



Improvised-Textiling as a Folkloric Narrative Practice in Qashqai Rugs: An Evolutionary Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract:

This study examines the concept of improvisation in Qashqai rugs as an embodied, cognitive, and evolutionary form of narrative, highlighting its parallels with folk and popular art. Unlike traditional interpretations that seek fixed symbolic meanings in motifs, this research shows that narrative emerges through the weaving process itself. Each motif, color choice, or pattern adjustment reflects situated interactions among the weaver's memory, embodied cognition, and ecological context. Improvised textiling is shaped by cumulative cultural knowledge and adaptive neural structures, producing emergent sequences comparable to episodic, non-linear oral folklore. By framing narrative as a dynamic, in-the-moment process, the study demonstrates that both Qashqai weaving and folk storytelling operate as adaptive, emergent practices. Meaning is not pre-established but arises from the ongoing interaction between humans, materials, and environment, making the creative process itself the narrative. This perspective clarifies the cognitive, cultural, and evolutionary foundations of improvisation in tribal textiles and situates Qashqai carpets within broader discussions of narrative, material engagement, and folk art.

Key Words: Qashqai Rugs, Improvised-Textiling, Narrative and Narratology, Material Engagement Theory, Cognitive-Evolutionary Archaeology, Evolutionary Psychology

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Introduction

Memory, as one of the most important cognitive processes, plays a vital role in the continuity of human experiences and behaviors (Wynn ۲۰۰۲; Renfrew ۲۰۰۷). In recent years, numerous studies have examined the interactions between humans and their surrounding material environment, highlighting these interactions as influential factors in the formation and reinforcement of memory (Malafouris ۲۰۱۳). While traditional perspectives often consider the brain as the biological organ of consciousness and the mind as an internal engine operating within the human skull, separate from the ecosystem (Farsi & Hosseinzadeh ۲۰۲۵), Andy Clark, through the theory of embodied and extended cognition in cognitive science and philosophy of mind, emphasizes the role of the body and environment in shaping cognitive processes (Clark ۱۹۹۷).

Material culture, on the other hand, represents one of the most important cognitive tools of past societies in art history and archaeology. It encompasses all human-made and human-constructed artifacts, ranging from ceramics, tablets, and sculptures to customs, language, and artistic styles (Henrich ۲۰۱۶; Richerson et al. ۲۰۱۰). These objects not only reflect the culture and life of past peoples but also actively contribute to shaping memory and cognitive traits in the present. For example, the invention of counting objects and subsequently numerical systems and inscribed numbers on tablets and other artifacts fostered rationality and logical thought, which continue to influence various fields of knowledge to this day (Overmann ۲۰۱۹; Overmann & Coolidge ۲۰۱۹).

From a classical perspective, storytelling refers to the narrative representation of historical events through written and visual forms. In narrative arts, such as iconography, murals, or historically themed paintings, images serve purposes such as creating meaning, sharing cultural and social concepts, and transmitting lived experience to subsequent generations, and are regarded as one of the principal areas of research within linguistic systems. Storytelling has historically been considered a core component of artistic works, and the quality and style of narrative in artworks of any period are shaped by the social system, prevailing language and artistic conventions, and the intentions of the artist. Art history encounters various types of artworks, each situated within a hierarchy of power relations. Accordingly, depending on their connection to authority and their commitment to conveying a message, these works exhibit different forms of official and vernacular narratives.

In popular art, as a major informal artistic trend, we encounter a distinctly different type of narrative that is highly personalized, emotional, and independent. Across different branches of popular art, the act of narration is often shaped by lived experience, collective memory, and modes of oral transmission rather than by fixed textual or visual canons. Consequently, narratives in popular and folk art tend to be direct, situational, and

responsive to context, and due to their strong sensory and emotional dimensions, they often exert a deeper and more immediate impact. Mental weavers, inspired by accumulated visual experiences and without following prescribed instructions or patterns, create their works through improvisation. In such contexts, narration does not function as the illustration of a predefined story but emerges through the act of making itself. Moreover, when verbal language proves insufficient, humans have historically turned to images and material forms to convey experience and meaning, a tendency that can be traced back to prehistoric cave paintings.

