

## Quiet and Warm: The Human Motifs and Symbols In the Chiprovtsi Carpets

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Received 07 March, 2015; Accepted 22 March, 2015 © The author(s) 2014. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

**ABSTRACT:-** Chiprovtsi carpets had and undoubted popularity in the carpet markets in Europe and Asia in the last 300 years. Nowadays Chiprovtsi carpets are expecting their market Renaissance again, ready to discover their natural beauty, rich ornamentation and deep meaning of their unique symbols. This paper presents the human motifs and symbols in Chiprovtsi carpets, together with compositions from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to modern times, where these symbols have been used. The materials and weaving technique are also presented.

**Keywords:** - Chiprovtsi carpet, human symbols, human motifs, ornamentation, textiles

### I. INTRODUCTION

Chiprovtsi is a small town in the North-West Part of Bulgaria, with less than 2000 inhabitants. It is one of the famous traditional carpet-making centers in Bulgaria. Since November 2014 the tradition of carpet-making in Chiprovtsi was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Three types of carpets are traditionally manufactured in Bulgaria: nonwoven felts, pile carpets and smooth surface carpets. Chiprovtsi carpets are smooth surface carpets, with two equal faces, which are the most typical for the national carpet craftsmanship. Their richness and beauty come from the combination of colors and decorative ornaments, as well as from the created compositions, which preserve the traditions, while being in a constant development.

Chiprovtsi carpets are very diverse as ornamentation and composition – Fig. 1.



Fig. 1 Chiprovtsi carpet

Geometric shapes, small tokens distributed evenly in the field of the carpet and complex compositions of stylized figures, objects, plants, animals and humans, are typical. The carpet scheme includes main field and one to three borders, more often wider than narrow. The carpet color range is also very wide: contrasting in color, uniform shapes are arranged on a unicoloured background (red, brown, dark blue) or the background is created by colorful wide bands, on which identical figures are also linearly arranged. Red is a traditional color in the last two centuries, but pure white, shadows of yellow, green, blue and black are also frequently used.

The aim of our study was to research the symbols in the weaving of the Chiprovtsi carpets and to make an electronic database of the ornaments and composition used. The electronic database would allow not only the better preservation of the traditions, but the application of the old symbols in modern textile industry: as woven or knitted details in clothing, embroidery motifs, articles of the textile art, etc. At the same time, we were impressed by the deep connection between all features of the carpet – from its materials and ways of weaving through its symbols and compositions to the final use in the Bulgarian revival house. Especially interesting were the symbols of humans – either entirely token or figures with fairly well-expressed details. The appearance of human figures or details of the human body in Chiprovtsi carpets happened in the course of time: such symbols did not exist in Persian “gelim”, and appeared quite late in the oriental “kilim”. Obviously, the Bulgarian housewife (carpets in Bulgaria were traditionally made only by women, i.e. there was a division of crafts by gender) had found a way to express symbolically the life that surrounded her and turned the carpet in a story about life, everyday occupations, holidays, social relationships – everything she could express through this silent object that created warmth and comfort in the home: the carpet.

## II. CARPET WEAVING TECHNOLOGY

The main material for weaving the Chiprovtsi carpets is the wool – fleece wool and skin wool. The fleece wool is much softer and with longer fibers than the skin wool, therefore the yarns from the fleece wool have higher strength and are used to form the warp set of threads in weaving. The skin wool is used mainly for spinning yarns for weft threads: these yarns are coarser and stiffer, since during the processing of the skin the wool fibers are losing their softness.

At 1900s cotton yarns started to be used as warp threads and the “new” carpets demonstrated to be more durable than the carpets of 100% wool yarns.

The most commonly used in carpet weaving wool fibers are these of a white color, as it is most easily to be dyed. But the use of black wool fibers sometimes reaches 20%, up to 50 %, depending on the symbols and the carpet composition. The warp set of threads is white because the pale color tires less the eyes of the weaver. Sometimes a black thread is also used in alternation with white warp yarns.

