from a mug in the carpet bazaar. These seemingly trivial objects can reveal important aspects about someone's status.

I collected data by taking notes of my participant observations, which helped me recall events later on. In Iran, I used my phone to quickly write down notes instead of using pen and paper. Using a smartphone is common in Iran, and no formal interviews or recordings took place in public or open spaces, which helped me to not stand out too much. The disadvantage of using a phone to take notes is that these notes are usually short and superficial. As a consequence, it can become difficult to work with them later on when writing more extensive notes. To solve this problem, Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) propose recalling the day's events and observations in chronological order. Another approach is to focus on "high points," activities that stand out as particularly important. These techniques helped me to structure the information I collected from my memory more systematically. To support this systematic way of collecting data, I used a diary that I consistently wrote in every evening. This allowed me to reflect on the day's activities and reread my notes in chronological order.

Chapter 2 - Kinship Ties

[10]

[10] Photo: carpet bazaar of Tehran, photo taken by Felix van den Belt, 23-02-2019, Tehran.

This chapter explores how the economic aspects of the carpet trade are involved with the ambivalent social relations of kinship ties within various social and cultural contexts and, in doing so, revealing that these ambivalent relations are often based on a balance of trust and betrayal. These carpet traders often rely on bonds of trust and money, contesting the assumption that they are culturally bounded groups or that kinship ties are a synonym for trustworthy relations.

After a long and hectic week in Tehran in the first month of the project, I was once again exhausted of the traffic and sipping on a hot black tea in my host's living room. Meanwhile, I was scrolling on *Instagram*, one of the few social-media platforms still accessible in Iran and therefore used by many traders to promote their business. While I was resting, I stumbled upon the *Instagram* page of a carpet trader with pictures of colorful, modern, yet quite unusual rugs. One of them had an Iranian banknote as its design, something I had not seen before. When I met Hooman, the owner of the *Instagram* page, his ways of doing business seemed just as unusual as his carpets. His shop was small; it was only a few square meters big. Barely four people would fit in it. The floor of the shop was covered with white tiles. The small kitchen had a coffee filter machine, a refrigerator, and a sink. Next to the entrance, only a few carpets were exhibited, which seemed to be of all kinds of different origin and sizes; a strange sight in an Iranian bazaar. Carpet shops often have some consistency in the type of carpets they sell as well as their designs and sizes.

In my confusion, I inquired about this rather unusual collection of rugs. Hooman took his coffee mug and started speaking with great determination and a sharp look in his eyes; "You want to attract people to your product, not to hunt them down and cheat on them, as many traders do in the bazaar." Hooman spoke about contracts, rules, and time schedules, practices he learned in America that were different from "the Iranian way of doing business." Not only these actions made him stand out in the bazaar, but also subtle features like the coffee mug. Drinking coffee as a *bazari*[11] shows a Western attitude. I later learned that most *bazari* people did not like Hooman's way of doing business. Hooman's contracts and work methods, which he said he learned at Morgan Stanley in the United States and the United Kingdom, are interpreted by Iranians as insulting. They perceive the contracts and schedules as acts of mistrust that are perpendicular to the "natural way of establishing trading relationships" these *bazari* have done for many years. To me, Hooman's reputation within the bazaar was a surprising observation. Carpet merchants usually go to great lengths to have an excellent reputation within their social environments. Instead, Hooman saw his business methods - having all kinds of different rugs at the same time - as a necessary step of being a successful carpet trader. Hooman called his methods "innovative business tactics" that he learned from his family. He stated, "I don't have to learn from these carpet *bazari*. My experience with internationally orientated family connections and business will be more beneficial. I have two lawyers who work for me, who are also my family." These statements

[11] Trader based in the bazaar.

came as a surprise, since Hooman often asked for advice from his business partner, Taghi, whom I interpreted as rather traditional in his manner of doing business. Taghi is a much older Iranian carpet trader originally from Tabriz. He has over 40 years of experience with carpets and the business. Regarding being a "traditional" trader, I mean that he is highly specialized in one type of carpet, ones from Tabriz. He does not speak English and has consistency in the types and sizes of carpets in his shop.

Hooman is a 30-year-old Iranian American and claims to have returned to Tehran in order to radically change the carpet business, by giving it a new direction. He grew up in New York, where most of his family members live today. Other members of his family live in Canada, Singapore, Kuwait, and Iran. Hooman studied banking in the United States and the United Kingdom. He speaks American English and Farsi. What is interesting about Hooman's business strategy is that he hires local Iranian artists who make modern designs for new handmade carpets. His reasoning for this strategy is that "in the past, many foreign acquisitions, such as the Turks and Arabs, have influenced Iranian carpet art. Why shouldn't the present world also influence this type of art? My father disagrees with my plans to do this in Iran, but he still supports me." The Hooman's situation is somewhat unusual. Most Iranians do not have such a huge family network outside of Iran, which plays a significant role in his success the success of traders like him. In the situation of contemporary Iran, the ability to use family networks dramatically reduces the negative effects of geopolitical tensions on the trade. However, these family networks require constant negotiation to function properly.

The importance of his family network is clear. "My trade would not have been possible without my family connections. For sure, no chance," Hooman explained to me. As I explore in depth later on in this chapter, international payments were not possible in Iran at the moment of doing this project. It is precisely concerning these financial issues that family ties become crucial. These connections allow traders like Hooman to transport their carpets out of Iran, thereby still having access to the global market, including the United States. Hooman explained it in detail: his family has businesses and real estate both in and outside of Iran. These money flows can never meet, at least not on paper. However, shipping cargo between Iran and Kuwait, Turkey, and Dubai, amongst other countries, is still possible. As I learned from many traders in Iran, carpets and many other products, like shampoo, tiles and even peanut butter[12], travel along these family networks through various other countries before they enter the global market, or the other way around, to Iran. Traders often talk about the commercial opportunities or disadvantages that trading to a particular country or city offers. Within these talks, various political or economic settings are considered.

Hooman's example shows an unusual case in which, despite global geopolitical events that limit the Iranian carpet trade, he is still able to trade across Iran's borders using his family networks.

[12] In a shop in Hamedan, Iran, I found peanut butter which was produced in Texas, USA. I learned that it was traded by family networks and made its way to Iran through Dubai.

