



Researching Craft in Azerbaijan

Field research in the time of the pandemic

Interview between Dr Kim Bagley and Vafa Gurbanova

Kim Bagley: Let me introduce myself for our readers. I'm Kim Bagley. I am the Making Futures Fellow from Arts University Plymouth. I'm UK Academic Lead on the British Council Crafting Futures Programme in Azerbaijan. I am a ceramic artist, a lecturer and a craft researcher.

Vafa Gurbanova: I'm Vafa Gurbanova and I'm a textile designer with seven years of experience. My educational background is textile and carpet design education for my MA degree. I have worked on many interesting projects, including educational or research projects throughout my career. For the Crafting Futures project I worked as a research assistant.

KB: Vafa, can you tell me what attracted you to become involved in the project?

VG: First, we met at the Icherisheher Centre for Traditional Crafts in the Old City. We talked, but later, when I saw the announcement that said, 'preserving and developing crafts and traditions,' I became more interested. Potentially sharing with younger generations, so they can continue those crafts; that was the most important part, for me. Although I'm a designer, I'm also a master craft maker, and I work in this art field which is under threat.

KB: I really appreciate your participation. When we were in Baku, in the Old City and you showed me your work, that was a really special part of my journey learning about craft in Azerbaijan, so thank you.

VG: Thank you.

KB: After a long period of time due to the Covid 19 pandemic, and the winter, you got to do the fieldwork research that we planned. Yourself, Adalat, the other research assistant, with support from Asmer, the director of Asmart Creative Hub, went to four regions, where you interviewed 47 artisans across Azerbaijan. Can you tell me about your experience during the field work?

VG: That was a really great experience because research in the field, physically, was new for me. It was great to listen to all the craftsmen because you are listening from first voice; some very old, some very young, some are teaching their child to continue their craft. The most remarkable thing was that most craftsmen answered our questions sincerely without any expectations and they tried to explain their art with great enthusiasm, like they're explaining to a child: 'did you understand?', 'did you get it?' We went to many places, to so many workshops. Because of the pandemic and the weather, that was a little bit challenging. I think we did okay at the time.

It was very sad that some craftsman said, 'I'm the only person' or 'I'm the last person doing this craft and no one wants to continue'. For example in Shamakhi, an older participant in said that he is the last person doing hat making. And no one is using hats anymore. That's why no one is interested in his craft and that's why he is not sure someone will continue after him. That was a very sad moment in the research, but there were very happy times too. We saw some very big families, with all of them doing their craft and supporting each other.

KB: So tell me about the physical experience. What was it like as a researcher working through that period?

VG: It was very enjoyable but also challenging because when we went from Baku to Shamakhi, it was normal weather, but when we were in Shamakhi it started snowing and the last day we were under the snow. It was really enjoyable but also challenging, physically, to go somewhere during the pandemic. For example, in Basgal, we couldn't find the craftsmen because of the Pandemic. They eventually came to us and they said 'we're already recovered from Covid-19'. That was really full of surprises. But the people were really helpful to us, all of them. They helped us to go somewhere, to find places, to get a little bit of heat, to eat something. And yeah, all the craftsmen tried to feed us. 'You have to try this, you have to try this'. All the sweets, all the saltiness. It was really enjoyable.

KB: I think with research there's the outcome that you intend, and there's also the pure pleasure and challenge of meeting new people, and finding things. You and Adalat did an amazing job. I remember when I travelled around Azerbaijan: we also got fed a lot and offered a lot of Azerchai.

VG: Exactly.

KB: What you are describing is that human connection that you make during research, which I think is just as the research itself. What did you learn about craft and Azerbaijan from that research experience? You obviously had extensive knowledge before you began the project, but what did you learn about the craft sector in Azerbaijan during that time?