The spinning of the wool yarns for the Chiprovtsi carpet was done manually or with a spinning wheel – Fig. 2. It was again a female duty, but the man could help with the wool carding. Nowadays industrially spun wool yarns (worsted or semi-worsted) are used and the appearance of the carpets is much better, due to the greater evenness of the yarns.



**Fig. 2 Hand spinning done nowadays in Chiprovtsi**

Up to the 1890s the color of the wool was obtained only with natural dyes, but later chemical dyes appear and since the beginning of the 1900s natural dyes were rarely used. Weaving was done on a vertical loom, which is used nowadays as well.

### III. BASIC MOTIFS

#### 3.1 “Triangle”

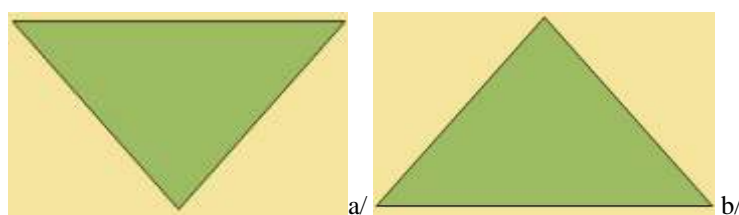
The first period in the weaving of Chiprovtsi carpets dates back to the early 1700s (Stankov 1960). The markets of the Ottoman Empire were the main places for sales of the carpets. Therefore human figures could not appear on the carpets (forbidden by the Koran) and only symbols of them were used.

The basic figure in the weaving of the Chiprovtsi carpet is the triangle. The triangle as a motive appears as a separate element in the oldest carpets: triangles were arranged in horizontal or vertical lines. A substantial part of the other traditional carpet motifs are combination of triangles: “Makaz”, “Wing”, “Nest”, “Bibitsa”, “Kanatitsa”, “Kolo”, etc.

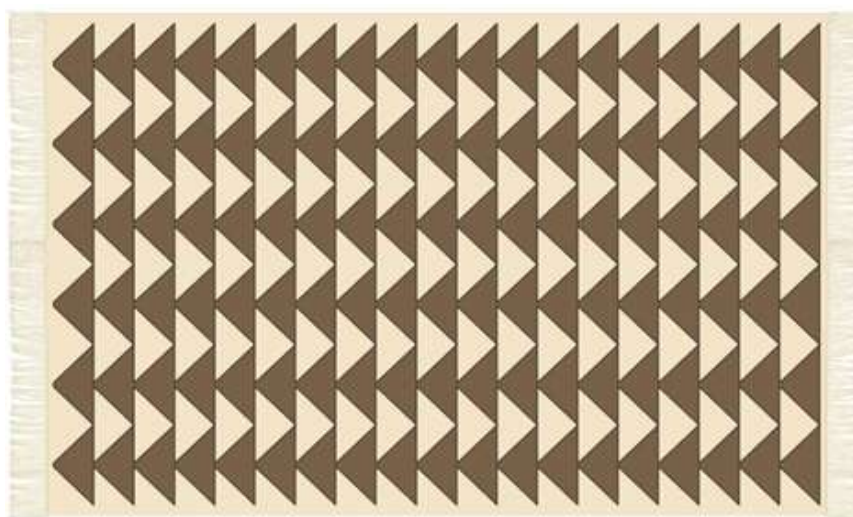
The triangle is a wide used symbol: from the essence of stability for Pythagoreans (Geldard 2007) to the Holy Trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) in Christianity (French 2014). The upward pointing triangle is the blade in magic rituals (A Visual Glossary of Religious Symbols, 2010), the symbol of rising up and the male principal (Wangu 2002). The downward pointing figure is a symbol of the chalice in magic rituals (A Visual Glossary of Religious Symbols, 2010), representation of water or a symbol of the female principle as an image of the genitalia of the Goddess (Wangu 2002, Mandell and Jordan 2010).