Just like Hooman's family, Iranians that left Iran in the past and traveled around the world, often resulting in vast global kinship networks, are able to bring carpets to the global market in unusual ways. Many of these traders are nowadays located in Europe and North America, although recent studies have also shown that because of Western sanctions, Iranian carpet traders increasingly travel to Southeast Asia (Erami, 2019). While these traders start their businesses in new environments, they rely on kinship networks within the new country and with contacts back in Iran to establish a successful carpet business. In Germany, most of the trade between the Tehran and Hamburg bazaars is built on these shared kinship connections and a shared nationality (Razaei, 2009).

Here, it is easy to assume that kinship ties are central to the production of forms of trust on which these networks rely, thereby overlooking the extent to which kinship is always an ambivalent relation. In early writing, transnational trade communities, such as Hooman's or the traders in Hamburg, were portrayed as culturally defined. This assessment leads to the assumption that "trade diaspora communities are naturally imbued with trustworthy members because of kinship or family ties" (Aslanian 2014, p. 17). More recent ethnography contests this observation, since taking a trustworthy bond for granted within these networks ignores the practices these carpet traders use to maintain their "in-group" trust (Aslanian, 2014). Analyzing these practices reveals a nuanced and complex reality; they can be sets of shared ideas and symbols that inform human action. Baumann's (1995) ethnography in Southall explores how such shared ideas and symbols reveal the maintaining of such in-groups. Within this suburb of London, the figure of the "cousin" is often used by its inhabitants as a cultural unit that traverses multiple cultures. As Bauman puts it, "ethnographic attention to processes of convergence may help studies on kinship to overcome the limitations of regarding ethnic delineations as boundaries of culture" (p. 726). In this manner, outside of boundaries of culture and ethnic bonds, kinship ties are mediated through a complex bond of both trust and betrayal. Anthropological work on family firms shows that bonds of trust and betrayal are as important for the success of the firm as those of "trust and kinship solidarity" (Yanagisako, 2002, p. 114).

These complex bonds of trust and betrayal through which kinship ties are mediated are now recognized as being ambivalent (Peletz, 2001). This is already ethnographically documented in trading networks and contests the previously assumed idea that kinship networks are based on forms of trust (Marsden, 2011, 2016). However, as Marsden (2016) points out in later writing, this image of kinship fails to understand the acts of cooperation within a trade network concerning the changing circumstances of particular business and personal situations. To explore these circumstances, kinship needs to be approached through people's daily experiences (Carsten 2004).

To further problematize the notion that trading networks are culturally bounded or based on forms of trust, I show how these networks are often negotiated between trust and betrayal and based on complex bonds of taking risks, trust, and money.

2.1 Kinship ties in Iran

It seems that carpet companies in Iran are often passed on from generation to generation, which suggests that the market of carpets is based on family networks. On a national level, the Iranian carpet trade is determined by regionalism, ethnicity, and family businesses (Keshavarzian, 2007). Carpets initially have regions of origin and specific specializations in weaving techniques and patterns that carpet dealers from these regions specialize in. For example, rugs from Tabriz are mostly sold by Azeris, while carpets from Esfahan are sold by Esfahanis. The Tehran carpet bazaar is different. Here, the Azeri-speakers have a particular position, as they often speak both Azeri and Persian. Those who do not master Azeri within the Tehran bazaar have a harder time competing within these Azeri sociocultural networks.

At this point, it is tempting to state that the kinship ties of Iranian traders are important for the makeup of their social relations, assuming that it has an advantage in trade. However, the ambivalent nature of kinship ties becomes clear, since these traders have to negotiate the relationship between their working and family lives and what these mean for their economic success.

One such example of the ambivalent relation of kinship becomes evident from the conversations I had with Hooman. He uses his family companies inside Iran, Kuwait, and other countries to make his trade economically possible. It took Hooman much effort to convince his family network to help him. As a start, he had to convince his father, who owns many of the family companies. In the beginning, his father did not understand his move to go back to Iran and pursue a carpet business. After all, his father brought him to New York and let him study in one of the best banking universities in the United Kingdom. His family left Iran for a better future in the West and were successful doing so. Why would Hooman want to go back to Iran to start a business in the "already dying Iranian carpet trade?" Despite all doubts, Hooman's father gave him economic advice not to modernize his carpet shop in the bazaar too much, according to Western standards, or to spend too much money on trivial activities in Iran. His father also acknowledged that Iran has some economic benefits: most activities in Iran are cheap, and the Iranian Rial is weak compared to foreign currencies. However, Hooman's father stressed that "a person's orderly daily habits that fit within the context he is in, will make that person ultimately successful." This example of Hooman and his father show how these bonds need to be constantly negotiated. Focusing on this situation shows how traders maintain and sustain relations, even in the face of persistent transgressions of trust. These negotiations of bonds and trust form the ultimate basis of Hooman's global economic success.

Other carpet traders I met in Iran used to live somewhere in Europe, most of them in England, France, Germany, or Italy. The ones that have not lived abroad, know other traders who did. Carpet merchants in Iran often use trading networks made up of international colleagues and family. In the carpet bazaar of Esfahan, I often witnessed carpet traders use their European contacts as intermediary actors while selling carpets to foreign tourists, including myself, in an unusual manner.

Due to international sanctions, transferring money to Iran is impossible. Because foreign tourists cannot use their bank accounts or money-transferring services like *PayPal*, *Mastercard*, or *Visa* in Iran, they are limited to the amount of cash they can comfortably carry during their travels inside the country. To solve this problem, carpet traders offer to transfer the money to their foreign friends or family outside of the country. While doing so, these carpet traders stress the importance of not mentioning anything related to their carpet business in the statement of the transaction, because they fear that their family or friend's bank account will be affected. This is a risk for these carpet traders and their European contacts, because it takes a long time before the money reaches them. Since many, if not most, Iranian carpet dealers are not able to travel to Europe to collect the earnings themselves due to expensive travel costs and difficult visa regulations, they rely on these European contacts to travel to Iran to deliver the revenue earned by tourist sales in cash. On the other end, these European contacts demand a share of the earnings, since they take the risk of carrying large sums of cash through customs and having the possibility that their European bank account will be blocked. It often happens that these European contacts neglect coming to Iran or refuse to cooperate in the scheme, which has an effect on their relationships.