VG: I learned that most of the craftsmen here in Baku are doing craft mostly for the

money, but not so in the regions we visited in the field work. Most craftsmen there are doing their craft for the sake of art, and continuation of that particular craft. I saw the desire of the craftsmen to teach their knowledge to someone, to younger generations, whether that person is a family member or not, as long as they are asking to come to learn, to continue. In this, there was no difference between the regions and this applies to most craftsmen. For example, in Shamakhi, that person I already mentioned, who was the last hat maker. It was the pandemic period but he spoke like the life they know will come back. They will do it again, they will create again like in our past normal lives.

I learned techniques, across all these craft spheres, new craft spheres for me. I learned so much even when I thought I knew these things. They opened new windows for me. Also in some places, because of my previous work in UNDP, I saw some teachers over there I knew. I did some training with the VET schools, (vocational schools) in the regions but it was online because of the Pandemic. That project was about inclusive education in art. Those teachers had started to use what they learnt, but found some things weren't possible. We talked about that project as well and how they can change their attitude to disability, how to be more inclusive in art education. That was a very interesting part for me. Because that was online training, I couldn't quite understand something, but when I saw them next to me, and they explained their point I somehow could understand it and could explain more about how they can change something. For example, in Lahic, a coppersmith said that they can't use a disabled person in their craft because it's physically demanding, and they can't use women or girls either. I said, 'but you are doing some patterns, on top of your copper plates,' and he said, 'yeah you're right, young girls can do this, or even someone who can't walk can do this, and that was a really nice experience. I learned from them, and they listened to me, and they learned, I think, from me as well.

KB: Being involved in multiple projects sounds like an opportunity for community building. A deeper connection between you, a textile designer from Baku, and those coppersmiths in Lahic, so the conversation continues. I'm struck by what you said about the difference between online and in-person, because this is something that's been a challenge for me in this project, because all aspects that I've done, apart from those initial visits in 2019 have been online. Really understanding what's happening on the ground is impossible so it's really reassuring, especially for craft, because we work with our bodies. We cannot entirely replace that embodied experience with screens. You were able to push through to things on a more detailed level.

VG: yeah.

KB: What did you learn about yourself during this experience?

VG: Actually I'm usually an introverted person. But during this time I changed my mind about myself, because when I talked to craftsmen I couldn't stop talking and couldn't stop listening, analysing them, and I asked so many different things, like 'could you show me this?' and 'could you explain this medium?', asking about the wax, the stamps, the fabrics, the metals, the tools that they are using, and how they are using it. I'm really

interested to know many different aspects of craft, and not just textiles. That's why it was very interesting to go to each workshop and to understand how they are doing things. I was thinking about how I can adapt my craft or combine something with my craft. The people, they're talking to me, they are so full of information, they're like a book, and they are talking to me in real life. That's why in some places, I asked Adalat not to explain about me, that I am an art person or that I'm doing some craft. I want to hear them because, when they know I do craft, they start talking to me in a different way. They start to say 'oh yeah you know this already'. In Basqal, I asked Adalat not to tell them I'm making Keleghayi (a type of patterned traditional silk head scarf) at first. I want to hear their voice, to learn from them. That way I learnt what I should do to improve myself or my skills, and perhaps so I knew how to help them.

KB: Fieldwork research sounds like it was a natural habitat for you, because of your passion and your desire to know more about your heritage. Since the field work was completed, have you changed anything in relation to your work as a textile designer?

VG: When we went to Sheki, the last region we visited, I saw that even there, a maximum of three people are practising natural dyeing with plants. I was in shock. I thought I would see more people using natural plant dyes. I thought to myself, you have to do this more, and you have to move further to improve yourself. I can't say I completely moved to them as a textile designer, because I'm still developing my skills, but I'm trying to share with my students and colleagues, how we can use plants in our work. I had used natural dyeing before but not for commercial things, or not as a full production of the fabrics, but now I've started to. Also I had the opportunity to deliver training in another region, which is also supported by A-smart Creative Hub to to teach village women dyeing processes, and teaching them how they can use plant dyes in silkscreen or felt making techniques.