Building on these perspectives, this paper, considering the interactions and relationships between humans and material culture (Farsi & Hosseinzadeh, ٢٠٢٥), examines improvisation in Qashqai carpets as a form of narrative practice situated within popular and folk art traditions. Rather than approaching these carpets as symbolic texts requiring interpretive decoding, the study asks whether improvised textiling can be understood as a folkloric mode of narration shaped by embodied action, material engagement, and ecological conditions. The central research question concerns how narrative emerges in Qashqai carpets in the absence of a predetermined design, written story, or intentional symbolic program.

By drawing on evolutionary psychology and cognitive evolutionary archaeology, the article aims to clarify how memory, material culture, and human environment interaction jointly contribute to the formation of improvisation as a processual and situational narrative act. In doing so, the study seeks to reposition Qashqai carpets within broader discussions of folklore, popular art, and narrative theory, arguing that improvisation functions not as an expressive representation of meaning but as an emergent narrative practice unfolding in the act of weaving itself.

٢. Narrative and Narratology

From a classical perspective, narratology is understood as a set of literary theories encompassing narrative texts, images, staging, events, and cultural achievements that collectively convey a story (Ball ١٩٩٧). Most narratologists assert that a narrative includes both material and discursive signs, such that it communicates a specific meaning or content, performs a particular story function, and serves a social role, delineating three potential domains for its definition: discourse, story, and function (Ryan ٢٠٠٧: ٢٤). In this context, the French literary theorist Gérard Genette defines narrative as the interaction between what is told (the story) and how the story is told (the discourse). In his seminal work *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Genette categorizes discourse into three dimensions: *time* (the relationship between the story's chronological sequence and the discourse's presentation), *mood or mode* (the forms and degrees of narrative

presentation), and *voice or tone* (the manner in which the act of narrating itself is incorporated into the narrative) (Shen ۲۰۰۸: ۱۳۷).

In simpler terms, from Genette's perspective, *time* includes three components: order, duration, and frequency. *Order* refers to the correspondence between the chronological sequence of events in the story and the sequence in the discourse (the textual ordering of events as rearranged). The sequence of events in discourse may align with chronological time or diverge through techniques such as flashback or flash-forward. Disruptions of chronological order are termed *anachrony*. Frequency refers to the relationship between the number of times events occur in the story and the number of times they are recounted in the discourse. Voice or tone concerns who narrates and from where, whether the narration occurs inside or outside the story world, and whether the narrator is a character within the story (Yaqoubi ۲۰۱۲: ۲۹۲-۲۹۴).

In summary, Gérard Genette's narratology analyzes narrative structure, temporal distance, focalization, and narrative voice. He regards narrative as a linguistically mediated construct that represents experience, not merely as a transmission of information, but as a structuring and *meaning-making* of experience.

۳. Improvisation and Narrative from the Perspective of Cognitive-Evolutionary Archaeology

۳.۱ Material Engagement Theory and Time, Space, and Improvisation

Evolutionary archaeology seeks to examine the development of human cognition over time in relation to tools and material culture. According to this approach, humans are not merely internalist, mind-bound beings, but possess distributed cognition, an extended mind dependent on tools, the body, and narrative (Farsi ۲۰۲۵). Evolutionary cognitive archaeology, which, as Garofoli (۲۰۱۶) notes, reconstructs the cognitive systems of ancient eras through the analysis of artifacts, investigates the existential reasons for things and the interaction between mind and objects (Malafouris ۲۰۱۳: ۱۳). This perspective contrasts with other branches of cognitive archaeology, such as idealism, which posits inherent symbolic meanings in material culture, because, in cognitive-evolutionary archaeology, the focus is not on the question, "What do artifacts mean?" but rather on "How are cultural materials cognitively produced, and how do they generate meaning?" (Iliopoulos ۲۰۱۶: ۱۱۳).