To make the situation even more unusual, the incentives for these traders to sell carpets to foreign tourists increases as international sanctions on Iran continues. Because the sanctions lead to an unstable and low value of the Iranian Rial, it becomes increasingly beneficial for carpet dealers to deal in dollars or euros, which they obtain from foreign tourists. Hooman once told me that because of these geopolitical tensions, "the real job of many carpet traders in Iran, is to trade in currencies, not in carpets."

This example not only shows the direct effects geopolitical tensions in the region have on the carpet trade, it also shows how local practices of exchange and movement enables carpet traders to continue their trade in surprising ways. Although these surprising business strategies are often accessible through family networks, there is no guarantee they can be always trusted. Furthermore, the example also shows that these trading networks seem to be based on complex of money and trust. Both the European contacts and Iranian carpet traders take risks in the transferring the money gathered from foreign tourists, which results in a thin line between trust and betrayal.

2.2 Kinship ties in Europe

Until the 1990s, as I am told by Dutch carpet merchants, many carpet shops did business all over the Netherlands. Later, as the carpet trade declined, many shops had to close, changed business strategies, or went bankrupt. Most of these shops traded within already existing global kinship ties. In the Netherlands, a carpet trader told me that his carpets come from his brother, a wholesaler in Hamburg,

Germany. He said, "In that way, we have negotiated that we do not compete with each other, and I have a reliable stream of carpets for the best price."

Moreover, about 200 carpet traders are active in the Hamburg Free Harbor area; from there, they export to about 10,000 carpet traders worldwide, many of which are originally from Iran (Rezaei, Hansen, Ramadani & Dana, 2018). Carpet traders in the Netherlands often trade with these intermediate dealers located in Hamburg. On many occasions, these deals do not consist of a formal contract. Instead, as is the case with the Dutch trader who has family networks in Hamburg, they are based on a trustful, long-lasting business relationship. The ability to trust family members serves the rationale of maximizing economic gain for both sides. However, these networks have to be negotiated and always have the potential of being betrayed.

Still, many Dutch carpet traders do not rely on family connections, meaning they often need to figure out whom to trust and whom to avoid. One such carpet trader in the Netherlands, Koen, explained that he used to trade with “an Iranian merchant.” That Iranian trader traveled to Iran or Afghanistan for years and acquired new carpets for the shop in the Netherlands. After years of successful business relations, the Iranian partner disappeared altogether, never to return or send a message to the Dutch shop. At this point, Koen needed new contacts, so he contacted other traders. These new traders bought new carpets and did business with Koen in large quantities, paying in cash right away.

Koen continued to trade with these new contacts, acquiring significant economic gains. Just as before, when collaborations with business partners are profitable, a bond of trust is established. One day, about a year later, these new business connections asked Koen if they could borrow some carpets as samples to be presented at an auction, because they did not have enough carpets themselves. They promised that Koen would get the money as soon as these carpets were sold. When I spoke with Koen during this project, it was already years later, and these new business relations had never paid him.

As I listened to his story, he said that the practice of lending carpets was reasonably standard amongst traders at that time. He had no reason to be suspicious of their actions, as they did exactly like the other traders he had worked with. Moreover, they showed their trustworthiness on earlier occasions. This example shows the thin lines between trust and betrayal. Carpet traders need to continue to sustain relations with one another even if there is risk involved. The ability of carpet traders to negotiate these bonds of trust despite being betrayed occasionally is what allows them to balance between maximizing economic gain and the manner in which to continue their transnational trading activities.

2.3 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I discussed how kinship ties contribute to carpet traders' economic success. What I illustrate is a more nuanced and complex picture of how bonds of trust and betrayal are negotiated within family trading networks. These discussions are essential within the anthropological debate, as they contribute to the assessment of the contemporary carpet trade within the current world system. The chapter examined both the importance of kinship ties in the carpet trade as well as the cultural and social relationships that are necessary to establish such a business. These cases are helpful in assessing kinship ties across boundaries of culture, ethnicity, and countries. Since they are intertwined with business and personal situations, the chapter reveals crucial aspects of traders' daily lives. Furthermore, the traders' actions and assessments of kinship ties highlight that they go beyond being culturally bounded. Instead, they are often mediated through bonds of trust and money that bind traders together. As carpet traders travel internationally, they are part of a heterogeneous group. The next chapter explores how these traders create unwritten contracts and how they are dependent on a moral economy embedded within their social and cultural environments.

Chapter 3 - Moral Economy

[13]

[13] Photo: a carpet shop in Tehran, photo taken by Felix van den Belt, 06-02-2019, Tehran.

This chapter explores how carpet trader's economic activities are embedded within their evaluations of their moral lives, social modes, and identities. These evaluations are often neglected in the ethnographic material on carpet traders. Carpet traders often have multiple responsibilities within their social networks apart from business activities.

The day I met up with Pedram, he brought me to several carpet shops in Tehran outside of the grand bazaar. In one of these shops, I met Jamshid, a carpet trader. When I asked him about his thoughts on the carpet dealers in the touristy area of the grand bazaar, he responded in the following manner: *"Man soll daran verdienen [carpet trading] beim einkauf, nicht beim verkauf! 'Die sind wie kranken in ein Koma im [grand] Bazaar. Die sind verrückt und nur mit Geld beschäftigt'!"*[14] He explained that selling carpets is originally a traditional job, which is now abused by these people. "The big carpet bazaars are now over flooded with cheap and uninspired carpets which are sold for way to high prices." He went on to explain that he even hides his best carpets when the traders from the grand bazaar enter his shop. Otherwise, they would continue to harass him to sell it to them. Jamshid said that for some, "the carpet trade has become pure greed, without the appreciation for the carpets. Back in the day, traders did not do that" he concludes, noticeably frustrated.

Although Jamshid conceded the need to make profit, he also emphasized the importance of pride while doing so. "Not to have a corrupted conscience," as he would call it. Jamshid lived in Stuttgart during the late 80s and early 90s, so he was able to speak German fluently, which enabled us to communicate. He is a 60-year-old Azeri Turkish man with over 40 years of experience in the carpet business. He is short and always wears a cap, a t-shirt, pantaloons, and leather shoes. Jamshid focuses more on high-end customers, primarily those who do not want to search for a carpet in the big bazaar themselves. He adapts his style to the manners of the customers, which is not only evident from his clothing but also the building[15], its location, and his speech. Several times while I was in his shop, the use of dirty jokes and informal use of language stopped as soon as customers came close. The shop is only a few square meters in diameter; the walls are covered with his best carpets. One third of the shop is filled with a desk, which is covered by old postcards and photos of Germany. The carpets are perfectly ordered in piles right next to the walls, leaving just enough room in the middle of the shop to open up a carpet. On the desk, pens and papers are arranged in a precise manner. In the small kitchen area, the teapot is used and cleaned every day. Within the bazaar, Jamshid is known as the "German professor" who shares tea all day. Other traders that passed the shop would often shout *"chai chai!*" as they jokingly wanted more tea.