I saw something different from my work to their work, because of the machined, mechanical part of my work. For example, before I made my wooden stamps with the laser cutter, but after that I started to cut them by hand because it seems to me more natural. I see them as more elegant than the laser cut straight cuts.

KB: When I visited Basqal I remember seeing some stamps that were really old. They are such beautiful objects just in themselves. Have you taught yourself to cut the handmade stamps or did you have that skill already?

VG: When I started to learn stamping technique, I had a teacher in our Icherisheher Center for Traditional Arts, from Syria. He taught me how to cut, how to hold tools nicely, and which kind of tools to use. We started with that technique, but later on, because of the demands of production, we moved to the laser path. We went to Basqal first when I didn't know about that technique, in 2013 or 14 and I saw those stamps. Later, during the research time when I saw those stamps again. I asked myself, why did you move to the artificial part of this craft? You can do this as well, and I definitely said to myself when I will go back, I will start to cut my own stamps, whatever they will say. It's not a quick process, but I will do this, and that will affect my work in a good way,

because it will be more natural, more human, with life and soul.

KB: There is definitely a place for contemporary technologies within design. But equally we can't lose some of those beautiful hand making processes, especially when they bring something more to the design.

VG: Yeah, for example, I use computers when I am playing with pattern tessellation, or to see how colours combine, or choosing colours, or positioning patterns on a scarf or on a runner. As I said, yes, for the test part, but for the practical part, handmade.

KB: I know time has passed since the fieldwork took place, and you have been busy, but do you have any ideas for future projects that might have come from this experience?

VG: I decided to organise some trips for the students to go to those workshops to meet those craftsmen. For example, an opportunity came to me for the Sabah programme students who I'm teaching. They asked me to organise trips to some regions. They decided on Sheki, and asked me to arrange what they can do there. They can go to visit all the craftsmen because we have ceramics, textiles, carpet, tapestry, fashion and interior teachers and students. They can meet those craftsmen and especially those practising disappearing crafts. That was my idea at the time and now it's getting real. I'm planning to go to Sheki with the students so they can see their craft and creativity; their soul.

KB: I wonder, in the long term, how to get those students and other crafts people to learn from those old masters; how do we create that environment? This was one of my questions when we started and I don't think we have an answer yet. We have some things we've learned, which could help, but I don't think we have the complete answer yet, to get those younger students including VET school students or university students to learn in a sustained way beyond just one or two visits. Do you have any ideas about that?

VG: Yeah, no one way at all. When we were in Lahic we talked about that. It's just like you said, one or two visits is not sustainable. There was one person involved who said it should be one place in Baku or somewhere each month. Some craftsmen can come, for example, to visit an arts centre to teach students for one month or one week continuously. I want a month, one week or two weeks, and later again two weeks for each craftsman covering different techniques such as ceramics or coppersmithing. I know this is not a full answer.

KB: These longer master classes, are not just a one day workshop, not just a taste. The taste gives enthusiasm but it takes sustained engagement to develop skill, and to maintain that skill. Even your story about the stamps; you knew that you learned at once, but you needed to be fed that again. Maybe some medium length master classes could be useful, but I'm also wondering about people from Baku, or from other regions, moving across the country. Would it be feasible to go and spend some time with somebody in Lahic, for example?

VG: During the fieldwork, I asked craftsmen if they would like to do that, for example, one month you come to us, or to Baku somewhere. You will live in the hotel or in someone's home, and you will teach, and earn money, and it will be minimum one week. They said 'Oh yes, of course, we did something like that'. They did it in Baku. It was some project, not our project but something like that. They came, they stayed here. They taught different people, but each day, the same group came. During the one and a half week they learn something to continue with that craft and he said yeah we were happy at the time, and we can do this. Later on, when I asked a different craftsman, which is the uncle of that person, he said 'I'm already doing this. I'm teaching vocational school students each month one or two weeks, in different regions. I'm not getting paid enough but I'm doing this and that's possible to do'.