The triangle in the symbolism of the Chiprovtsi carpet has an opposite meaning: the downward pointing triangle (Fig. 3a) is a symbol of the male principle, while the upward pointing triangle represents the female principle (Fig. 3b). Probably the ancient weaver in Chiprovtsi had no idea about the symbolic diversity of the triangle and she proceeded from her own observations on male and female figures: the man – with narrow hips and broad shoulders, often widened by the clothing; and the woman – with wide hips and narrow shoulders, wearing a dress (pinafore).

Figure 4 shows “Garibalda” carpet from 17<sup>th</sup> century, where the triangle is the main motif in the composition.



**Fig. 3 The basic symbol in Chiprovtsi carpet: a/ downward pointing triangle – the male principle; b/ upward pointing triangle – the female principle.**



**Fig. 4 “Garibalda” carpet – classical composition from the 17<sup>th</sup> c.**

#### 3.2 “Makaz”

The combination of the two triangles (the male over the female principle) – gives the “Makaz” motif: Fig. 5. The word “makaz” comes from the Turkish language and means “scissors”. The motif resembles an hourglass and is a symbol of the balance, time and completeness. In traditional compositions the motif most frequently occupies part of the carpet border; it is rarely woven in the field. It is perhaps a symbol of the eternity as well, due to the merger of “male” and “female” principle.

If the “Makaz” motif is rotated at 90 degrees, it resembles the sign of infinity in mathematics ( $\infty$ ), for which the weaver in the 18<sup>th</sup> century certainly had no idea.

Figure 6 shows a classical Chiprovtsi carpet from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, called “Garibalda”, where “Makaz” motif is widely used.

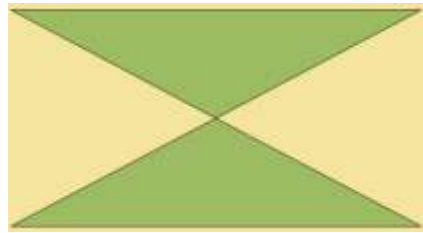


Fig. 5 The “Makaz” motif



Fig. 6 “Garibalda” carpet with “Makaz” and “Diamond” motifs (18<sup>th</sup> c.)

### 3.3 “Diamond”

The combination of the two bases of the triangles in Fig. 3 gives another one, much more “stable” figure, which is the “Diamond” – Fig. 7. This motif, often cut by a line in the middle, was used to fill the fields in the carpets from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Fig. 6).

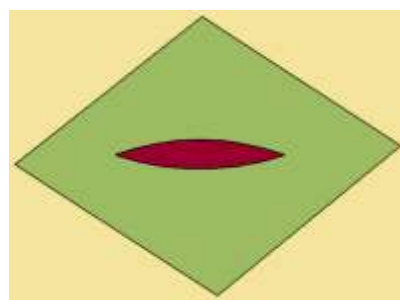


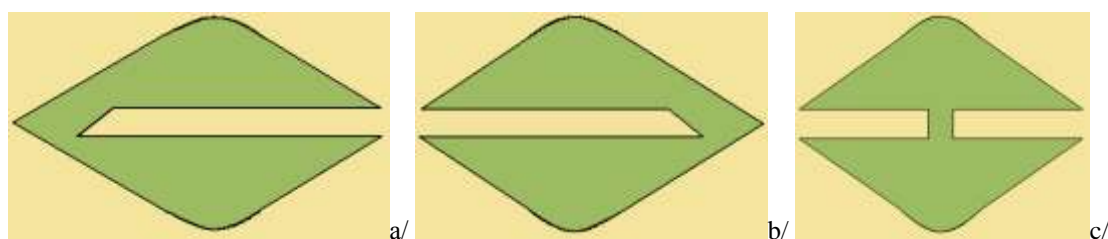
Fig. 7 The “Diamond” motif

It is very interesting that Native American Indians used the Diamond motif as a symbol of the butterfly. Thus it represented the idea of transformation and immortality (Venefica 2008). The same is valid for a motif in the Chiprovtsi carpet, which is derived from the Diamond motif: if the bases of the triangles in the diamond are separated from one another, but still kept linked together, the new figure is called “Kamula” (or “Kamulka”).