Compared to classical cognitive studies, this view can account for intelligent behavior through the study of cultural materials, recognizing the active role of objects and their changes over time (Overmann & Coolidge ۲۰۱۹: ۵-۶۹). The theory asserts that material culture actively contributes to the shaping of human cognition and memory; it is not merely a reflection

of preexisting ideas (the focus of idealist archaeology), emphasizing the importance of objects in the process of meaning-making and human understanding of the world. From this perspective, objects not only reflect past cultures and ways of life but also shape contemporary cognitive processes and memory (Farsi & Hoseinzade ۲۰۲۵).

From one viewpoint, improvisation refers to creation in the *Here-Now* (Overmann & Coolidge ۲۰۱۹; Malafouris ۲۰۱۳). Malafouris (۲۰۱۳), in his Material Engagement Theory, addresses the concept of time. Based on the continuous intertwining of brain/mind, human body, and ecosystem, of which material culture is a part, which redefines time from evolutionary and phenomenological perspectives. Time is understood not merely as lived human experience in the present but as fundamentally tied to the placement of the human body as a *situated entity*, such that what lies in front of a person constitutes the future, what lies behind represents the past, and what is in the current bodily position corresponds to the present, the point of contact between body, mind, and world. Importantly, this temporal understanding is not abstract but embodied in material interaction with the world.

۳.۲ Thinging as Thinking and Episodic Narrative

A key characteristic of human–object interactions is that they occur in real space and time (Clark, Malafouris & Knappett ۲۰۰۸). Human embodiment renders people spatially situated beings, and embodied cognition demonstrates that sensorimotor bodily experiences play a significant role in structuring thought. From this perspective, space is not merely a passive background but functions as a cognitive tool, much like other artifacts (Malafouris ۲۰۱۳). Accordingly, Malafouris introduces the notion of *Thinging as Thinking*, whereby creation occurs simultaneously with reflective flow, physical bodily movements, and cognitive perceptions (Malafouris ۲۰۲۰).

This theory resonates with Genette's perspective, previously discussed, insofar as both narrative and creation unfold across time and space. In Genette's view, narrative time can move freely among past, present, and future, but the reference point is always the moment of narration, the *now* of the speaker. In contrast, for Malafouris, the present is materially and bodily situated, and past/future are defined relative to this body and location. Thus, while Genette and like-minded theorists provide tools to see how narrative reconstructs or rearranges temporal experience, Malafouris emphasizes that every narrative, even when about the past or future, is realized in an embodied now, meaning the narrator's presence in a specific space and time shapes the form and qualities of the narrative.

۴. Improvisation and Narrative from the Perspective of Evolutionary Psychology

۴.۱ Darwinian Perspective on Culture and Cognition

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, the human-object relationship can be understood as a product of human evolutionary history. Darwinian thought posits that the world and the consciousness or intelligence governing it emerge through the interactions and interrelations of objects or “things,” with the complexities of the world arising from these entanglements over the course of evolution. In simpler terms, complexity and understanding in the world are non-agentive, so that there is no central determining element responsible for the arrangement of the world and its structures; rather, they emerge through interaction and self-organization. Daniel Dennett (۲۰۰۹) similarly maintains that the complex world is the product of natural selection, a non-intelligent and non-agentive process.

From a Darwinian perspective, not only biological structures and molecular arrangements but also culture and cultural evolution are non-agentive, including art, customs, and intellectual foundations (Richerson & Boyd ۱۹۸۵; ۲۰۰۵; Henrich ۲۰۱۶; Malafouris ۲۰۱۳; Hodder ۲۰۱۲). In support of the non-agentive nature of the world, Malafouris, influenced by Heidegger (۱۹۶۲), considers material agency as a central component of his theory, highlighting that *being in the world* shapes human experience through interactions with the world, including objects and material culture (Malafouris ۲۰۱۳). Another important contribution in the field of phenomenology regarding human perception and interaction with the material world comes from the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who introduces the concept of embodiment. He argues that human experience of the world is fundamentally shaped through the physical body. In his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, he writes, “Our body is the means by which we have the world” (Merleau-Ponty ۲۰۱۲: ۱۴۷).

