

İdris Coban: A Master Who Sustains Felt-Making Tradition in Balıkesir

İdris Çoban: Balıkesir’de Keçecilik Geleneğini Sürdüren Bir Usta

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Abstract

Felt-making has a long history in Turkey going back to nomadic times in Central Asia before the Turks settled permanently in Anatolia. For centuries, master craftsmen have practiced their skills, passing them on to younger generations and ensuring that the chain of traditional felt-making remained steadfast and unbroken. Due to industrialization, factory-made felt has affected the making of handmade felt profound, causing a steep decline, as master craftsmen shut down their ateliers in the face of overwhelming competition from industrialized mass-production. Nevertheless, despite this deterioration, a few master craftsmen have continued to make felt by hand. This paper documents the work of one of them, namely, İdris Coban from Balıkesir, an inland city of over 300,000 inhabitants, and the capital of the eponymous province.

Keywords: Traditional, master, wool, felt, Balıkesir.

Öz

Toplumsal yaşamda önemli işlevler üstlenen, üretimi özel ustalık gerektiren ve uzun yıllar talep görmesi nedeniyle sürdürülen faaliyetler ayrı bir meslek kolu olarak geleneksel hale gelmiştir. Geleneksel mesleklerin dönemin ihtiyaçlarını karşılamaındaki etkisi, sürdürülmesi bağlamında diğer kuşaklara aktarılmasındaki kurallar, üretimlerinin toplumda bulunduğu karşılık, onun yaşamla iç içe geçmesine ve toplumun kültürel zenginliklerine eklenmesine neden olmuştur. Türk kültüründe Orta Asya’dan Anadolu topraklarına aktarılarak gelmiş geleneksel el sanatlarımızdan birisi olan Keçecilik, toplumsal yaşamdaki işlevselliğine bağlı olarak tarihsel süreçte her zaman var olmuştur. Keçecilik Anadolu topraklarında Ahilik kurumunun çatısı altında ayrı bir meslek dalı olarak uzun yıllar varlığını sürdürmüştür. Bu dönemde ustaların yetiştirilme süreçleri, mesleğin sürdürülmesi ve geleneğin diğer kuşaklara aktarılmasındaki uygulamalar geleneksel özelliğini kazanmasında önemli olmuştur. Sanayi devrimi ile seri üretimin artması, tekstil ürünlerinin çeşitlenmesi ve kentleşmenin getirdiği yeni yaşam biçimi Keçeciliği olumsuz etkilemiştir. Bu olumsuz gelişmeler karşısında keçe ustalarının birçoğu atölyelerini kapatmak zorunda kalmıştır. Bu zorluklara rağmen Anadolu’da az sayıda da olsa geleneksel keçe ustası günümüzde üretimlerini sürdürmeye çalışmaktadır. Bunlardan birisi de Balıkesirli geleneksel keçe ustası İdris Çoban’dır. Bu çalışmada, ustanın atölyesi, ürünleri ve meslek yaşamı incelenip değerlendirilecektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Geleneksel, usta, yün, keçe, Balıkesir.

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Introduction

Sheltering and clothing are two of the most vital requirements of human beings. For this reason, humans have tried to meet their vital requirements since the antic ages. Felt, the oldest known textile product, should be evaluated with the history of humanity. Felt is a textile product without weft and warp produced with hot water and soap in a humid environment. Since the raw material of felt is wool, people met this need through animals they hunted first, but then through animals that they tamed. It is not known exactly where felt was first found and used. Felt-making art that should be followed through Turkish history will be evaluated in a historical context of pre-Anatolian of Scythians, Huns, the Göktürks, and Uyghurs and the Anatolian period of Seljuk's, Anatolian beylics, Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.

1. History

It is possible to trace Turks back to VIII century BC in Chinese resources. Scythians (Saka), who are accepted as proto-Turks, lived in a large area that reaches out from the western border of China to the costs of the Danube River. We gather information on their culture and civilization through the tombs called "Kurgan" where they buried their ancestors. Scythians are the precursors of mounted nomadism culture. "Hippocrates" stated that "Scythians are a nomadic tribe, live in chariots pulled by oxen with four or six wheels which are covered by felt that protect them against cold and they browse around to find meadows with abundant grasses for their animals." (Durmuş, 2008: 24).

The Great Hun Empire, founded by Turkish tribes, is the first "nomad" empire documented in Inner Asia.