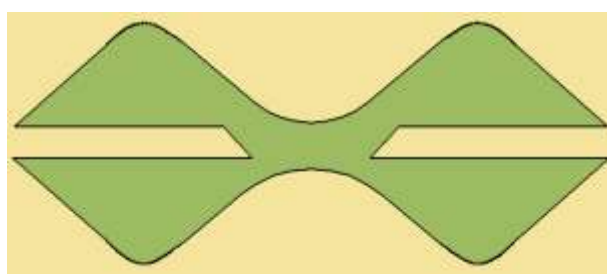
### 3.4 “Kamula”

Figure 8 shows three samples of “Kamula” motif: left, right and centrally linked triangles that form “Left Kamula” (Fig. 8a), “Right Kamula” (Fig. 8b) and traditional “Kamula” (Fig. 8c). The motif is used for filling-in the field of the carpet.

The combination of two forms gave the so called “Double Kamula” – Fig. 9. This motif is used in the carpet border, and sometimes in the colored bands of the field. The inserting of the “Double Kamula” in the border unwanted empty spaces appear, which usually are filled in with other motifs, for example “makaz”.



**Fig. 8 The “Kamula” motif: a/ left kamula; b/ right kamula; c/ kamula.**



**Fig. 9 The “Double Kamula” motif.**

Our attempt to find out the origin of the word “kamula” is still quite fruitless. We expected that it is of Turkish origin, as “makaz” and “kanatitsa”. There is a Turkish word “kamula” that means “expropriation”, and the word “kamu”, which means “public”. We still do not know if there is something to do with the carpet motif from Chiprovtsi, however.

Searching for the etymology of the “kamula” motif, we have found that the word “kamui” existed in the language of ainu people: indigenous people who lived in Hokkaido and Northeastern Honshu (Japan) and Sakhalin and Kuril Islands (Russia) (Ainu Museum, 2010). “Kamuy” in Ainu language meant “god” or “divine spirit”.

In the Chiprovtsi carpet the “kamula” motif was a symbol of immortality.

Is there any relationship between the “Diamond” motif and the symbol of immortality of the Native American Indians? Or between the “Kamula” motif as derivation of the “Diamond”, used again as a symbol of immortality and the “kamui” – the eternal gods of the Ainu people? The question has no answer and probably would never have, but it is really inspiring to discover that groups of people, who lived at large distances from each other at about the same time or even at different times, had the same feeling for nature and the world around them.

#### **IV. THE HUMAN SYMBOLS**

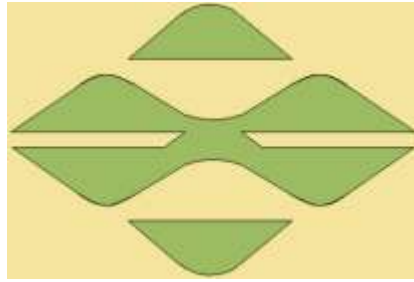
Apart from the triangles, which can be treated as human symbols as well, the ornamentation of the Chiprovtsi carpets involves specific motifs, which represents humans or parts of the human body. Many of them are not only “figures” from a “craft design”: they are protagonists in the story, told by the carpet.

