



CULTURE AND NATURE: THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE OF  
SHEEP FARMING AND PASTORAL LIFE

**RESEARCH THEME 1: HANDICRAFTS BASED ON RAW  
MATERIALS FROM SHEEP AND GOATS**

**RESEARCH REPORT FOR BULGARIA**

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## 1. Sheep breeds and their wool

According to archaeological researches sheep and goat breeding can be traced back to the Neolithic Age. The population of the Balkan-Danubian area domesticated and raised sheep of the *tzakel* breed. The wool of this sheep was brown. White wool was introduced during the Iron Age. Then a new breed of sheep was carried in Southeast Europe from Western Asia and Caucasus.

Today in Bulgaria 35 sheep breeds are raised, 28 of which are Bulgarian. Eighteen of the Bulgarian breeds are aboriginal selection. The average shears of wool of these breeds varies from 3 to 6 kg per ram and 2 to 4 kg per ewe. Eleven breeds bear white wool, three have both white and pigmented wool and four have solely pigmented wool. In the second half of 20 c. new breeds were created by complex reproductive cross-breeding and other selections. They were selected especially for production of wool and meat and partially for milk. The wool shears is relatively greater – from 9 to 16 kg per ram and 5 to 8 kg per ewe. The color of the wool is white, its softness - of high quality. In Bulgaria, most of all in the mountainous and hilly areas, a local goat breed is raised whose hair is diverse in colour – dominantly brown, black, grey and white. Other breeds in the country are late selection since 1990.

The use of sheep skins, wool and goat's hair was directly evolving of the complex agrarian and stockbreeding nature of medieval rural economy. These raw materials were basic for many crafts developed in Bulgarian lands. These crafts were leather-industry and furriery, homespun manufacturing, wool braiding, goat's hair weaving, etc.

Home textiles production satisfied the first-hand needs of the household while craftsmen guilds and the estate of craftsmen emerged in the feudal domains and in the towns. The crafts developed rapidly in the 10<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> century. We obtain some information on spinning, weaving and tailoring from the report of the Ottoman commander Lala Shahin written about the conquer of Sofia in 1382. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries textiles manufacturing was leading among the other developing crafts.

## 2. Traditional weaving as a home trade

Traditional weaving it was one of the first skills mankind developed; it is basis of the modern textile industry.

**2.1. The tools** used in shearing, processing and weaving are the following: wire combs/cards – *darátsi* (Bulg.), spindles - *vretena*, distaffs - *hurki*, niddy-noddies, skein winders, spinning-wheels, warpers, spools, shuttles, looms – horizontal and vertical. The tools are almost identical both in shape and name for the whole country, with some differences in local terminology.

**2.2. Stages in wool processing** and turning the raw material into yarn ready for weaving and knitting.

The wool sheared from a sheep is called 'fleece' – *rúno* (Bulg.). To remove dirt and to melt and remove fat away from the fleece, hot water is poured over it. After that fleece is **washed** in running water and dried in the sun. The wool is first **carded by hand** and then it is combed/carded with wire combs/cards - *grébentsi*. In the town and long ago

in the country too, carding machines - *darátsi* were introduced for this purpose. The electric carding machine introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century completely replaced the manual operations.

Wool **spinning** is done with a distaff and spindle or by hand.

With the help of a niddy-noddy – *motovílka*, skeins are made from the spindled yarn, the skeins are then **dyed**. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. natural dyes and pigments were used for dyeing wool, yarn and woolen fabrics. The long experience and constant practice have established exactly which parts of plants can be used to extract pigments. The brown color for example is obtained from walnut leaves and the green shells of fresh walnuts; the beige in its various shades – from the barks of dogwood, quince leaves, oak galls, elm barks, plum barks, St. John's wort, etc.; the yellow – from barley straw, onion husks, hellebore, apple peels, *kana* (Bulg. - the golden moss on the stones); the black – from branches and catkins of the broad-leaved fir-tree, ash barks, oak leaves, etc.; the red – from madder roots, oregano, sumac, kermes. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> c., however, the imported Cochineal has been increasingly replacing the natural dyes. The red dye obtained from the cochineal was called *vardziya*.

### 2.3. Preparatory processes for weaving

The dyed yarn is winded into balls or on reels, then a number of very important preparatory operations follows – **warping**, **winding** and **mounting** the warp on the weaving loom.