۴.۲ Non-Agentive Creativity and Iterative Process

The Darwinian worldview is not limited to biology; other domains such as art and creativity are also influenced by this perspective. For instance, Dean Keith Simonton (۲۰۰۸), referring to the concept of *blind variation and selective retention*, argues that even literary and artistic work, as well as theories in physics, chemistry, and other sciences, are products of a non-agentive process, which forms the basis of Darwinian thinking (Gabora ۲۰۱۱). In this view, ecosystems and objects interact blindly yet continuously, and the traits or features that exhibit greater adaptability persist.

Simonton’s analysis of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (۲۰۰۷) illustrates that this work was not initially produced according to a predetermined design; rather, its creation and complexity were *non-monotonous*. Non-monotonous formation, which is also non-agentive, involves false starts,

uncontrolled experimentation, repeated revisitations, and multiple failures. Although in interpretations of artworks, and of the world in general, one might assume that creation follows a linear and patterned trajectory from start to finish, in reality it involves irregular ups and downs and non-uniform back-and-forth processes. Based on this perspective, Simonton examines *Guernica*, demonstrating that, contrary to the classical assumption of a pre-established plan (an agentic model), the work exhibits a disordered pattern that reflects not only its own production but also the underlying dynamics of the world itself (Figures ۱a & b) (۲۰۰۷: ۳۲۹–۳۴۴).

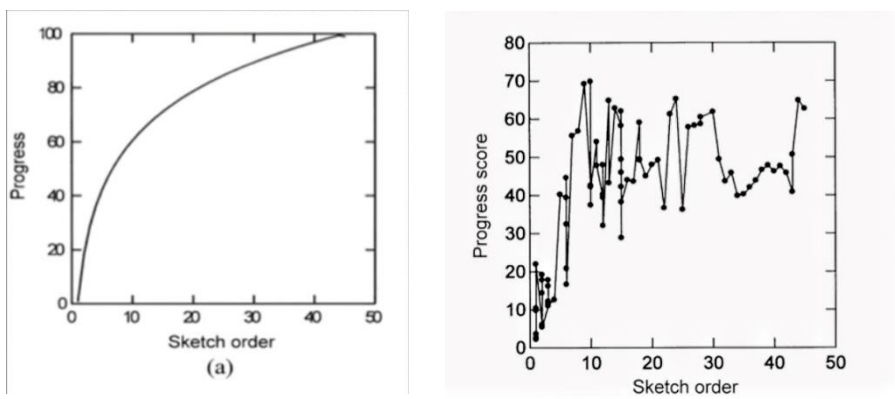


Figure ۱. Comparison of creative patterns: (a, left) an agentic pattern, reflecting a predetermined, directed process; (b, right) a non-agentic pattern, characterized by iterative trial-and-error, setbacks, and emergent complexity. Source: Simonton, ۲۰۰۷

•. Improvised-Textiling as a Folkloric Narrative Practice

Qashqai oral narratives, such as folktales, epic fragments, and everyday stories, are typically episodic, non-linear, and dependent on the moment of narration rather than a fixed script (Parham, ۱۹۸۰; Alizadeh, ۲۰۰۴). These stories evolve through repetition with variation, shaped by memory, environment, and the narrator's emotional state (Malafouris, ۲۰۱۳; Clark, ۱۹۹۷). A similar narrative logic can be observed in improvised Qashqai carpets, where motifs do not follow a predetermined order but emerge through the weaving process itself (Farsi & Kahvand, ۲۰۱۷). Each motif develops as a situated response to previous patterns, accumulated visual memory, and environmental conditions, reflecting the episodic, adaptive, and emergent nature of oral storytelling.

The improvisational character of Qashqai carpets is evident in asymmetrical-patterned weavings, including Ashkāli motifs, pictorial carpets, Shiri-style carpets, and Gabbeh rugs (Parham, ۱۹۸۰; Farsi & Kahvand, ۲۰۱۷). While motifs are “more or less uniform, relatively fixed, and largely unalterable,” they are arranged without a predetermined plan, allowing spontaneous modifications and new designs to emerge. Historical continuity is also present: motifs from sites such as Persepolis, Pasargadae,

and Tal-e Bakun appear in nomadic textiles, demonstrating the interplay of collective memory and improvisation (Alizadeh, ۲۰۰۴). For instance, the lion motif from Persepolis reliefs is reproduced as the “horsehead” motif in Qashqai carpets, while shepherd motifs on cultural buildings closely resemble those in woven rugs (Figure ۳).