[14] In German: A carpet trader should earn money by buying at the right price, not by selling! They are as if sick in a coma in the grand Bazaar. They are crazy and only busy with making money!

One day when I entered his shop, he was busy talking on the phone and had a stern look on his face. His friend had alcohol problems, which led to relationship issues; *"das war Seine schwäche Punkt."*[16] The friend's wife had enough of it and threw him out of the house, along with his belongings, which were thrown out of the window on the fourth floor. He was now homeless and had lost his home, cars, and bank accounts, because all those properties are registered in the wife's name. The friend came to Jamshid, as he had some emergency cash left in Jamshid's safe. Jamshid was busy talking on the phone, helping his friend to buy a house: *"Sonst hat er auf der Straße geschlafen!"*[17]

As shown by the example of Jamshid, who helps a friend buy a house and save money, carpet traders often have multiple jobs and responsibilities within their direct community. Carpet traders often told me that establishing a good reputation and relation with their community is essential to their success. The very bond with the community is constantly reinforced by sharing tea, discussing family relations and political issues. Often, carpet traders take great pride in being of help to others. The example of Jamshid, helping with money issues, is especially interesting considering the geopolitical circumstances of Iran. As the local currency devaluates, carpet traders play an increasingly important role of, for example, keeping people's money. I learned that, for some, storing money at a local bank is not always considered to be safe.

Helping to find a new home for a friend is only one example, as I have seen similar actions on numerous occasions. In Berlin, Germany, I met a carpet trader who rented houses only to refugees. On other occasions, I witnessed carpet traders assisting others with government affairs, because "they know who to call." In sum, I have experienced carpet merchants as "problem solvers." I therefore argue that these additional jobs and responsibilities rely on and constitute a moral economy. Many carpet dealers reflected on their work: to be a successful carpet trader, one "is obliged" to be involved with societal, cultural, and governmental systems. Interacting within these systems entails a sense of morality and values, which are not made explicit but based on unwritten social contracts.

These contracts are also discussed in the work of Anderson (2018). Based on his ethnography on Syrian merchants during Ramadan, he concludes that *bazari* are not merely interested in the economic aspect of the trade. Instead, they value the nature of the social connections they have with the public of the bazaar. They consider "their moral actions not as values to be maximized, but as qualities that, when exchanged, disseminated, and distributed, determined the social, that is, the kind of connections that bind people together" (Anderson, 2018, p. 610). Anderson argues that this type of social bonding can be seen as part of a moral economy that encompasses different persons functioning in the same system of circulation. Anderson's understanding of the moral economy is derived from Fassins (2009) definition: "combining the distribution, production, circulation, and use of moral

[16] In German: That was his weak point.
[17] In German: Otherwise he slept in the street!

sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in one social space." In this project, I do not approach the moral economy of carpet traders as being merely the moral principles of trading practices - such as what constitutes a fair transaction - but use Anderson's notion of the moral economy as an ethnographic object. Approaching it as an ethnographic object enables me to combine and describe the circulations of values, norms, and obligations into particular contexts with a carpet trader's economic interests and identification. This is, for example, the case in the Netherlands, where carpet traders would often tell me that they only sell carpets they like themselves, even though they would not be able to "easily scam their clients and sell them something plastic or cheap." Being associated with such practices is bad for one's reputation and is therefore not considered a long-term business strategy.

3.1 The moral economy in Iran

In Iran, carpet dealers often have their shops in a bazaar. As noted by Rezaei, Hansen, Ramadani, and Dana (2018), the bazaar is a place where discussions about family and other personal issues take place over a few glasses of tea as a way of building trust in the process and establishing future business relations. Within these bazaars, carpet merchants often act as caretaking actors. On various occasions, I saw carpet traders "act out of goodwill," as they would call it; "out of their obligations to take responsibility for the community." On one such occasion, I was with Parizad in the Esfahan carpet bazaar. Parizad is a Persian trader located in Esfahan. He is 35 years old and comes from a famous carpet-trading family. He is short, wears blouses with palm trees, and speaks calmly and slowly. His carpet business is focused on other traders, so-called "housekeepers." Parizad is aware of his "well known" status in the bazaar. One day, we walked through the carpet bazaar, while I offered him a cigarette in the same manner as I did on earlier occasions. However, Parizad rejected the cigarette this time, because "they all know me in the bazaar, they cannot see me smoke." As we sweep through small alleyways, he adds to that by saying, "I know the bazaar better than my own house, [hard laughter]." While we walk around the bazaar, we come across places where his carpets are being repaired, cleaned, shaved, and recolored. Some of his workers bow for him as he enters a shop. Later, upon leaving the shop where they recolor the carpets, an old lady blocks the entrance. A black *chador*[18] conceals her whole body. Her head is tilted downward while her wrinkly right hand sticks out, asking for money. Parizad is quick to respond by handing her a bit of cash. He states that being responsible for his bazaar, family name, and workers is "very important."

Parizad also takes responsibility for the people who tie his carpets for him. On another day, he invited me to join him in a village just outside of Esfahan. We brought new wool to the two ladies Parizad had hired to tie his carpet. On the way there, he explained that he is very proud of the colors of

[18] A *chador* is a robe that covers the entire body, except the face.

his wool, although he also mentioned another famous carpet brand that has better colors. That other brand of carpet makers has developed “a pure blue color,” that Parizad is jealous of. He explained, “To get such a special color requires a lot of technology and experience.” For Parizad, having the formula for such a true color himself is the ultimate dream. He has just started his own brand of carpets. His very first carpet, which he designed himself and which he showed me later, is currently being made. "I only started making carpets after 25 years of experience in the trade. "

The women making Parizad’s carpet live in the village because, according to Parizad, they cannot live in the city with their low wage. When we arrived in the courtyard, I saw an old house with broken stairs and windows. The carpet was being made in a small room on the top floor of the house. One of the women accidentally cut her finger with the old faulty scissors she uses to cut the wool. She asked Parizad, apparently upset, to get rid of the defective scissors. Parizad's response was to bring her new ones that same night and help her to check her hand with a doctor.