Depending on the number of loom treadles and heddles used in weaving there are several weaving techniques: basic (warp-and-weft), old ones and a combination of basic techniques with old and new ways of weaving – open-work, extraction, tied and others; also a combination of various techniques and complex weaving with many heddles.

The wool had ritual role in folk traditions: while the wedding ceremony was performed, for instance, the couple stood on white wool; the bride carried two distaff-fuls of wool into her new home and raised them three times over the threshold, then she spun white wool beside the fireplace; the wedding flag, the best man's tree and the *surovachki* (New Years' ritual staffs) were also decorated with fibres of wool. A specific Bulgarian amulet - the so-called *martenitsa* was also made of two woolen threads – white and red, twisted together.

The wool processing tools and techniques participate in different practices of magic nature. They are designed to repel harmful influences and guard people against supernatural beings, evil eye and dangerous diseases.

### 2.4. Articles

Until the early 20 c., hand weaving provided all necessary equipment for the household – rugs, carpets, tufted textiles, cushions; fabrics for home use – cloths, bags, sacks, saddlebags and more; woolen fabrics for making the traditional clothing – sleeveless tunics (*sukman*), *saya* garments, *poturi* (kind of trousers/breeches), jackets, vests, topcoats, etc. The traditional clothing of the Bulgarians was almost entirely made of wool. The hooded cloak *yamurluk*, also called *opandzhak*, *gunya* – deserves special attention here as a typical shepherd's outfit. It is represented in texts of the ancient authors and in images on decorated pottery.

**The woolen rug** is the most common type of tissue in Bulgarian lands with the main function to provide warm wrappings for the sleepers. Initially, wool in its natural color – shades of white, grey, brown – was used in rug weaving. Later, narrow and wide stripes appeared in the weft. Quadruple weaving technique with four or five cloths is usual in this case. In most cases these rugs are subjected to further processing at the fulling-mill. By means of this treatment greater density and thickness of the tissue was achieved and in some regions they were known as “rolled or beaten rugs”. Fundamental change in the coloring of the woolen rugs occurred in the late 19 c., when aniline dyes quickly began to displace the dyes of natural origin. Now color stripes of their own rhythm could be shaped horizontally in the weft. The result was the so called *sharena cherga* (‘multicolor rug’), typical of the whole Bulgarian territory. The practical function of the rug partly changed too – from thick and warm wrapping for the sleeping people it started to be used as bed cover and later on - as floor mat.

**The “carpet rugs”** – *kilimeni chergi*, split off as a separate group in the early nineteenth century. Typical for them is that different motifs (mainly geometric) began to be woven in the patterns of the multicolor rug.

**The carpets** – *kilimi*, were made on special vertical looms in smooth carpet weaving technique. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the warp and weft were mostly of woollen yarn. Gradually cotton yarn began to be used as warp. Weft, however, remained woollen. The carpet is used as floor covering textile. During the last two centuries two big carpet-producing areas emerged – East Bulgarian centered in Kotel and west Bulgarian in Pirot (now in Serbia), Chiprovtsi and Samokov. In these centers gorgeous carpet masterpieces were created that persisted during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the wealthy Bulgarian houses, churches and monasteries, as well as in the mosques. The main motifs and patterns applied in weaving gave the names of the carpets – *Fuchilata*, *Bibitzite*, *Karakachka*, *Loznitsata* (‘trellised vine’), etc. With these names they remained popular among the Bulgarians.

On this basis, the **carpet-weaving craft** emerged, practiced generally by women. Quite dramatically, with climaxes and declines, this craft continued to develop up to the present day.

There is a group of textiles which have different regional and local names – *halishte*, *kebe*, *guber*, *yambolii* and others. The warp-and-weft weaving and the slightly twisted thick weft helped to create textiles, called *kebe* or *yamboli* which are typical for Sliven, Elena and Kotel. Further processing of these tissues in the fulling-mill improved the quality of the fabric.

The Rhodopean covering - *pokrov*, originally woven on a vertical loom with a very thick warp and weft, is close to the *yambolii* textiles. Later they began to weave it on a horizontal loom, which allowed alternating stripes in the warm shades of wine red, brown, orange and yellow colors.