##### **4.1 “Pirochanka”**

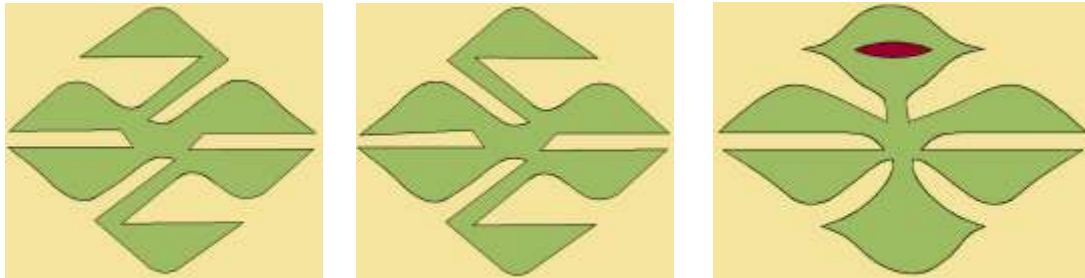
The “Pirochanka” motif is a symbol of the bride or the young married women – Fig. 10. The name is related with the town of Pirot, which is situated in Serbia, close to the present border between Serbia and Bulgaria. The motif includes a combination of two triangles (the female is on the top and the male is on the bottom) and the “Double Kamula” motif. In larger carpets it is woven in the border, while in carpets and rugs with small sizes it is situated as a central motif in the field.

Versions of the motif are presented in Fig. 11. There are also two more complicated versions: “New Pirochanka” motif (Fig. 12a) and “Big Pirochanka” (Fig. 12b).

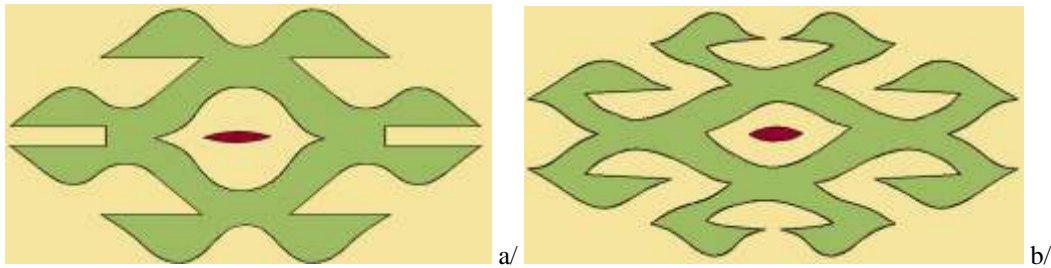
A carpet, which involves the motif in its composition, is shown in Fig. 13.



**Fig. 10** The “Pirotschanka” motif.



**Fig. 11** Versions of “Pirotschanka” motif.



**Fig. 12** Versions of “Pirotschanka” motif: a/ “New Pirotschanka”; b/ “Big Pirotschanka”.

#### **4.2 “Karakachka”**

“Karakachka” motif is one of the most common ornaments in Chiprovtsi carpets. The name comes from the Turkish language and means “black-eyed bride” or “black-eyed young married woman”. This is a motif, made of several triangles, as shown on the geometrical representation in Fig. 14. The result strongly resembles a human figure and it is supposed that is a symbolic image of fertility. “Karakachka” motif is found in carpets, dating back from the 17th century. The motive is woven both in the field and in the border. The oldest carpets with this ornament were made in two colors: blue and red or black and red.

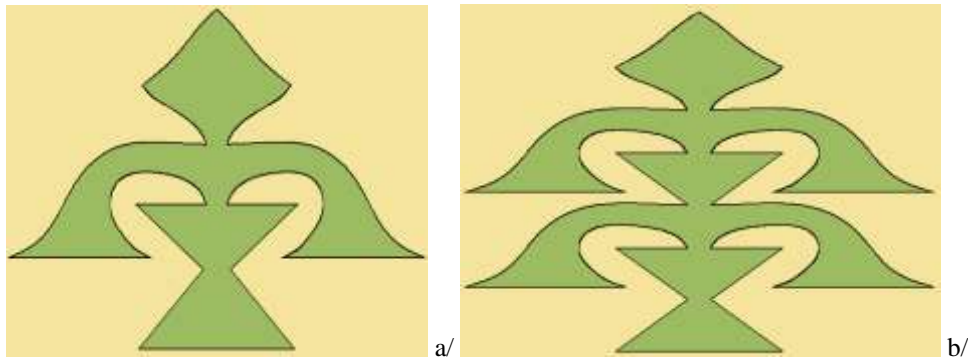
The versions of “Karakachka” motif, shown in Fig. 15, represent the symbol that is already woven in the Chiprovtsi carpets. The figure can be considered as an image of a woman with a yoke and coppers on her shoulder, which are probably full with the desired treasures: fertility and wealth (Fig. 15a). It may be accepted also as a woman, who wears clothes of a rich person, with long wide sleeves, symbols of prosperity.



