



Fleshing after liming — done by hand, over a log leant up against a tree. A long and arduous task, requiring great hand-eye coordination to avoid damaging the pelt.

CREDIT: ALC LTD.

Medieval leathermaking lives on in Afghanistan

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It's not often that one can read about normal, everyday life in Afghanistan. While it does not have a large intrinsic leather production sector, the country that makes headlines everyday for the wrong reasons nevertheless continues to provide a significant proportion of Pakistan's raw material supply through traders and hide/skin merchants who salt, sort and select for export to Lahore, Karachi, Sialkot or Kasur by the truckload.


There is a handful of pickle and wet blue plants, but the industry, despite the volume of raw material available, is low-key and lacking in investment, not at all surprising in a poor and war-torn country. The closest thing they have to a National Grid for electricity supplies is not trustworthy enough to rely on for continuous processing.

In northern Afghanistan, in the district of Taloqan, [see footnote] in a small town without mains electricity, called Takhar, ancient and time-honoured methods are still being used to create leather for local consumption. The Taloqan river provides water in sufficient quantities for the artisans to perform their processing. Small, stone-lined vats are used to contain the various liquors and the process has been largely unchanged for hundreds of years. Unlike the much-photographed Moroccan tannery at Fez, this activity has not

received a great deal of publicity or similar scrutiny from the outside world.

Less technological even than the bovine "bag tanners" of Kolkata - who have a secret blend of tanning agents handed down from father to son - no significant process control or scientific measurement is evident. All decisions are made based on experience and years of practice.

As with many artisan undertakings, the whole extended family is involved in one way or another and the business of taking the leather to market completes the cycle, thus supporting the family.

One cannot help but imagine what a few very rudimentary mechanical operations might do to the quality and production capability of such a business. It might be reasonable to ask ourselves how many of us would still be in the industry if we had to work like this today, without all of the technological and mechanical assistance that as a supplementary effect has helped make us all slaves to high volumes? 

Footnote

German cooperation agency GTZ has been working with an entrepreneur and ALC Ltd to establish the feasibility of adding value to some of this local resource, by establishing a tannery to provide income and advancement for one small region and some of its people.



1) *Soaking: alongside the river, for a variable length of time depending on the season, ambient temperatures and the chosen substrate (from 2-4 weeks).*



2) *Liming: in stone vats, for between 1 – 3 weeks, depending on the raw material (sheep, goat or bovine) and, of course, the intended end use.*



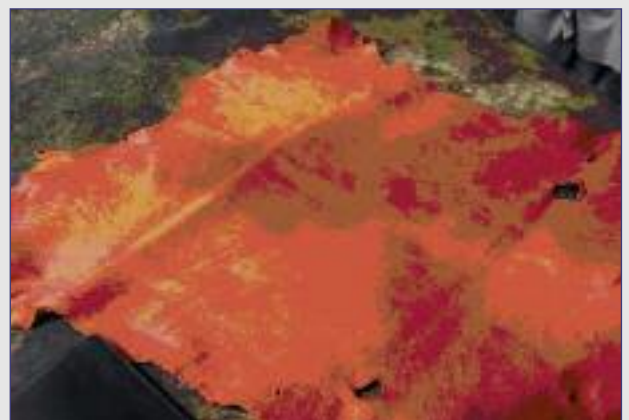
3) *Deliming/pickling: using a slurry of dried and ground pomegranate skins (1-2 weeks depending on the thickness). The fruit acids provide a natural and gentle neutralisation of the lime and a gentle pickling to the extent of starting a vegetable tannage. The exhaust material is piled and dried after use, providing winter fuel for heating.*



4) *Tannage: done in a vat, using a dried, ground root from a plant related closely to rhubarb (genus rheum). Up to 10 kg per pelt is required to complete the tannage.*



5) *Drying and oiling: the leather is oiled by hand during drying and finished with a hand dressing and colouring that the local market desires (depending on the end use and current local fashion / preference).*



6) *The final leather: the leather produced is robust, if not very highly aesthetic in quality, and suited for its purpose.*