**Goat’s hair rugs** bear the name of the material from which they are woven - *kozyatsi*. The warp of the old goat’s hair rugs is woollen and the weft – goat’s hair. Subsequently wool was added to the hair weft. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century goat’s hair rugs were woven in the natural hair colors – white, brown, grey and black. Along with them, two-color stripe patterns were also customary. They are found usually in the villages of Stara planina, Sredna gora and Strandzha. In the late 19-th and early 20-th century they began weaving multicolor goat’s hair rugs in the regions of the Rhodopes and Pirin. Their colors were mostly red, black, green and randomly yellow and blue.

### **Felts (Non woven textiles)**

Felt is relatively limited woolen non woven textile in Bulgaria. Felts have special technology of making. It consists in piling up wool in several layers and then pouring hot water and soap to felt them. The wool is then densified and the fabric becomes about 2-3 cm thick. Ornamentation is made on the top layer with monochrome or multicolor wool. Felt rugs and carpets are widespread in the regions of Vidin, Koprivshitzta, Strandzha. The most vivid examples are the felt carpets from Koprivshitzta.

Felt-making gradually disappeared late in the 19-th century.

Felt was used in felt hats manufacture. The center of that home handicraft was the village of Arda, Smolyan region. Felt hats were made until 1940.

The group of the **cushions** shows a great variety and specificity in the artistic decoration depending on the different ethnographic regions of the country.

Some **ritual objects and attributes, special fabrics** were also made of wool. They were required as compulsory elements in some calendar and family celebrations: in the wedding ceremony – the small rug for the bride's horse, the brother-in-law's bag, the mother-in-law's rug, the wedding cushion, the wedding flag of the Karakachans, the woolen red veil of the bride (represented in the past by a male's girdle), the new woolen bags for the ritual food on St. Thrifon's Day and Easter, the woolen socks for family gifts on Christmas Eve etc.

## **3. Crafts – tools, articles, centers**

The professional **craftsmen guilds** played an important role for the development of crafts and trades. They first appeared in the early 10-th century. During the Ottoman period the wool processing and weaving were mostly home occupations and trades. In the 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century the weaving of coarse woolen fabrics – *aba*, *shayak* ('frieze') developed increasingly, as well as weaving finer cloth - *choha*.

### **3.1. Homespun manufacturing**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century the increased production of homespun *aba* and *shayak* (coarse woolen fabrics) went through different stages – from a home occupation and craft to manufacture. Many households in the Balkan and sub-Balkan settlements became small centers of that manufacture. This domestic industry is generally known as *abadzhiystvo* (homespun manufacture), i.e. tailoring and sewing traditional clothes (*terziistvo* – Bulg.) from the manufactured homespun fabrics. At the end of the 20-ies of XIX c. (after the formation of regular Turkish army) Ottoman authorities paid special attention to the *aba* (frieze) production as the military uniforms were made from that woolen cloth. In the late 18-th and early 19-th century the capitalist manufacture emerged. It developed in two forms – centralized and dispersed. The most powerful was the organization of manufacture in textiles industry. Dispersed manufacture of woolen textiles and clothing was the most developed industry in the early 19-th century Sliven. The conditions in the town at that time were very favorable. Sheep-breeding was highly developed, comprising about 700 000 sheep and 200 000 goats. The manufacture of Gumushgerdan in Dermendere (the Rhodopes) extended. All the sub-Balkan towns: Panagurishte, Zlatitsa, Pirdop, Koprivshitzta, Klisura, Karlovo, Kazanlak, as well as some Balkan towns –

Troyan, Gabrovo, Tryavna – were involved in textiles manufacture and became centers of homespun tailoring crafts. In 1834 the first textile factory in the Balkans was found in Sliven. It became possible thanks to Dobri Zhelyazkov, a weaver-craftsman and merchant, who turned his house into a factory. It is interesting that in the 1860s purposely for the manufacture of fine woolen cloth for military uniforms, the governor of the Danube Vilayet (Bulgaria) Midhad Pasha imported from Spain Merino sheep (the first attempt to improve the breed with fine-fleece sheep, despite how successful proved this experiment) whose wool was used in the Sliven factory. Dobri Zhelyazkov was awarded the Golden Scissors and a Sultan's decree (*ferman*) was issued for his production.