KB: This goes back to what you were saying about the high motivation of these people to continue their craft, which is not driven by money, though of course they should be paid fairly.

VG: You know Azerbaijan is a multicultural country and some of those people interviewed are Tats. When I asked one whether or not they will teach Azerbaijanis or others, or if they will especially teach Tats, they said no, they have many students and taught different ethnic people. This is how he's earning his money alongside selling things. They're very generous and I was really proud to hear that it doesn't matter who taught you or if you are different, but what you are doing, is for the sake of craft.

KB: You've told me about practical changes to your practice as a textile designer as a result of your experience during the research trips. Tell me about any moments in the field work that changed the way you think about craft practice in Azerbaijan?

VG: Azerbaijan is already full of natural resources that enable different crafts here, naturally. I knew that before, but during the field work, I saw in Sheki, a potter who is still using the natural way of making pots. He fires them in the kiln, under the earth, and uses natural clay that he's spending his time to clean (process). Clay is taken from nearby. He's spending his time, choosing not to speed up this process. When I asked if it's not too difficult to do all these things, maybe you can do it much quicker to get more productivity, he said 'why would I speed up myself like that? I am enjoying cleaning this clay to work with'. And there was a potter's wheel, a very old one, which is powered by foot. They turn the circle wheel and they made pots, and he said, 'all the control is with me. I'm controlling the clay, I'm controlling all of it. I am putting my soul into these pots and I'm not rushing anywhere. I'm still here and I will work with this', and that was really a different point of view, for me. He is an old man, but he said 'I'm not rushing to get anywhere; I am still here'. His workshop was under his home, and it was like 9 or 10pm and he also tried to feed us, and to get us to try the wheel with our feet, and that was really different for me. They really like to have someone new to explain to. Also from Lahic again, that family of Coppersmiths, fifth or sixth generation, and they are still supporting each other. For example, if some of them have no job to earn money, they are sharing their orders. We saw that at that time. If someone hasn't a job in that

month, they said, 'okay come here, you have to work here you, you have to do this is,' and they went home together, and they came to work together. That relationship really affected me, especially in that period of the pandemic.

KB: It strikes me that the people you were talking to were interested in, or value the lifestyle that they had created for themselves and their community, through their choice...

VG: To be a craftsperson, yes.

KB: It would just be nice to know what you have been doing since you completed the field work in spring last year.

VG: I did the project with Asmart, which was Pirsah Camps Village. I was there, one month. Later that summer, again with Asmart, a different project for Azerxalca, a carpet project with my students. We did some silk thread dyeing. I think they did weave some carpet from those threads. It was very challenging because the company is washing carpets with chemicals. For one week I tried to explain to them not to wash with chemicals, I will give you some natural soaps, natural pH soaps, that you can wash with, because the chemical ones change the colours. Silk is a sensitive material and the colours of the naturally dyed silk are very sensitive. Later I started to teach again, using different aspects of craft geometry. I also had some training with the UNDP about inclusive education.

KB: It seems to me, from my online interactions with you, Asmer and Adalat, that there is a lot of care and attention on craft in Azerbaijan. Would you agree? And what do you think?

VG: Yes, especially the last few years, like now, they are trying to take out all the craft things and all the projects related with the craft. I agree, and I think there can be more projects about that, because some craft spheres still need more attention, for example in the last few years carpets have received a lot of attention. Most people are doing carpet projects. They need to focus on a wider range of crafts.

KB: It's almost like the time and energy and attention that's been put into the carpet field should now be replicated for some other crafts.

VG: Exactly.

KB: So, which crafts, do you think could do with this attention?