**Fig. 13** Carpet with “Pirotschanka” motif.



**Fig. 14 “Karakachka” motif: combination of triangles**



**Fig. 15 “Karakachka” motif: a/ woven version I; b/ woven version II**

This symbol of fertility and wealth is obviously “doubled” in the second motif (Fig. 15b), since the human figure has four “hands”.”

A modern carpet with “Karakachka” motif is presented in Fig. 16.

#### **4.3 “Child”**

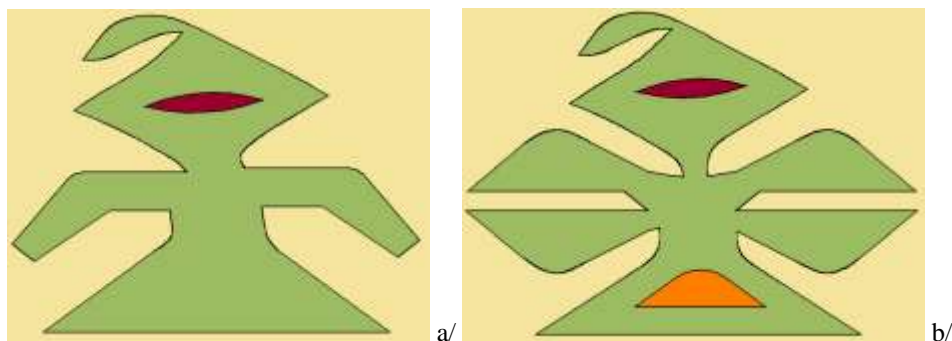
The figure of a child is composed again by triangles and a “Diamond” – Fig. 17(a). Additional “Double Kamula” motif is used for the development of the form in Fig. 17(b). Usually the “Child” motif is used to fill the empty spaces in the carpet.

#### **4.4 “Gipsy women”**

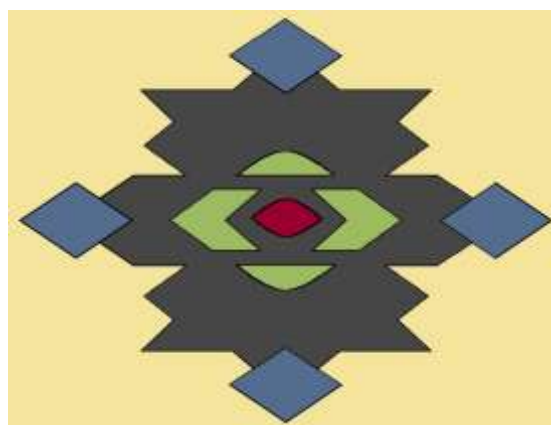
This motif is called “Gipsy women” as it is woven usually in dark, dull colors: gray, brawn, blue – Fig. 18. It appeared in the ornamentation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a specific period in the development of the Chiprovtsi carpet started: the ornamentation became more opulent than before, many symmetric and small ornaments were used in a rhythmically repetitive composition, the carpets have polychromatic vision much more than before. New motifs were developed, some of them due to the greater freedom in the movement of Bulgarians and contacts with other countries and peoples, as well as access to new markets after the Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in 1878.