After the Liberation in 1878, Sliven, Gabrovo, Kazanlak, Tryavna, Karlovo, Samokov and other towns became advanced textile centers. Development of textile industry in the different towns was based on the manufacture of various fabrics.

In Gabrovo the textile factory emerged in connection with woolen braids (*gaytani*) manufacture. The first factory was found by Iv. Kalpazanov and P. Tsochev in 1882. Until the end of 1892, 28 textile factories opened in Bulgaria (only three of them were established before the Liberation).

### **3.2. Wool braiding**

Initially, woolen braiding developed as a home occupation for the manufacture of multi-color woolen cord (*gaytan*) to decorate the homespun clothes. The Balkan town of Kalofer developed as the center of hand-braiding. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the production of woolen braids was mechanized. A cog wheel for woolen braids was imported from abroad. The braiding mechanisms were of two kinds: *osmak* (a cog wheel with eight spools), which produced ridged cord with four equal sides and *dvanadesetnik* (with twelve spools), which made double-faced cords – flat and round. Black and blue were the most spread colors for the woolen braids. Less common was the green color; red was used especially for the female traditional clothing. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, centers of the braiding crafts were mainly the villages at the foot of Stara Planina. This craft was one of the most important factors for the economic prosperity of Gabrovo, Kalofer, Karlovo, Sopot and Kazanlak. The blacksmiths from Gabrovo were the major producers of cog wheels. After the Liberation, braids were made for the military uniforms too.

### **3.3. Goat's hair rug weaving**

The information on the development of goat's hair weaving in Bulgaria dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the European countries this occupation was known as a typical Bulgarian craft. It is distinguished by the use of only one raw-material in weaving - goat's hair.

The craft - *mutafchiistvo* (Bulg.) was practiced only by men and only by Bulgarians. The goat's hair was purchased from middlemen. All preparatory processes and the weaving itself were carried out by the master in the craft himself - *mutafchiya*.

**Tools:** cog wheels for spinning the goat's hair; counter – a vertical loom for weaving

**Processes:** shearing; *trebene* (cleaning and sorting the hair by color); *darmonene* – the cleaned and sorted hair is gathered in bundles, sprinkled with water to soften and

placed in a leather bag so that one end of the goat fibers sticks out through the opening. The bag is usually made from goatskin (*ulya*).

The spinning is done with a special spinning wheel (*chekrak*) operated by triple transmission lines; the hair is placed in a leather bag (*vuliya*) and tied around the master craftsman's waist. The warping is then mounted on the vertical loom, called "tezyah", i.e. 'counter'.

The manufactured tissues – the articles of this trade are very coarse and are commonly in the natural colours of the goat's hair. According to their function, they can be classified in three groups: bed and floor mats; particular kind of horse-cloths (*chulove*) to cover the livestock and belts for tightening the saddles on the horseback and the saddlebags on the donkeys; for business purposes – saddlebags for carrying over the shoulders, saddlebags for the donkeys and horses, sacks for transporting grain, animal feed bags - *zobilnitsi*.

Large centers of this craft were Panagyurishte, V. Tarnovo, Kazanlak, Dupnitsa and others. In the region of Strandzha Mountain the advanced goat-breeding explains the development of this craft, which in fact was imported from Panagyurishte. It was practiced seasonally – just in winter.

The patron of that particular occupation was St. Nikolay (St. Nicholas). The goat's hair rug weavers also observed the days of St. Spiridon, the Three Saints and together with the tailors – the day of St. Athanasius.

At the end of the 19-th and the early 20-th century (after the Balkan Wars and the World War I) the craft rapidly declined because of the competition of west European industrial goods.

### 3.4. Handicrafts related to the processing of skins

Handicrafts related to the processing of skins (leather and furs, footwear, saddlery, etc.) were documented in medieval Bulgaria. In the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century they were flourishing, following the extension of Bulgarian national market. Their production consisted of coats, fur caps, horse harnesses, more than 15 kinds of shoes and slippers, bags, belts, saddlebags, etc.

#### 3.4.1. Leather industry

The tannery – *tabahana*, was supplied with **animal skins and hides** by the craftsman usually in spring - after St. George's Day - with lamb and kid skins, and after the Assumption Day – with weaned lambs skins. Fresh, dried and unsalted skins were preferred. The **lime** used in the skin treatment was supplied by arrangement with the lime-burner and was delivered directly from his kiln. **Sumac** and **bran** were bought at the market; **wood ashes** was collected from the fireplace and the **dog's faeces** was gathered from the streets and yards.