As I observed Parizad's actions in the bazaar, in his house, and during our trip to the village, I became intrigued by him. During these observations and interpretations, I often thought about what Pedram told me at the start of my journey. Pedram reminded me of the changing logic in the carpet trade. A carpet trader is often only there to maximize their economic profit, regardless of how they do their business. While Parizad undoubtedly works hard in the competitive carpet business to stay economically successful, I also met an inspiring, passionate person, a carpet trader who takes responsibility for his employees and fulfills his moral obligations. Parizad's example shows how he takes on multiple responsibilities within his community and working environment. Apart from the apparent economic motives, Parizad acts here as a responsible and passionate “problem solver.” Parizad's success and family reputation are based, among other things, on the fulfillment of his obligations within the social and cultural reality of his daily life. Following his daily activities reveals a sense of morality that seem to be based on unwritten contracts.

3.2 The moral economy in Europe

Through the carpet traders I met in Iran, I learned about Bashir, an Iranian carpet trader located in Berlin. Bashir was born in Tehran and is the son of a respected and internationally successful Iranian carpet trader. Bashir studied Iranian nomads for over 30 years, especially in the northern province of Iran, called Mazandaran. He wrote several books about carpets and nomads and even researched Sigmund Freud's carpet collection in London. When I met him in Berlin, he argued with great passion that many more aspects of the carpet trade in Iran remain unknown to this day. In previous works, Bashir “discovered” and documented several carpet types and their creators that were unknown to the global public at that time. Like several other traders I met who were born into the family tradition of carpet trading, Bashir did not want to be engaged in the trade at first. Instead, he started pursuing a

medical degree in Germany. Only later, when he began researching the materials and coloring of the carpet, did he become known for his expertise on carpets. While Bashir became known for his knowledge, people would continually come to him for advice. Bashir naturally reconnected with the trade and started a carpet business in Berlin.

This preservative element of the trading job is often profoundly embedded with morality, personal identity, and the market environment. As Kaneff (2002) shows in her ethnography on the morality of the market activities in rural Bulgaria, engagement in the market is not a moral-free activity but is actually constrained by the political-economic context in which it operates. Moral positions in the marketplace are expressed by "kin engaged in the same activity: views which are rooted in an individual's position with respect to 'production' and 'work' in the context of political-economic environments" (Kaneff, 2002, p. 46). This example shows how morality and identity remain prominent features of market activity.

It is no different in the carpet trade. Bashir, just like another trader I met in Belgium, Maxime, says the best way to trade carpets is through awareness and responsibility. Various carpet traders I met, mostly in the higher segment, eagerly take responsibility for preserving the cultural significance of carpets and the stories of the weavers that made and still make them. These carpet traders often have their offices full of books, photos, and other significant objects that reveal a deep passion for the cultural significance of carpets. Some of these traders' review books and papers on carpets on a monthly basis. These engagements show that, apart from their commercial activities, they participate in researching and reviewing others' work. They also join associations and unions with strict rules of conduct. Within these associations, traders manage and monitor events all over the world.

Furthermore, appraising carpets is often one of their tasks. On one occasion, an informant in the Netherlands told me that he had sued a colleague for giving too-high appraisals and then bragging about his false deeds. Assessing carpets is so important that there seems to be social control between traders to ensure that it is done fairly. These extra activities seem to be practiced without immediate economic gain. Instead, these actions contribute to one's identity as a carpet trader or connoisseur. These examples show that for some, the job of being a carpet dealer comes with moral responsibilities. The practices related to the preservation of cultural heritage show an obligatory engagement that seems to be part of unwritten contracts; a moral economy.

3.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter has sought to bring attention to carpet traders' moral economy by means of an ethnographic exploration of the traders' own perspective on their work. It illustrated both aspects of the moral economy. On the one hand, the morality is shown through their sense of responsibility. On the other, it reveals carpet traders' economic practices through the consideration of their social modes and evaluations of their daily practices. Although most carpet traders in this project stressed the importance of economic gains, they often simultaneously reflected on the importance of responsibility and obligations. They illustrate the types of practices that are interesting for anthropologists in the study of the moral economy, in which interactions with others seems based on unwritten contracts. The case of carpet traders is especially interesting, since they trade in a nonstandard commodity. Carpets play an intermediary role not only between trading networks but between the participants' economic aspects and other obligations. Commitments and responsibilities are part of traders' moral economy to help the cultural conservation of carpets by studying them, being honest, organizing international events, and being of help within their communities. The examination of the moral economy amongst carpet traders reveals the local level of the carpet trade. Many carpet traders that participated in this project showed a deep commitment to various responsibilities and obligations that consist of their daily work. The next chapter explores how their modes of being and activities are related to acts of diplomacy.

Chapter 4 - Everyday Diplomacy

[19] Photo: a carpet shop in Tehran, photo taken by Felix van den Belt, 05-03-2019, Tehran.

Most of the times I visited a bazaar in Iran, I brought a local friend. During one of those trips, a *bazari* noticed our presence over several days in a row and approached, he urged us to follow him. For a couple of minutes, the three of us walked through a part of the bazaar I had not seen before. At one point, we stopped in front of a large metal gate, an entrance to a tall gray building full of carpets. The man who urged us to follow him introduced us to Mehruz, the owner of the house. Mehruz is a short Azeri man, casually dressed, although he wore expensive clothes. He lived in Italy for a few years and had several shops around Europe. Mehruz said to me, "The Iranian market does not make enough profit, so I went to Europe. Before, I did wholesale, but nowadays, that does not work in Europe anymore. I came back to Iran, and now I sell my carpets one by one. I do that because I cannot replace them, the 'good' carpets are not produced anymore. Carpet trading one by one is good for memory, not just for selling." By selling carpets one by one, Mehruz is adapting to new market conditions. He once rejected an offer from an Australian Afghan carpet dealer that asked to buy almost half of Mehruz's carpet stock. Mehruz rejected the offer, based on his change in business strategy to sell carpets one by one. He is proud to explain that he sells to Italians, Swedes, and Swiss people that visit Iran regularly.

