



**Southeast Embroidery and Design Conference**  
**Sui Dhaga Presentation: *Khamak and Afghan Women***  
**Kandahar, Afghanistan**  
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*Remarks by ACS Field Director, Rangina Hamidi:*

Afghanistan is a highly mountainous, land-locked country with centuries of struggles with neighbors for its prime location of connecting continents. An ethnically divided nation, Afghanistan dates back thousands of years of history rich with the world's largest Buddha statues (which were destroyed by the Taliban), raising great scholars and poets such as Mawlana Jalaludin Rumi and once having a unified and strong people that defeated even the world's largest powers of its time.

The country however paid a huge price in the midst of world politics. The invasion of the Russians in 1979 led to a decade of bloody war which cost the lives of millions of people, made that many more handicapped and created the largest Afghan diaspora in Afghanistan's history. The country was destroyed to pieces. The Russian war followed by four years of a bloody civil war and still more by the Taliban, brought a dramatic change to the social, economical and political structure of Afghanistan.

We need not spend more time going over the atrocities that each regime brought with them to Afghanistan, but to say that the destruction was big and severe enough to have transformed an entire nation and its people. Today, after four years of the reconstruction process, Afghanistan is still faced with many challenges – namely that of security. Neighboring countries continue to meddle with the politics of Afghanistan and reconstruction is very visibly affected by insecurity. However, the Afghan people are hopeful that a brighter future lay ahead of them in spite of the shortcomings. For the first time in ten years, Afghanistan received rain last year and farmers were able to harvest their lands again. The doors to education have reopened, female teachers have returned to teach the leaders of tomorrow. Women are taking steps to actively get involved in social and political issues of their nation. Women have resumed their meetings and gatherings to discuss their situations and learn methods to improve the lives of their sisters. While there are positive steps towards change in some parts of Afghanistan, impediments remain in Kandahar and in the surrounding southern region of Afghanistan where for the majority of women not much has changed since the days of war and destruction. Women must still be completely covered in the infamous burqa when leaving the home. When we asked Shaagula what would happen to her if she decided to take her burqa off as she is old enough now to do so, she replied “my husband will kill me!” The majority of women are completely home-bound, only allowed to attend immediate family social gatherings and medical emergencies, but ONLY with the permission of their men. Because of their complete secluded and segregated lifestyle, many young women must find means of enjoyment or entertainment inside their homes. Young women often celebrate dolls' weddings inside their homes to keep themselves from boredom. With over 90% illiteracy rates for women in Afghanistan, housework, needlework, traditional singing and dancing, child rearing and bearing are about the only activities women are allowed to take part in.

In southern Afghanistan where the majority of the people are of the Pashtun ethnic tribe, a strict code of conduct, known as Pashtunwali, is practiced. This code of conduct may sometimes be even higher than the rules and regulations of our religion Islam. The effect of this code of conduct is most especially visible in the treatment of Pashtun men towards their girls and women. In Pashtunwali it is shameful for a man to let the women of his household out for education or work. Even though Islam has made education mandatory on every Muslim – man and woman – for a Pashtun man it is a dishonor to send his daughter, sister or wife out to school for education. As a result, any activity outside of the home is considered unethical for women. Before the wars Afghanistan had a class of women who were educated and today when many of those women who could potentially serve their nation are home-bound because of this ethnic structure. There are a number of highly qualified and educated women today in Kandahar who do not have permission from her husbands or other men-folk to leave their homes. Some development projects are utilizing this hidden skill to share the knowledge and create opportunities for such women to teach at home. However, even teaching inside her house may ruin her reputation as a “western” woman who is teaching. Often women must secretly teach young girls in their neighborhoods in the name of religious teachings to spare themselves from the unwanted comments from their communities. Belquisa is one such example. Belquisa is a 12<sup>th</sup> grade graduate from the past and her husband will not give her permission to work outside of her house. Driven by the poor economic situation of her home, Belquisa secretly teaches thirty young girls at her home. Some of the girls leave the subject books with their teacher because of the fear of their fathers finding out the real subject of their learning. While Belquisa teaches both religious teachings and other school subjects the neighbors know her as the religious teacher and sending young girls to learn religious matters is acceptable.