The **tannery** had to be located near a river and to have two floors. Downstairs was the large fireplace. On the second floor there was a balcony (*chardak*), where the tanned skins were dried and rooms in which they were stored. The pits with the vats for soaking the skins in lime solution were in the yard.

**Tools:**



*Sarkisnitsi/ rukani* were a special kind of blunt knives for ripping hides and skins open and scrapping them inside; **wooden blades** for removing hair, large **cauldrons** for water boiling; large **troughs** (3 to 8 pcs, 60/150 cm), called *yambatsi*; **chests** – kind of trays with holes in which the raw hides were submerged in the river; **buckets** or coppers for soaking the sumac; *krina* (‘bushel’) to measure the amount of sumac for the tanning; large wooden **mortars** (*chutura*) for grinding the sumac; *kuspiya* – a special beam, 120 cm long, used for scraping off the hides and skins; *dartove* – long poles to carry the wet tanned skins; **wooden press** – two straight boards connected with screws for squeezing skins and hides.

In the past animal skins and hides were vegetable tanned. This was the most environmentally friendly method for processing, but it was not effective. Subsequently, tanning solutions began to be produced by special extraction methods.

#### **Production:**

For the needs of different crafts, tanners and leather-makers produced various types of leather: *meshini* – processed lamb or sheepskins for slipper-makers; *sahtiyani* – processed goat skins for saddlers’ needs. By the end of the nineteenth century the manufacture of leather (mostly Russian leather, morocco and *sahtian*) and soft leather (*meshina*) was supplied with hides and skins exclusively from the local resources.

Larger leather-making centers arose in Gabrovo, Lovech, Shumen, Silistra, Vidin, Svishtov, Sofia, Plovdiv, Kazanlak, Stara Zagora, Nova Zagora, Yambol, Sliven, Burgas.

### **3.4.2. Furriery**

Furriers process sheep, goat, lamb and weaned lamb skins and hides. Lambskins are bought around St. George’s Day and the weaned lambskins – in the summer. Rural furriers work with materials provided by the client; urban craftsmen produce goods with their own materials. In their work the furriers use large amounts of sea salt, corn meal, barley or wheat bran and bread leaven.

**Tools** are of two types:

Fur processing kit: **vats** – *futii*; *argasnets*– a container with narrow bottom and wide neck; *melitsa/ stan* – a frame for stretching skins and hides; **scraper** - *ogribka* for removing remains of flesh, fats and other impurities; *koltuk*; blunt **knives** for scraping; **iron comb** (*chesalo, darak*); **scissors** for trimming and **scales**.

**Tailoring kit: a knife for cutting the leather; scissors for tailoring clothes; scissors for trimming caps, pins, needles, thimble, wooden yardstick, cutting patterns, molds for fur caps**

**Key technological processes:** washing, scraping, tanning, dampening, stretching and rarely dyeing. The terminology associated with the processes and the tools is the same and largely borrowed from Turkish. There are also many names of Bulgarian origin, preserved from the Old Bulgarian language – evidence that the craft did not cease to be practiced after the conquest of Bulgaria by the Ottoman Turks. There are differences in the names of fur articles, which were determined by the specific features of traditional clothing and the vernacular in the different regions.

Many of these specimens housed in the museum can be defined as pieces of Bulgarian folk art. These are wedding coats, richly decorated with leather motifs of various colours. Original pieces of work are the shepherds’ leather bags for storing the

bagpipes – embellished with beautiful tassels of leather stripes, plaited in various striking fashions and with decorative knots and sequins; with blue beads to ward the evil forces off and mounted mirror round pieces bordered with leather cord-like strips.

The furriers celebrate St. Elias (July 20) as their professional patron. After the legend St. Elias used to climb on that day up the mountain peak and to call “*People, tighten the hoods, winter is coming*”.

Since the Liberation in 1878, the handicrafts based on skin processing have been continuously in decline. The main reason for that was the loss of the vast markets of the Ottoman Empire as well as the penetration of industrial manufacture in the processing of skins and hides.

A temporary rise was registered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after the adoption of the Law for Preservation of the Bulgarian Industry in 1894.