Some meetings later, the same friend and I joined Mehruz on his business trips around Tehran. We met up at the metro station "Gholhak" in the northern part of Tehran, an area well known for its luxury houses and wealthy families. Mehruz arrived in his black Lexus crossover, a rare sight in present-day Iran because of the rising inflation rate and import restrictions on cars. We joined Mehruz and headed south. While driving toward the south of Tehran, where the business meetings took place, Mehruz often ignored red traffic lights and used the bus lanes. He assured me to not worry about his driving manners. He stated, "If the police stop us, I will tell them that you are a Dutch diplomat." When I asked why he has such confidence, Mehruz quickly explained that he "knows people," and is involved with "the government." Mehruz explained that he is involved with the development of public roads, hospitals, and universities all over Iran. He has great pride in being able to take these responsibilities for his country.

When we arrived at the business meeting, we stood in front of a gate similar to the one at Mehruz's place. A small man opened the door. After firmly checking my friend and me, he invited us to come inside. The house seemed desolate; no people were living there on a regular daily basis. The place we entered functioned as a storage place for carpets. The dusty "living room" was filled with many carpets, four chairs, and some pens and papers, leaving just enough room to walk around. After a short welcoming gesture of tea and cakes, the business negotiations began. The atmosphere was suddenly intense as the merchants started negotiating, letting their tea get cold. After the meeting, Mehruz came to me and said, "I do not trust that guy, he is foxy. Everyone knows that. I know him for many years. It is all a lie; he keeps the carpets that are in better shape, always hidden. It is like a game, I have to study his eyes, to know what his intentions are. This man tells eleven lies in ten words." The

dealer that Mehruz was trading with argued that he needed extra money for his family during *Norooz*[20], which would be celebrated in two weeks' time.

Another strategy of Mehruz's is to promote carpets at various tourist organizations in Iran. In doing so, Mehruz promotes his carpets in the manner of a "Persian experience." Furthermore, Mehruz has perfect knowledge of the European carpet market. He often travels to European countries like Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Italy to promote his carpets, mostly at galleries. He invites these European carpet traders to come to Iran "to show them around, and possible even drive them to the nomads who make the carpets."

Mehruz's knowledge of the European market became evident after I asked, from a business perspective, how to determine the price of a carpet: "It depends on the country. I know how much they sell in Euro. They sell this carpet [points to the carpet shown at the first page of this chapter] from around 1800 to 3000 in the shops. For example, in Norway, they sell this carpet for 6000 Euro, because Norway has a very high-income, everything is high. Every year I have people from Norway; 26 April they come. You can't believe. I give 30% to the man that brings them [people from Norway] here, we sell for 15000 Euro in total to them. They are very happy because they see how much is cheaper compared to Norway. If you go down to Denmark, it depends, you can sell for 3000, 4000. But if you go to Italy, 1200, 1300, you understand? But the value in Iran is 450 to 520 Euro. But if you do carpet selling, you must enjoy it, because today, in this market climate, you will not have customers every day." Mehruz is also active in Afghanistan. The international sanctions on the trade of carpets and their low production in Iran affect Mehruz's business. Because of this situation, Mehruz is in the process of opening a carpet factory in Kabul, since labour is cheaper and transport is easier there.

This chapter explores how traders use their skills, knowledge, and competencies. My observations of their skills are based on business meetings and daily conversations like the one with Mehruz. I relate their activities to that of "the diplomat," an analytical tool I borrow from Marsden (2016b). It is important to note here that there is an ongoing assumption that only the most influential actors conduct diplomacy on a global scale. According to that assumption, diplomacy takes only place in presidential offices and embassies. Anthropologists have written about many geopolitical situations in the past "without addressing in a systematic fashion the insights that ethnography stands to offer into the understanding of everyday diplomacy" (Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado & Henig, 2016, p. 7). In order to ethnographically approach everyday diplomacy in the geopolitical situation of Iran, I use the heuristic of "everyday diplomacy" in accordance with the work of Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado. and Henig to describe the ways carpet traders handle and influence these geopolitical contexts. In doing so, it is not

[20] The Persian New Year usually occurs on March 21 or the previous or next day, depending on where it is observed. The moment that the sun passes the celestial equator and equalizes day and night, is calculated exactly every year.

the intention to describe a form of diplomacy that opposes international politics. Here, the notion of everyday diplomacy seeks to address the diplomatic practice that is under-examined in the discussion of geopolitical situations that affect everyday human life. As I am also involved in the carpet trade, I was often part of these everyday diplomatic acts. On many occasions I was asked what my opinion was about politics, or I was approached about different aspects of "the Dutch identity" that people were familiar with. I was often, although always without my permission, introduced to others as a representative of the Dutch national soccer team, tulips, and Dutch cheese and cows, among other things.

It is important to note that with "the diplomat," I am not just referring to the carpet traders' abilities to "build bridges" between different cultures. Instead, I focus on how the practice of everyday diplomacy requires the differences between cultures and individual actors to become blurry while not disappearing altogether (Bryant, 2016, p. 27). Latour (2007) also noted these daily diplomatic practices: the blurry boundaries of diplomats between morality and pragmatism. Within these boundaries, a clever diplomat who knows which words to use can redefine arguments and is flexible during the disputes between certain groups. What makes everyday diplomacy risky and blurs the boundaries of their behavior is that these actions can simultaneously make them be seen as traitors (Marsden, 2018). As carpet traders sometimes betray their networks, they continually break and recreate their ties of trust. These ties allow them to balance "the rationale of maximizing economic gain, while still being able to continue their transnational trade" (p. 177).