**Fig. 16 A modern carpet with “Karakachka” motif**



**Fig. 17 “Child” motif: a/ version I; b/ version II**



**Fig. 18 “Gipsy women” motif**

#### **4.5 “Rachici”**

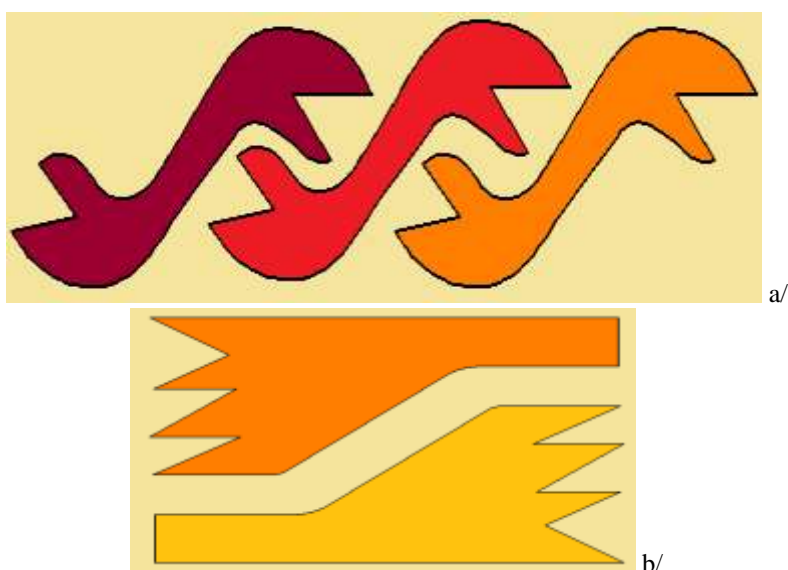
This motif is presented from some authors as related to the nature ornamentation (Stankov 1960). It appeared in carpets from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when mostly geometrical motifs were used – Fig. 19. Obviously it was the wish of the weaver to diversify her work with new elements, without coming into conflict with the prohibition on depiction of human figures that would make the carpet unsalable to buyers, professing Islam. Not coincidentally after the geometrical period, which ends at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the Chiprovtsi carpet ornamentation appeared stylized images of flowers, animals, trees and natural elements – a period that ended with the liberation of Bulgaria at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the opening of the country to the European markets.



**Fig. 19 “Rachici” carpet (19<sup>th</sup> c.)**



“Rachici” motif resembles strongly the position of the arms folded on the chest, with stylized thumb and palm (Fig. 20a). The name itself comes from the word “hands” in Bulgarian language. In the variation of Fig. 20b even stylized fingers of the hand appear.



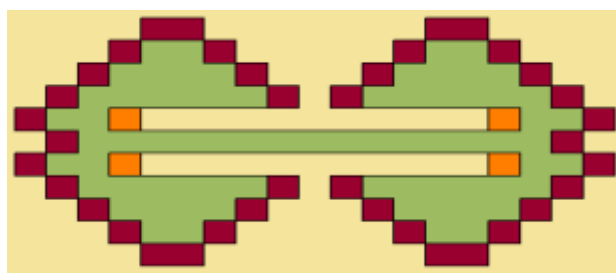
**Fig. 20 “Rachici” motif: a/ version I; b/ version II**

#### **4.6 “Big eyes”**

It is not known if this motif was developed as a symbol of a human or it was named later on, finding a similarity between the figure and the eyes – Fig. 21. “Big eyes” motif is part of the carpet “Kufarite” (The Suitcases) – Fig. 22.

#### **4.7 “Human figure”**

This motif is an example of the modern development of Chiprovtsi carpet. The “Genko” carpet, a composition from 1998 (Fig. 23), shows complete human figure. Though the motif carries back to Egyptian representation of human figure as well, the motif is completely created in the traditions of Chiprovtsi carpet ornamentation – Fig. 24.