Through the political institutions they built to establish their political control in an area from Manchuria to Kazakhstan and Baikal to the Great Wall of China, they provided a basis for "Steppe Empires" particularly the Göktürks and Mongols to establish their own multinational states (Cosmo, 2002: 709). The natural conditions and climate of the region compel them to mount a nomadic life.

German scientist Wolfram Eberhard describes Central Asian Turks in "Northern Neighbours of China" as "nomadic Turks deal with hunting, their dresses are buttoned from the left side and their hair is cut. They live

in tents covered with felt. They do not have ancestral shrines. They sculpt the eikons of their gods on felt and preserve them in a leather bag” (Eberhard, 1996: 86-87).

The Göktürks, who ruled in Central Asia after the Huns, are the first civilization to use the name Turk, rich in terms of art with plenty of advanced artworks. “The Göktürks residences are made up of tents. These tents are moved from one place to another all the time on an oxcart, camels, and hinnies” (Koca, 1990: 110). In archaeological excavations, in Turfan, many artifacts such as Manichaeism frescos and paintings on silk were found. “A miniature found in Qocho reveals that Turks who believed in Manichaeism used to wear hats made of felt. The form of these white-colored felt hats is quite different from the previously mentioned conical hats. It is understood that the form of the white-colored felt-made hats differed according to the status of the individual.” (Ergenekon Başar, 1999: 20-23) It is understood that these hats have the function that showing the status of people in society.

During the first quarter of the 19th century, handicrafts started to decline in the Ottoman Empire. An increase in mass production thanks to industrialization required new textile products to be marketed on a world scale. As a result of agreements that the Ottomans made with foreign traders, new products began to enter the country. After those newcomers, the usage area of felt has shrunk. At that period felt production continued mostly to meet the requirements of the army and rural dwellers. “After the declaration of the Republic following the collapse of Ottoman Empire, laws on traders and craftsman were introduced.” (Begiç, 2017: 48).

However, collateral problems of technology and industrialization caused felt makers to close their ateliers one by one. Despite these unfavorable circumstances felt making never lost its place as a traditional handicraft that survived from Central Asia to Anatolia, through changes and transformations within the historical context. Felt, which met the vital needs in the first place and was used as a sign of social status, transformed into a product that was used mostly by peasants and that met the needs of subculture due to technological developments in the world, mass production because of the industrial revolution, diversity of new products and changes in social life.

Today, felt making has been carried on by traditional felt masters in some parts of Anatolia. Masters in Balıkesir, Afyon, Urfa, Kars, Konya, Kahramanmaraş, Yalvac district of Isparta, Akhisar, and Kula districts of Manisa, Tire and Odemis districts, and Bademli town of İzmir, has been carrying the tradition on.

2. About Balıkesir

It is found the research conducted in mounds, caves, and plain settlements in the Balıkesir district shows that the first settlement in the area was BC 8000-3000. Remains and settlements belong to the Paleolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and Bronze Ages, subsequently. Karesi Beylic was established after the collapse of Anatolian Seljuk and then the region was passed into Ottoman Empire. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, when all the sanjaks turned into provinces in 1923 it was named Karesi and then in 1926, it was named Balıkesir (URL-1). Turkmens were the first settlers starting from Seljuk's period. And today they constitute the majority. For this reason, husbandry and associated culture are common. Also, it is an area that felt making still survives today in Anatolia.

3. Idris Coban: Traditional felt master

3.1 Personal life

Idris Coban was born in 1956 in Balıkesir. Coban attended primary school from 1963-1967. But, like many Turkish people of his generation, did not continue to high school, leaving formal education at the end of his primary school. Nevertheless, his training as a felt craftsman continued under the guidance of his father Suleyman Coban 1931-1995. Having five siblings, he is the only member of the family who was interested in this art and acquired it as an occupation. Coban is married and has two daughters. The felt-making tradition has been sustained by descending from father to son which prevents women to work in felt-making ateliers. Since women were not allowed to work in felt-making ateliers in the Balıkesir district, following tradition, Coban did not pass the craft of felt-making on to his daughters.

3.2. Professional life

Idris Coban is one of the experts who keeps traditional felt-making art alive in Balıkesir. He chose his occupation at a noticeably early age on the grounds

that his grandfather and father were felt-makers. Coban summarizes the working conditions and developments in felt making in 45 years as follows:

“We used to work extremely hard in 1968-1969 that we could not take a vacation. We used to come to the store early and close it in late hours. At that time felt making was a notable profession.’