A woman in Afghanistan is molded to become a servant to her father and brothers when she is not married, to live up to the wishes of her husband and in-laws when she is married, to remain quiet in spite of beatings and suffering, to quietly endure all the pain that must come to her, take the blame of all others and to live up to the expectations of all others but hers. A woman’s life in Afghanistan is completely controlled by others from cradle to the grave. Within the four walls of their homes, Afghan women smoke away their sorrows and pains through their chillums (or hookahs) and even that only when they are old enough (beyond child bearing age).

To endure all of this, Afghan women have kept an incredible skill that aids them through their daily struggles – doing fine hand-embroidery known as *Khamak*. With the extended family structure, many women depend on the embroidery not only as a means to earn an income, but to also keep themselves busy during the long homebound days. The three decades of war has destroyed the economic structures of families and thus many families can no longer solely depend on the income of their men-folk to run the house and fulfill the material needs of their women. One benefit of the Pashtunwali towards women is that money from women’s hand is considered shameful for a man to accept – thus the women who do the embroidery in their homes get to keep all of their earned income and it is at the discretion of the woman to spend it as she wishes – often on household expenses anyway.

Afghans for Civil Society is a small grassroots organization working for social development in Southern Afghanistan that operates a home-based income generation project for 520 Kandahari women. *Khamak* is a hand down tradition taught to girls by their mothers, grandmothers or elder sisters starting as early as ages six or seven. By the time the girl reaches age twelve she has already mastered the art. This fine work is done by counting the threads of the fabric weave to stitch geometric shapes with silk-thread.

The work is done in a sitting position with the work positioned on the top of a bended knee.

Girls must master this art not only for their knowledge but because in Kandahar girls are tested for the quality of their work at the time of proposal of marriage from the boy's family. A girl's value goes up with high quality needle work. She must always have a work in progress for her mother to show to the future potential inlaws – which may become the deciding factor in a marriage choice.

When a girl is promised in marriage, she must work hard to complete her embroidered set of napkins, pillow covers, bed spreads, wall coverings and suit case coverings. This dowry set will be used to decorate her future room. Everyone who visits the bride will see the amount of work put into her decorative room items. Praise on her work will gain her value among the inlaws.

As Afghan women say goodbyes to their family on the night of their weddings, they are told to be patient and be strong in the face of future struggles. She is reminded of this all of her life. Indeed, Afghan women – especially those in the south – endure more pain, suffering, control and power with patience. While they wither away in their socially unjust world, they leave behind their perfect marks of stitches – which tell us that like their fine work, Afghan women have lived their lives to the standards and norms set for them by their patriarchal societies. As perfectly as they finish their work, Afghan women must similarly live perfect lives sacrificing their personal wishes and desires for the sake of their families. Just as a small mistake in the counting of the stitches can ruin the perfect geometric design of the work, so can a small mistake scar the life of a Kandahari woman forever.

The khamak embroidery opens the gate of spiritual escape from the mundane, meaningless day to day life of Afghan women. Through her fine and refined stitches she expresses the innermost desire for aesthetic beauty as expressed in her fine work. Described in her own words, Hajira states that “when I would get into an argument with my husband and he would leave the house to calm his anger I had the four suffocating walls of my house around me to calm myself down. My anger and frustration would feel like a mountain on my shoulders...doing khamak gave me the peace that I needed. Through creating beautiful designs I would divert my mind to calm myself down and the end result of finishing a beautiful work of art would give me the satisfaction that I needed.” Afghan women stitch their hopes, dreams and desires into embroidery as quietly as they live the voiceless lives in Kandahar.

Moving forward, we Afghan women want to reclaim our autonomy and clear the path for the future of our daughters. While it may be too late for the generation of Afghan mothers to drastically change their future now, it is possible to stitch a new path for the future of the next generation. It is with this hope that women of this region, with similar pasts and stories can bridge their gap of differences and together stitch a new hope, a new identity and a new autonomy for the women of tomorrow.