VG: Coppersmithing, for example. We know Lahic is the main area, but in Baku we can't see it anywhere. We can see a few of them on the market, but not original ones. We can see copper objects made elsewhere but not the genuine Azerbaijani ones we can see everywhere in Lahic. Also feltmaking, for example, now they started to do felt making. It was our ancient craft. Some places are now doing this. Also silk Keleghayi. There is just a

maximum of three places doing this: in Basqal, and in Sheki, but Keleghayis made in other countries can be found even in Sheki. I heard the grandson of this master saying they are in trouble with Chinese imports. It's really terrible to see that kind of silk head covers, which is not natural silk. The patterns and colours are copied but it's not handmade, but has a stamp on it that says handmade in Sheki or in Basqal. That's a really sad part of this.

KB: I think that's a huge challenge, but that goes back to what you were saying about the carpet makers. They themselves need to understand the different treatment for natural dyes, and you yourself observing the difference between a handmade stamp and a laser cutter stamp, and so it's almost about makers teaching the audience to value the handmade, raising awareness about quality. People need to know how to look at the Keleghayi. They maybe know how to look at a carpet, because of the attention that's being paid to carpet and because of the research that's going on, and the museum. Perhaps you and your colleagues need to be out there, explaining to people what makes those genuine handmade Azerbaijani made Keleghayis better?

VG: And we need an audience for that. Because some people are saying 'yeah but it's cheaper' That just shocked me.

KB: I think it's our responsibility as craftspeople to develop that market. And I do feel that an interest in slower more artisanal production is growing globally. We've got to grow that more. I think that just understanding the process helps. For me, it's fascinating to see craft processes. Exposing those processes and showing people what the full story is, I think, is really valuable. I saw that demonstrated in Lahic, through enthusiasm, and then showing, telling and speaking about what they're doing. Anyway, you know that. I can see you nodding, you know that I'm saying is what you already know, but developing that market is the next step, and telling the story of the craft like we're doing right now is part of that.

VG: Yeah exactly you answered my last question.

KB: So, what are your, or do you have any, ambitions for future research or for future work within this area?

VG: For future research I'm really interested in difference, here. It feeds me, these craftsmen. I'll be honest, I'm not inspired often, but after this field trip, I really started to get inspired, to tell the stories, to understand how it's going on there, what the problems are. And they have really big problems. Mostly it was because of the pandemic, I think. I will know after visiting Sheki again. I will see whether they still have the same problems or not. But doing the research and understanding the crafts, I am really enjoying it and I will do, inshallah, more in the future. I hope so, in different countries, because when I was recently in Pakistan, when I saw the Pakistani craftsmen, when they explained to me how they are doing these things and how they are making some crafts, I really was inspired from doing this work researching, understanding, trying to do something by myself, like analysing. Also I'm really interested in the effect of

art in human psychology as it really drives the soul. I don't know how to explain spiritually but yes, I will continue.

KB: Is there anything else you want to say?

VG: Some problems for the craftsmen that emerged during the fieldwork really hurt me. It was really heartbreaking. In Sheki, I saw one woman who lost her mother. It wasn't because of the pandemic, it was because their place was so cold, it was without electricity. No one cared about them. I couldn't promise anything because I couldn't do anything but I talked to someone, and he said no, no, no, we will fix it very soon, and they will be good after this. But, as I said, I will see them when I visit Sheki and hopefully they will be okay. I think the sad part of researching, or of being a researcher is this, because you can't solve their problem. You have to analyse it but you can't promise something.

KB: I think we also have a responsibility as researchers. We get a lot from the people who we speak to and somehow we have to find a way, whether it's direct or indirect, we have to find a way to return that favour.

VG: Uh huh yeah.

KB: That might be by taking that report that we've made, and using it to influence decision making at a higher level. I'm hoping that will help. But you know, I think, as long as we do what we're doing in a conscientious way and in a respectful way hopefully, eventually what we're doing will make a positive impact on people. It was quite shocking to read the responses to the interview question and to see the deep impact of the pandemic but wonderful to see the passion and interest.

VG: Yeah.