Coban states that the area where they worked was a felt-makers bazaar, and it was a haunt for passengers and passers-by while there was a garage in the district. On Sundays, foremen used to work on shepherds' felt cloaks. All the money earned from those cloaks used to be paid to them. They used to charge 2-3 Liras for a kilogram, and the personnel used to be selected meticulously. According to Coban, although the number of processed wool and cloak produced correspondently is higher today, lower workmanship per kilo of wool and cheapness of wool causes a decrease in revenues.

3.3. His atelier



Figure 1: While Idris is scouring wool in his atelier (Begic, 2016)



Figure 2: Outlook of Idris Coban's atelier (Begic, 2016)

The expert atelier is a single chamber and single floor masonry with a high ceiling in a bazaar of an old craft store in the city center of Balıkesir. The pit looms in the middle of the atelier are 1.00 m deep and 50-60 cm wide which allows six people to work while standing back-to-back. When it is not used, it is closed with a wooden cover. As Coban says: "We do not lean when we are in the pit. Since we work while standing, we do not have backaches. We lay on felt more and work more comfortably." The need for physical strength for kicking and boiling of felt causes difficulties for experts. In this context, pit looms ensure a more comfortable working environment for the human body and therefore less exhaustion during kicking and boiling processes by applying more pressure on felt.

About straw, which is a material used in felt making, Coban says, "We used to kick the wool within a straw mold that knitted with whites. Nowadays we use nylon straws. We used to knit the straws by ourselves with materials that my father used to buy from Simav. Since wetland areas have shrunk, straws have disappeared too. Then we began to use nylon straws which are mass-produced in the requested shape and cheap due to advancements in technology."



Figure 3: While Idris Coban is working on a pit loom in his atelier (Begiç, 2016)

Coban stated that the wool for felt is supplied from herd owners in Balıkesir and the wool sold in this area is high quality while mentioning he uses wool of merinos sheep raised in the area and he knows well about wool and felt cannot be made with only merinos or sheep wool. He explains the mixture of wools he uses as follows: “While making shepherd’s cloak, 300 gr normal wool and 750 gr fleece wool and 750 gr sheep wool are mixed, the short wool will settle down and will be more efficient. The surface of felt will be smoother and the texture will be softer. We buy clipped wool as of August 15. Sheep are clipped twice a year. The first clipping time is in April or May. We call these wools fleece which are of no use to us. It is not suitable for felt making since it is overwintered on the animal. The second clipping in August or September is suitable for felt making. The water was plenty back in the old days, the rivers used to babble, and sheep used to get cleaned

up in rivers before clipping. They used to stay for a day and after getting dry, they were clipped by shepherds in a clean place. Now there is less water. Where do they take the sheep and wash them? Besides, the wool is not worth a fig, and they must pay for clipping. They must drop a bundle for it, so peasants do not get their animals clipping. They only get them clipped in August or September once a year. That is why it is hard to find quality wool. So, we are at the mercy of wool gatherers. There used to be a Wool Market in Balıkesir and there was plenty of wool. Now we are going shopping but there is no wool. All there are 5-10 kilos. I remember the times when we used to go buying wool with my grandfather in 1968-1969. One kilo of wool was equal to one gram of gold. Nowadays one kilo of clean wool is 3 TL, and the price of dirty wool is around 1-2 TL. We buy raw wool in the first place. We wash them and then dry them. We take out the garbage and cocklebur inside of it. Then tease them with a carding machine and make them ready for usage.” With these words, he discusses the changing value of wool in time and the difficulties in wool supply. It is observed that the usage of wool, which was valuable since it was used in many areas formerly, has shrunk because of new fiber types thanks to the advancements in technology, and demand for it is declining correspondingly. In this case, finding quality wool for felt, making gets harder.

3.4. Traditional products

Coban has made shepherd’s felt cloak, vest, tread cloak, military boots, industrial felt, and the shoe felt. In recent years he makes shepherd’s felt cloak and sweat felt for horses to order. He explains why he does not make new products as follows “I have no assistance nor time. I barely fulfilled the orders. We used to get orders for shepherd’s cloak from Erzurum, Erzincan, Mus and Diyarbakir. We used to make at least one thousand cloaks for Erzurum, 600 or 700 hundred for Mus and Diyarbakir. We used to make saddle felt with thin felt and send it to Gaziantep since the terror diminished husbandry in East and Southeast those days and this blocked our work. Recently with the emphasis on husbandry, our work has increased with the increase in shepherd’s felt cloak orders.” Since the usage of traditional felt products is linked with husbandry, the orders come where the husbandry continues, and it is effective on afloat of ateliers.