Taking risks and forming relations across borders becomes evident in the actions of Afghan traders, who often marry local women in their new countries, such as Ukraine (Marsden & Ibañez-Tirado, 2015). These marriages play an important role in helping Afghan traders settle in their new places. It also contests the notion that trading networks are always culturally bounded. Instead, while moving around in different countries, bonds of trust are often formed upon the basis negotiations, as laid out in chapter one. An example of these blurry boundaries is demonstrated by Marsden (2016b) in his ethnography on Afghan traders. Marsden argues that these traders use their diplomatic skills to cultivate relationships in the countries they operate in. Namely, one of Marsden's participants, Abdul, is ethnically Turkmen and works for a company run by ethnically Pashtuns men. To be able to work in that company, Abdul has to carefully balance his position in the trading hierarchies using his skills of diplomacy. A trader's interactions have to encompass a sense of sincerity and decent behavior with those who are in charge. At the same time, Afghan traders that work abroad are not able to accompany their work and family relations. Those disrupted relations limit their capacity to act autonomously, which is an essential part of their collective identities. As these traders are abroad using their skills to cross international boundaries and form relations with host communities and state officials, they become experienced social actors within the influence of modern globalization. According to Marsden (2016), these recordings of diplomacy should not only be used analytically. They also reveal an emic

perspective of how their job as a merchant is invested with meaning and significance within their communities. Such significance is demonstrated by Erami (2019). She states that carpet traders increasingly travel to Southeast Asia as "carpet ambassadors." These developments show a direct connection between Iranian carpet companies and traders' roles as diplomats. In Asia, these merchants act as a link between the state and the carpet trade. Through press conferences and carpet exhibitions in places like Hanoi, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur, they try to cleverly find alternatives for Western economic sanctions.

Scholars of diplomacy have urged further investigation into the "hidden continuities" between diplomatic behavior and everyday life trajectories, examining the meaning of diplomacy concerning otherness (Cornago 2013). Marsden (2016) explored one such emic perspective in his fieldwork, as he followed the unusual story of an Afghan-born refugee becoming a Ukrainian parliamentarian. Stories like these reflect the need for the notion of "everyday diplomacy" as a way to analyze traders' motivations, actions, and perspectives.

These notions of "everyday diplomacy" become clear in Mehruz's case, illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. While observing all the different activities, arguing with other dealers, and promoting his carpets in Iran and European countries, the practices of diplomacy are illuminated. As Mehruz shows his carpets to European galleries, he is not just selling a carpet as an object on its own. He is selling the whole experience of coming to Iran, seeing the people and places in which these carpets are made and sold. Mehruz's negotiation skills were also demonstrated during the meeting with the other trader. The two of them were both aware that the other will "conceal the truth" to a certain degree before the meeting even started. Afterwards, Mehruz referred to this as "the game." Later, after the negotiations, I saw them drink tea and have lunch while being friendly and engaging with one another's families. Driving with Mehruz while not respecting traffic lights, his associations with the government and international business connections showed a kind of social mobility that can be associated with a diplomat.

Mehruz's diplomacy is not just relevant during carpet trading, as he is involved in several other businesses and responsibilities. The vignette shows that within their families and trading hierarchies, these carpet traders strive to demonstrate themselves as capable of decent behavior. These reflections on their behavior are crucial to consider, since their acts of diplomacy help in enabling carpet traders to produce multiple types of connections between places and people and within intense geopolitical contexts. In his own way and on a daily basis, Mehruz negotiates and influences his carpet business within the geopolitical context of Iran. As I observed my participants, I explored these skills and capacities in their working lives. These diplomatic skills take various forms, including the ability to speak multiple languages, intimate bonding across different religions or ethnicities, and the capacity to live mobile lives.

4.1 Everyday Diplomacy in Iran

My participants often emphasized the need to be skillful or diplomatic. For example, many carpet traders in Iran speak multiple languages, particularly English. On other occasions, as I showed earlier, carpet traders had often mastered numerous European languages like Dutch, German, French, or Italian. The importance of such language skills should not be underestimated. It allows carpets traders to engage with tourists and in international business endeavors.

Amongst the carpet-trade communities, speaking a foreign (European) language comes with great pride and social status. Communicating in German with Jamshid led other traders, who could not follow our conversation, to call him the "professor of German." Acquiring foreign languages also comes with the capacity to live mobile lives and traveling the world.

Speaking various different languages is often a sign of social mobility, as becomes evident in the following vignette. On one of the many days I spent in the Tehran bazaar, I met Sohrab, a Persian carpet trader in his mid 30s. He wears an expensive suit, leather shoes, speaks English quite well, and has a carpet shop in a prominent location in the bazaar. I visited him multiple times before the start of this project and revisited him again during it. Upon entering his shop, a warm smell of tea and wool greeted me. The shop was about 15 square meters in size. The walls and furniture were all made of wood. In a circle around the walls were piles of handmade carpets. In the middle of the shop were two chairs for customers, mainly tourists, to sit on. On previous occasions, I brought a local friend to help me around the bazaar. This time was different; I was alone. Sohrab promptly remembered me being alone, as his first sentence was "Are you alone?" Sohrab not only used his English language to communicate with me but also invited me to a party at his house in the north of Tehran. The following Thursday night, which is considered "weekend" in Iran, I took a taxi to an area called "Golab Darreh," which is known for its expensive houses, clean air, and lower summer temperatures. When I arrived at the party, I handed my jacket and backpack over to Sohrab, who welcomed me at the entrance. He said, "Your bag is full of cash, no?" Immediately, inside, I felt underdressed. My light travel outfit stood out amidst suits and dresses. To me, the party felt more like a business meeting, as I was introduced to various members of Sohrab's community. Amongst them were other carpet dealers who trade internationally, neighbors, and family members. During the party, they asked me how many languages I speak and if I was interested in starting some sort of business partnership in various other fields, like medical tourism. The women present did not wear headscarves; almost everyone was drinking either whiskey, vodka, or expensive wine; and several people spoke with American accents. In the kitchen, many magnets from all over the United States cluttered the refrigerator. In the rest of the house, there were flat-screen televisions, pool tables, expensive furniture, a toilet with a seat, and above all a great view of the Tehran skyline. Before I left, Sohrab asked me when I would see him again in his shop to make "an excellent deal."

During the party, speaking foreign languages was very important, as it presents an image of skill, social class, and business opportunities. Carpet business deals are often made during events like these, in which bonds of trust are negotiated. During the evening, Sohrab presented himself as a clever and trustworthy "diplomat" that knows which words to use, can redefine arguments, and is flexible during disputes between certain groups. The house, clothing, and business-related friends all fit with the atmosphere of building an excellent business environment.

