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Investigating cultural evolution through biological phylogenetic analyses of Turkmen textiles

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Abstract

The debate on the evolution of culture has focused on two processes in particular, phylogenesis and ethnogenesis. Recently, it has been suggested that the latter has probably always been more significant than the former. This proposal was assessed by applying cladistic methods of phylogenetic reconstruction to a data set comprising decorative characters from textiles produced by Turkmen tribes since the 18th century. The analyses focused on two periods in Turkmen history: the era in which most Turkmen practised nomadic pastoralism and were organised according to indigenous structures of affiliation and leadership; and the period following their defeat by Tsarist Russia in 1881, which is associated with the sedentarisation of nomadic Turkmen and their increasing dependence on the market. The results indicate that phylogenesis was the dominant process in the evolution of Turkmen carpet designs prior to the

annexation of their territories, accounting for c.70% of the resemblances among the woven assemblages. The analyses also show that phylogenesis was the dominant process after 1881, although ethnogenesis accounted for an additional 10% of the resemblances among the assemblages. These results do not support the proposition that ethnogenesis has always been a more significant process in cultural evolution than phylogenesis.



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Keywords

Cultural evolution; Phylogenesis; Ethnogenesis; Turkmen; Woven textiles; Cladistics

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