Building on these observations, the act of improvisation in Qashqai carpets demonstrates how memory, material engagement, and embodied cognition jointly generate narrative. Each carpet unfolds as a sequence of visual episodes, with motifs responding to preceding ones without an overarching narrative plan. This mirrors oral storytelling, where the narrative emerges situationally and adaptively. Improvised textiling thus functions as both an aesthetic practice and a living narrative, connecting material culture with folkloric storytelling and revealing the cognitive, cultural, and evolutionary processes underlying narrative formation (Malafouris, ۲۰۱۳; Clark, ۱۹۹۷; Overmann & Coolidge, ۲۰۱۹).

۵.۱ Improvisation in Qashqai Rugs

Many motifs and designs in Iranian tribal carpets are products of weavers' improvisational creativity, or “mental weaving.” These motifs, while relatively fixed, are arranged without a predetermined plan, strict order, or rigid rules. They emerge from weavers' accumulated visual experiences and gradually become established as conventional patterns in local and regional textiles. Over time, spontaneous creativity modifies motifs, producing new designs and variations. Carpets from Fars Province clearly illustrate this, with geometric motifs being particularly prominent (Parham, ۱۹۸۰).

The term Improvised-Textiling is introduced here as an equivalent to mental weaving (Farsi & Kahvand, ۲۰۱۷), providing a clear conceptual label. Improvisation in Qashqai carpets can be identified by features such as geometric motifs with broken lines at ۴۵° and ۹۰° angles, asymmetry, and a lack of uniformity in motif distribution. From an evolutionary perspective, it also reflects the absence of a predetermined design. Key examples include asymmetrical-patterned weavings (Ashkāli motifs), pictorial carpets, Shiri-style carpets, and Gabbeh rugs (Figure ۲).

Fars Province, historically the capital of major dynasties like the Achaemenids and Sassanids, is an open archaeological region. Ancient sites along nomadic migration routes have influenced local textiles. Consequently, motifs from Persepolis, Pasargadae, Tal-e Bakun, Jari, and Mushki appear in Qashqai carpets (Alizadeh, ۲۰۰۴). For example, the lion motif in Persepolis reliefs is reproduced as the “horsehead” motif, while shepherd motifs on Pasargadae columns closely resemble patterns in woven rugs (Figure ۳). These examples illustrate the continuity of visual memory and the dynamic interaction between improvisation, material culture, and historical motifs.

Figure ۴ shows how the lived experiences of Qashqai weavers are directly inscribed into carpets. Motif placement reflects bodily engagement, memory, and environmental interaction, such as the movements of Qashqai women while dancing, rather than any pre-established symbolic scheme. These carpets act as dynamic narratives, where improvisation itself enacts storytelling. Each motif emerges as a situated, adaptive response to prior patterns and accumulated visual experience. In this sense, the carpet functions not just as an object but as an active record of lived experience, bridging material culture and episodic folk narrative.



Figure ۲. Groups of Qashqai carpet designs exhibiting the highest levels of improvisation. Source: Farsi, ۲۰۲۵



Figure ۳. Motifs inscribed on columns and walls at Pasargadae by nomadic Qashqai tribes along seasonal migration routes known as “Sheperd motifs (*Choupani*)”. Source: Farsi, ۲۰۲۳



Figure ۴. Placement of motifs on improvised Qashqai rugs reflecting the lived experiences and movements of weavers, e.g., Qashqai women dancing, Source: Parham, ۱۹۸۵

Discussion and Analysis:

It is important to stress that, in line with the theoretical framework adopted here, Qashqai motifs are not studied to uncover hidden symbolic meanings. This approach deliberately contrasts with classical symbolic interpretations and is fully compatible with evolutionary perspectives, in which artifacts emerge through non-agentive, adaptive interactions between humans, materials, and environment. Improvisation embodies a here-and-now creation, reflecting active cognitive engagement rather than passive reproduction of pre-existing designs. Thus, attempts to decode underlying symbolism would obscure, rather than illuminate, the dynamic narrative processes that the weavers enact. Motifs engraved on the columns and walls along nomadic migration routes, as shown in Figure ۳, reflect the lived experiences of the Qashqai people and illustrate the cumulative interactions of humans with their material and ecological environment. These images exemplify the active, reciprocal, and fluid relationship between humans and objects, demonstrating that no fixed boundary separates the creator from the material or the environment. This aligns with the evolutionary and

cognitive perspectives outlined earlier, reinforcing the idea that both cultural artifacts and the world emerge without a pre-established design (Malafouris ۲۰۱۳; Farsi ۲۰۲۵).

From the standpoint of cognitive-evolutionary archaeology, the complexity of artifacts parallels human biological and cognitive evolution. Henrich (۲۰۱۶) emphasizes that cumulative culture and the cumulative brain work together: culture accumulates knowledge and techniques outside the body, while the human brain accumulates adaptive cognitive structures, resulting in dynamic, emergent practices. Improvised Qashqai carpets exemplify this interaction. Each motif and pattern arises as a situated, adaptive response to prior patterns, environmental conditions, and accumulated visual memory, forming episodic and non-linear sequences comparable to oral folk narratives (Parham ۱۹۸۰; Alizadeh ۲۰۰۴).

This perspective challenges conventional symbolic interpretations of designs. As Malafouris (۲۰۰۸) demonstrates in the context of pottery-making, creation occurs through the interaction of body, tools, material, and environment, without a predetermined plan. Similarly, Qashqai weavers do not impose a pre-designed story on the carpet. Improvisation is both the method and the narrative: the act of weaving itself enacts storytelling in the here and now. The emergent narrative is thus a reflection of embodied engagement and cumulative cultural knowledge, rather than an explicit symbolic message intended for future observers.

Even carpets previously classified as “regular,” influenced by urban weaving traditions from Kerman and Khorasan, display characteristics of improvisation when examined through this lens. These designs emerge through iterative trial-and-error, experimentation, and adaptation, highlighting the entanglement of humans and objects as an ongoing narrative process (Farsi & Hoseinzade ۲۰۲۵; Parham ۱۹۸۰). This demonstrates that improvisation and narrative are not separate from cognitive and material processes; they are inseparable from the embodied, situated practice of weaving itself. Consequently, the connection between improvisation in Qashqai carpets and folk art emerges clearly: both operate as situated, adaptive forms of narrative that unfold in the present moment. Both rely on cumulative culture and cumulative brain, allowing stories and patterns to evolve iteratively without a fixed script. Improvisation in weaving, like oral storytelling, is thus a form of active narrative practice, where the process of creation itself embodies meaning and memory (Clark ۱۹۹۷; Malafouris ۲۰۱۳; Overmann & Coolidge ۲۰۱۹).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that improvisation in Qashqai carpets functions as a form of narrative closely aligned with folk and popular art. Both practices unfold in the present moment, with meaning generated through the act of

creation rather than pre-established stories or symbolic codes. Improvised motifs and patterns emerge adaptively, shaped by the weaver's memory, embodied cognition, and interactions with materials and environment. Cumulative culture and the cumulative brain together enable iterative development of designs, reflecting a process in which the act of weaving enacts narrative itself.

By situating narrative as a dynamic, enacted process, this research clarifies the connection between Qashqai carpets and oral folklore. In both, episodic, non-linear, and context-sensitive structures evolve over time through memory, repetition, variation, and environmental responsiveness. Improvisation is therefore not merely a method of decoration but an active, cognitive, and cultural performance of storytelling.

Ultimately, Qashqai carpets exemplify how folk art integrates human cognition, material engagement, and ecological awareness into a continuous narrative practice. Each carpet enacts a story in the here and now, demonstrating that both improvisation and narrative emerge from embodied, situated interaction rather than from fixed scripts or symbolic intentions.

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