**Fig. 21 “Big eyes” motif**



**Fig. 22 “Kufarite” carpet with “Big eyes” motif (20<sup>th</sup> c.)**

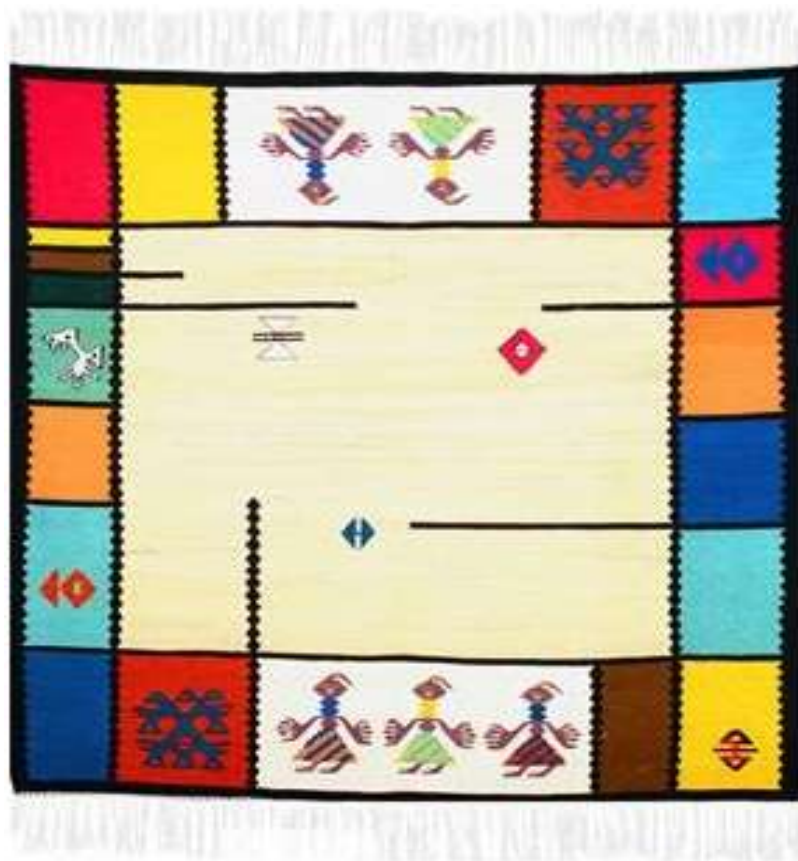


Fig. 23 “Genko” carpet with “Human figure” motif (20<sup>th</sup> c.)



Fig. 24 “Human figure” motif

## V. CONCLUSION

The human figure has a traditional presence in the design of Chiprovtsi carpet: from the triangle that symbolizes the male and female principle in a way, opposite of symbolism in other countries and cultures, to the detailed “Human figure” in the contemporary carpet design, resembling Egyptian art. The weaver of Chiprovtsi carpets crafts her works with symbols of people – “Big eyes”, “Karakachka”, “Child” - for people, who loves, even they are strangers.

Many symbols are related with the motifs and compositions in Chiprovtsi carpets. Even the beginning of a new carpet weaving is not made in a random day – the popular belief says that the weaver has to look for a good day or a good person to enter the home. When the carpet is finished and removed from the loom, some weavers sing a special song and a child is rolled in it, to check if the carpet is strong enough.

All the skills, concentration, inspiration and even the soul of the weaver are embedded in the Chiprovtsi carpet. Is not a coincidence that some of the masters of carpet today work only for their families, because they cannot part with their works. The most important is, however, that the carpet-weaving traditions in

the town of Chiprovtsi are alive, making a bridge between the aesthetics of the past and the view of the modern people, helping them to identify their cultural character.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to express our gratitude to Mrs. Velika Stoeva and Arch. Joanna Petkova-Chushkareva, generation of carpet-weavers and designers of “Tchushkarcheto”, for their valuable help in entering the amazing

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