Figure 4: İdris Çoban, spreading wool with a splatter (Begic, 2016)

“While making a shepherd’s cloak Coban states how many kilos of felt he used and the length of the cloak as well as placing small motives or writes the name of the shepherd on the front face of cloak to not to mix the front and back of the cloak. “ (Begic, 2014: 132). He stated that they used to put initials of his father’s name on cloaks. He uses natural colors of wool while making a shepherd’s felt cloak. Coban says “I learned this job from my father and continue to do it without debasing it. We comb out wool one by one with our hands. No cocklebur or garbage can be found on it. Moth nestles on felt easily. It is not hardened; the cloak gets loose in rain. A hardened one endures for 3 years at least. I can make two shepherd’s cloaks in two days by working from morning to night. There is a saying in this area “Surface is gliding, inside is fading” which implies showing the good part to the outside and the bad part to the inside. But as I have learned from my father, I have never reduced the quality.”



Figure 5: İdris Çoban, while dying felt in his atelier (Begiç, 2016)

Coban continues the motives and patterns he learned from his father without making any alterations. He calls these motives baklava, passionflower, five bellies, and amulet. There are not any different colors in the region. Except for white, black, and brown which are the natural colors of wool, blue, green, orange, and red are mostly preferred colors. Sweat felts are made in white, red, orange, and green based on the order. After the kicking and boiling process, sweat felt is dyed with chemical dyes. Coban states that jockeys and horse owners order the sweat felt with a color that they think will look good on their horses.



Figure 6: Idris Çoban, wearing a shepherd's cloak that he made in his atelier (Begiç, 2016)

The glue used for industrial felts in Balıkesir is not used in other regions. Coban says on this issue “We apply glue on industrial felt. We water down the resin and spread it on felt and then place the felt into a machine. We get it crushed in the machine again. Since glue gets hardened by penetrating felt, it will not get loose even if it is washed. I used to make this kind of felt for automobile factories in Izmir. Felts were used in the ceilings of cars and under the seats, especially for sound insulation for the repair and maintenance of old cars. I also made felt for trains. But I have not done them for a long time since there is no demand. I can barely fulfill the shepherd's cloak and sweat-felt orders.” The expert makes felt products for industrial needs as well as traditional felt products based on orders.

Traditional felt-making art continues from father to son in this region. There is another expert who works in Coban's atelier. He has no apprentice or foreman. His wife helps him wash the wool. He has no son to pass this art. While Coban was making oil felts, motor felts and smooth felts for sound insulation by going beyond the traditional products depending on the order, now he makes only shepherd's cloak and sweat felt since there is no order for others. In industry, today felts that mass-produced in machines with high tonnage by compressing which are called "press felt" in vehicles. Stating that he has not made any ground cloths for nearly 15 years, Coban still makes shepherd's felt cloak and sweat felt.

Conclusion

Felt making, which is an ancestor art of Turks, is one of the traditional professions that continues from the Central Asian to Anatolian period and that meets the needs of people. While felt is considered a product that meets daily needs, on the other hand, it represents its artistic value through Turkish motifs and patterns. Alongside its functionality, its artistic features make felt one of the cultural richness of Turks.

İdris Çoban was trained with traditional teaching methods while working with his father as small age. He makes requested felt products with a master in his atelier. Traditional felt masters who are active only in some parts of Anatolia continue their professions although their number decreases every day. İdris Coban, who is one of the last representatives of felt-making in Balıkesir tries to sustain the cultural memory that he acquired from his father.

Today's conditions also affect felt-making art. Most of the products suited for the lifestyle of the past are not produced today, instead, new products are produced according to the needs of today. Change is the basis of tradition. Cultural values inherited from the past are adapted according to the circumstances of the time and in this way transferred to the next generation. Sustainability can only be ensured by this cycle. In this context, Turkish Felt Making Art will survive within our culture as it was in the past through the works of masters like İdris Coban and their efforts to transfer the tradition to the next generations.

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