The nationalization of the industry and the banks was carried out in Bulgaria at the end of 1947. 47 wool-spinning enterprises, 103 tanneries and leather factories, 23 furriers and 18 shoe factories were nationalized.

In the period 1944 – 1988, several large leather factories and two large plants were found in Ruse, Gabrovo, Sofia, Sevlievo, Lovech and Etropole. The “G. Dimitrov” woolen combine/ enterprise in Sliven concentrated the overall production of woolen fabrics for clothing. The “V. Kolarov” combine united 36 textile factories in Gabrovo. In fact, it inherited the experience of several families of traditional textile-workers (Gabrovo was known as the “Bulgarian Manchester”). Its output was exported to over 25 countries. In 1969 its collection of tissues was sent to international displays and fairs in Moscow, London, Copenhagen, Tripoli, Vienna, Thessalonica, Leipzig, Algeria, Damascus, Kuwait, Casablanca and Paris.

In 1963, 334 000 leather clothes were produced in Bulgaria. Annually, over 4 million lambskins were processed. About 90% of the production was exported. In 1970 there were 18 enterprises – 7 leather, 2 fur and 9 shoe factories.

Nowadays, the woolen, leather and fur production is almost dormant.

### 3.4.3. Musical instruments

**Bagpipe** (*gayda, meshnitsa*) is a folk wind musical instrument, popular among the ancient Thracians, according to the historical sources. It consists of a hide bag and wooden parts – blowpipe (*ruchilo*) with mouthpiece, and a chanter (*gaidunitsa*). The smaller bagpipes are made from kid hides and the large bagpipes – from the hide of a larger kid or a small goat, sheared in advance and hair turned inwards. The bagpipe is typical musical instrument in Thrace, the Rhodopes, Eastern Dobrudzha and Eastern Stara Planina.

**Gusla** (kind of a simple harp) is a stringed bow instrument of old Slavic origin. It is made from solid wood. Instead of a resonator board, lambskin is stretched on the deck of the instrument with small resonating holes in the skin (sometimes a metal sheet is nailed instead). This instrument had limited distribution primarily in Central West Bulgaria and particularly in the mountainous areas of Trun. Since the late nineteenth century it gradually came out of use.

**Drum** (*tupan, daul, talambaz*) is a percussion folk instrument, known since biblical times. We see it in medieval frescoes (14<sup>th</sup> c.) – in scenes from the chapel of Hrelyo’s

fortress tower at the Rila Monastery and from the rock churches of Ivanovo, the region of Ruse, declared as world cultural heritage. The drum has two membranes – two tanned sheepskins, stretched on a hoop and tied with strings. It occurs throughout the country, but is most popular in the Pirin and Strandzha regions.

#### **4. Bone**

Usual practice for some shepherds is to decorate various objects of bone – powder-horns, chanters, squealers, bagpipe drone rings, knife handles, bone parts of pistols, rifles, scimitars, combs, buckles, etc. Interesting are the bone plates, which the shepherds mount on the leather bags. These bags were made by the shepherds themselves or by skilled furriers from a whole sheep or goat skin and are specific for the Bulgarian and Balkan culture. On the one hand the bone plates served for better and tighter close of the bag and on the other – the small crosses, arcs and points, carved with knives and awls, have a decorative function.

The sheep and goats' horns are still used by the craftsmen for making mummies' – *survakars'*, *babugers'* (Bulg.) masks.

In the past, but also nowadays, sheep and goat skins are used for making masquerade costumes of *survakars* (Pernik region), *dervishes* (Pazardzhik region), *babugers* (Pirin region), etc.

### **5. Contemporary state of crafts**

#### **5.1. Association of Masters of Folk Crafts and Arts**

In 1967 the Association of the masters of traditional crafts (AMTC) was found. It unites more than 2000 Bulgarian craftsmen throughout the country in six regional centers – Varna, Vratza, Gabrovo, Plovdiv, Ruse and Troyan. The management is in Sofia. The association conducts examinations for craftsmen and issues master certificates. Its main priority is to train young people intending to indulge in craftsmanship.

The section of the weavers, knitters and embroiderers is the largest among the other 15 sections of the association. Some masters-craftsmen come from families of hereditary artisans. Others are people with different professions – economists, teachers, ethnographers and others, all attracted by the magic of creativity.