4.2 Everyday Diplomacy in Europe

Carpet merchants' modes of diplomacy in the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium differ in a striking manner from what I observed of their Iranian colleagues. They quite frequently come together in international conferences, such as the "International Conference on Oriental Carpets" (ICOC). The ICOC is held in places all over the world and collaborates with the Textile Museum and the George Washington University Museum, among others. The Belgian carpet trader, Maxime, described it as a show in which scholars, collectors, and merchants come together to appreciate carpets as a form of art. The organization of the ICOC sometimes leads to disagreements. On one such occasion of a dispute, the event was scheduled during the summer months. Some merchants who would typically be involved with the organization of the event protested, because most of their clients are on holiday during the summer. Maxime explained that there seemed to be two parties, each blaming the other for the bad organization. However, Maxime carefully avoided the argument.

These events are more than mere places to purchase a carpet. They are often held by museums or universities, and high-quality objects from any region can be exhibited. It brings together scholars, collectors, and experts from all over the world. They have talks, exhibitions, tours, and presentations focused around trends in the carpet world and textile scholarship. Because of these involvements, some Dutch carpet traders present themselves as being better informed about the carpet trade than their Iranian colleages, as one of them said: *"Ik ben etnografisch beter op de hoogte dan mijn Iraanse vrienden. Ik ken al die dorpen nog. Ik kan al die kleden ook plaatsen in de provincie Hamadan, met honderden dorpen."*[21]

However, according to Maxime, the ICOC has lost some of its greatness: *"het event heeft een beetje van de grootsheid verloren, eerder was het echt 'the appointment' voor iedereen die iets met tapijten te maken had*."[22] To him, it has lost its appeal since more commercial merchants joined the event during the years. Because of these commercial influences, valuable information on the classical

[21] In Dutch: I am ethnographically better informed than my Iranian friends. I remember all those villages. I can also place all those rugs in the province of Hamadan, which entails knowledge of hundreds of villages.
[22] In Dutch: the event has lost a bit of its grandeur. Before it was really "the appointment" for everyone who had something to do with carpets.

pieces of the last decades is increasingly lost or overlooked. He says, *"Er zijn een heleboel zaken in de 20e eeuw die ontstaan zijn waar heel heel heel weinig documentatie over bestaan, onder al zijn vormen."*[23] I met merchants like this in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. As laid out in chapter two, they feel responsible to help preserve the cultural heritage of carpets. In the process, they carefully choose and negotiate where they want to be associated with. On one such occasion, a carpet merchant in Belgium agreed to help edit a book about carpets before it was published. The Belgium carpet merchant said that it was badly written and full of clichés and erroneous information about carpets. He declined to have his name added in the book, as he did not want to be associated with it.

During international events like the ICOC, carpet merchants, especially in the higher segments, go to great lengths to promote and defend their special carpets. Because events like the ICOC are accessible to more commercial carpet traders, merchants in the higher segments feel the need to distinguish themselves. By carefully negotiating the places they exhibit their carpets and the books they have their name written in, they strive to present themselves in certain manners. It shows how everyday acts of diplomacy are ultimately linked to the global carpet trade.

4.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored the everyday diplomacy of carpet traders as an analytical tool while simultaneously giving ethnographic attention to the emic perspective as they reflect on their work. Carpet traders' activities are related to that of the diplomat, considering the clever modes in which they form their international networks. Analyzing the everyday lives of these carpet traders reveals their diplomatic skills and competences, which are essential to the study of informal trading practices. Following these carpet traders as diplomats through their various locations shows how they traverse the boundaries of countries, ethnicities, and cultures. The carpet as an intermediate, nonstandard commodity simultaneously opens up an opportunity to study the particular modes of diplomacy across these boundaries that emerges when information is costly. On an analytical level, the comparison with the diplomat reveals to what extent these diplomatic skills and competencies are embedded in particular types of communities, networks, and contexts. On a general level, these carpet traders are capable of being flexible in disputes. Within these disputes, diplomatic skills come with considerable risks, as they blur the boundaries between clever behavior and being a traitor. Furthermore, acts of diplomacy reveal their role in forging and maintaining various forms of relationships in informal settings. These reflections and activities demonstrate traders' ability to use their knowledge and skills in international environments. They know how to represent their type of carpet and their own image as a carpet trader

[23] In Dutch: There are many things that emerged in the 20th century that contain little documentation.

with respectable knowledge in the international scene. They are experienced social actors who influence the modern globalization of the carpet trade on a daily basis.

5. Conclusion

This project is based on a three-month-long ethnography of the mobile lives of carpet traders in Iran, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. I aimed to answer the question of how carpet traders value the social and cultural practices that are intertwined in the trading of carpets by following their everyday life trajectories. To answer that question, the project focuses on the trading networks of carpet traders as they operate in Iranian bazaars and European carpet shops. The project builds on the under-acknowledged role carpet traders play in the contemporary, geopolitically tense globalized world. The nonstandard-commodity status of carpets is more generally an opportunity to study particular behavior that emerges when information about its status is scarce. Moreover, the intermediary role that carpets play opens up an ethnographic analysis to examine how the relations of traders across cultural and geographical boundaries are maintained, created, and embedded in social and cultural contexts. By exploring their social identities, moralities, networks, modes of exchange, and diplomatic realities, the project has sought to illuminate hitherto under-recognized aspects of the Iranian carpet trade and carpet traders in general. These examinations have led to the realization that carpet traders do not form a homogeneous group or base their modes of business on survival strategies. Moreover, the carpet trade is not dying. On the contrary, this project shows how carpet traders find clever ways to handle geopolitical conflicts and a changing globalized market. Traders deploy their economic strategies at times of necessity and simultaneously show creative modes of action that offer insights into global regimes of trade, morality, economy, and diplomacy. The lives of these carpet traders are addressed according to three themes: kinship ties, the moral economy, and diplomacy. The insight that this multi-sited ethnography offers in relation to "globalization from below" is the nature of their overlapping forms of identity, morality, and economics and how their network is based on complex and nuanced bonds of trust and money.

This work has profoundly shaken my understanding of the practices of doing an ethnography. In the process, I have reflected on how I approached my participants. While being in a tense geopolitical environment, I have come to understand the social life of a commodity and how it is mediated between traders. While I am completing this thesis, I realize that many of the aspects of the carpet trade also apply and rely on my own position and behavior in the field and with my participants. Although this project is relatively short, it shows how carpet traders themselves are influential actors and rely on other dimensions of life than only the economic. These traders shape the global carpet trade in complex and often unusual ways.

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