The main group of handicrafts traditional for our country and greatly developed in AMTC is related to the manufacture of articles from textile materials. One of these crafts is the goat's hair rugs weaving with several representatives in the association. One of them is the Kekovs family from Panagyurishte who have been working in this craft since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their hair articles include floor mats, saddlebags, sacks, bags, etc. The production of the craft includes also goat's hair rugs, woven in stripes of length in the natural colours of the goat's coat. The goat's hair rugs are another type – the so called Rhodopean rugs – *kózyatsi* (Bulg.). They are made by masters artisans from Plovdiv, Smolyan and Kardzhali regions. Their fabrics are characterized by a beautiful bright multicolor palette of the dyed goat yarn.

Weaving in the AMTC has turned into a craft for dozens of women and men from the country - in their work they fully comply with the traditional technology. The textiles are made of natural materials on horizontal or vertical hand looms. Most popular among

them are the woolen textiles – fleecy and tufted rugs, carpet rugs, carpets, cushions, bags, etc. The type and nature of the textiles is largely determined by their function, the purposeful use in contemporary urban and rural households and by the fact that they are intended for the market. Today private companies operate in the carpet industry, producing carpets, whose designers draw inspiration from the forms and decorative motifs of folk arts.

The other group of traditional crafts is related to the processing of hides and to the production of a variety of leather and fur goods. In modern times very few masters, members of the AMTC, practice this craft – they prefer to use ready-made leather in their work. Novelty is the production of garments from leather and suede. Master furriers prevail in the craft. They make lambskin coats, sleeveless jackets, fur caps, gloves and more. The creation of modern examples of this production is influenced by the few preserved specimens of this craft, stored in the ethnographic museums and museum departments in the country. The artisans use traditional methods in the decoration of their fur products – attaching color braids and cords along the edges and the connecting seams to reinforce them, applying narrow open-work leather stripesp etc. The AMTC find that today this craft is not sufficiently developed although the demand for its products on the market is high.

Tailoring is also present in the structure of AMTC. The modern company which practices this craft satisfies the needs mainly of folklore groups and ensembles in the country. They look for clothing articles that come closest to the traditional patterns and decoration with braids and embroidery. Women masters in this field work in Gabrovo, Sofia, V. Tarnovo, Plovdiv, Zlatograd etc.

Hand knitting is another artistic craft based on domestic production which is not market-orientated. The products of women masters of knitting are mainly two types. With the first type, knitting follows familiar materials, shapes, ornaments and functions of the traditional Bulgarian knitting – woolen socks, leggings, gloves. The other type of knitting is based on the male and female costumes made of cloth. Knitted wear – dresses, jackets, suits, vests, sweaters, hats, shawls, gloves and others – are the main articles of that type of knitting.

In the 70s - 90s of the twentieth century, the crafts related to clothing and home furnishing, manifested brilliantly in the tissues, embroidery, knitting and leather. In the standard pre-fab apartments and brick houses in Bulgaria visible unification of furnishing occurred – very common is the picture of living-room floors covered with Kotel or Chiprovtsi carpets and of sets thereof in the bedrooms – *kitenitsi/ halishta* (tufted and fleece rugs) on the beds and on the standard three-part furniture – sofa, two armchairs and two stools. The Rhodopean blankets, fleece and tufted rugs and carpets are among the most common traditional bedcovers in the bride's dowry or the usual gifts for the newly married couple and the wedding sponsors.

The year 1959 is considered the starting point for the foundation of a textile art school in Bulgaria. In the same year, the “Textiles” department was created at the National Academy of Art.

In the 70s – 80s of the twentieth century Bulgarian artists demonstrated their capacity to use traditional materials and techniques in a way that made them relevant. Wool is one of the most used materials. Among the most distinguished authors with own contribution to the development of decorative textiles, the names of Marin Varbanov, Mara Yosifova, Todorka Yosifova, Maria Kochopulos and Vasil Ovcharov should be mentioned.

Delivery of wool, however, becomes more and more difficult. In recent years, the purchase price of leather and wool was extremely low. This circumstance pressed many sheep-owners not to market them, but to resort to other extreme solutions – they burn them or bury them in the ground. In the year when this research was going (2010 – 2011), the purchase price was 0.60 levs per kilogram wool, and between 12 and 15 levs per skin.

Fortunately, the masters of traditional arts and crafts know how to procure the necessary raw materials. They receive current information through the AMTC and during the annual fairs of folk handicrafts, which are regularly organized by the AMTC, ethnographic museums, private individuals, etc. In 2011 such events were: “Oreshak 2011” – a National Display of Crafts and Arts, in the Oreshak village (August, 12-15); the Fair of Traditional Crafts in Pazardzhik (June, 1–4); the Week of Crafts in the Regional Ethnographic Museum in Plovdiv (27 June–3 July) organized for the fifth consecutive year; the Yogurt Fair and the Festival of Folk Traditions and Crafts in Razgrad (21–23 July), the “Etar 2011”–IX International Fair of Traditional Crafts, etc. Some craftsmen and artisans have stands at the “Made in Bulgaria” annual exhibition at the National Palace of Culture.

After the political changes in Bulgaria that occurred at the end of the twentieth century, the well developed woolen industry declined. At present, only a few small private companies produce woolen textiles; for instance “BLAIV” in Sevlievo was a small family firm in the 90s of the twentieth century with experience obtained in the 60s. In the year of this study it is a modern enterprise with a spinning workshop, well equipped, with over 40 employees. It has own stores in Sevlievo, Lovech and Sofia where its production is sold – various woolen yarns, blankets, fleece rugs, woolen bedcovers and more.

One of the few manufacturers who weave genuine woollen carpets is “DEKOTEX” in Sliven. It is a joint stock company, which currently continues the traditions in woolen textile production from the early twentieth century.

## **5.2. Museums**

In the structure of regional museums of history in Bulgaria, there are ethnographic departments. Their funds comprise extremely rich and varied collections of traditional woolen and goat’s hair tissues, of hide and wool processing equipment, of technical weaving facilities, etc. They represent the specificity and the regional characteristics of the handicrafts, based on wool and goat’s hair and show the common ground for their development in the country. The National Ethnographic Museum and many specialized museums are directly related to the problem. The Museum of Textile Industry in Sliven deserves special attention with its two basic sections: hand-made and machine-made textiles with the respective operating exhibits.

The specialized museums show the production of carpets with smooth technique. Such is the exhibition in the Galatan School of the museum in Kotel and Chiprovtsi.

The only survived and restored large tanning manufacture workshop is in Sevlievo. It was built in 1873 and operated until 1948. The ground floor houses the exhibition “The Tanning craft in Sevlievo during the Revival”.

In 1963 the “Etar” Ethnographic Museum Complex was found and developed as the biggest Bulgarian open-air museum. In its bazaar one can observe closely the various crafts exercised in the past – goat’s hair rug weaving, braiding, furriery, weaving on horizontal and vertical hand looms, etc. Similar operational workshops appeared in Veliko Tarnovo, Dobrich, Zlatograd and in other places.

## 6. Conclusions

The sharp decline in sheep-farming in Bulgaria at the end of the twentieth century created rather unfavorable climate for the production based on raw materials derived from sheep – wool and skins. The lack of local raw materials and the collapse of existing foreign trade relations, almost liquidated the Bulgarian textile and wool, leather and fur industry.

The traditional technologies, however, as intangible cultural heritage have been preserved not only in the museum institutions, but also by practicing artists and masters. Their works, addressed to connoisseurs, orientated weaving and felt-producing, knitting and leather crafts to the applied arts, combining the utilitarian functions with high technical quality and aesthetic value of the handmade articles.

The interest to the workshops and courses in weaving, organized with the efforts of the museum professionals, is growing continuously. Particularly important is the work with children who learn to respect the folk art and master the traditional skills in the use of wool. Within the framework of the CULTRURAL project, the National Museum of History arranged children's workshops, issued a textbook on weaving and created the necessary ground for continuing the work after the completion of the project. It is worth noting the program "Tales of weaving" – a systematic training course and weaving workshop for disabled children. After the project closed, a weaving atelier and a permanent exhibition of the fabrics and distaffs children made, were organized at the specialized school for deaf-and-dumb children. Thus, home occupations and trades, which have irrevocably gone out of everyday life in most parts of the country, have now become an attractive field for creativity and are increasingly gaining popularity. The role of the museum as an agent of memory is indispensable in this regard.

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