

## The Comb Symbol in Tribal Rugs

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### Introduction

Among the many ancient symbols woven into the textiles of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the comb motif holds a special place. Especially prominent in antique tribal rugs from Azerbaijan — notably in the Shirvan, Quba, and Karabakh regions — this small geometric figure may appear modest at first glance. But upon closer inspection, it reveals deep cultural and symbolic meaning, often connected to purity, femininity, and protection.



### Historical Origins and Early Use

The comb as a symbolic object has ancient roots. Archaeological evidence from the Bronze Age in the Caucasus, Mesopotamia, and Iran reveals that combs — carved from bone or wood — were not only grooming tools, but also sacred objects buried with the dead, especially women. Their presence in burial sites points to ritual and protective functions, as well as associations with fertility and cleanliness.

As weaving was primarily a woman's art in traditional Turkic and Persianate societies, symbols embedded in rugs often reflected the weaver's world — daily tools, protective charms, and spiritual aspirations. The comb thus entered the woven language of rugs as both a personal emblem and a protective amulet.



### The Comb in Prayer Rugs

One of the most spiritually charged appearances of the comb motif is in prayer rugs (namazlyk), especially those woven in tribal and rural regions of Azerbaijan. These rugs, designed for individual devotional use, often display the comb symbol just below or beside the mihrab (the prayer niche) — a visual clue loaded with sacred meaning.

In Islamic tradition, the act of prayer must be preceded by ritual purification (wudu), which involves cleansing the body — especially the face, hands, and feet. The comb, as a tool of

personal grooming, becomes an emblem of ritual cleanliness and preparation. By weaving a comb into the prayer rug, the artisan essentially embeds a spiritual reminder: that purification precedes sacred connection.

Beyond physical purity, the comb also carries symbolic overtones of spiritual order and discipline — traits central to Islamic prayer. With its evenly spaced teeth, the comb represents structure, alignment, and harmony — visual metaphors for the mindset of a believer in prayer.

In many Azerbaijani prayer rugs — particularly from Shirvan and Quba — the comb motif appears near the base of the rug, where the worshiper would stand. Some researchers interpret this placement as an invisible spiritual threshold, protecting the worshiper from impurity and evil influences. In this context, the comb acts like a woven amulet, guarding the sanctity of the prayer ritual.

Moreover, many of these rugs were woven by women for themselves, their children, or as gifts. Thus, the comb takes on yet another layer of meaning — as a maternal blessing, an expression of care and spiritual safeguarding offered from one generation to the next.



### Motif Development in Tribal Weaving

Beyond prayer rugs, the comb motif also appears in kilims, sumak bags, and pile carpets throughout Azerbaijan and neighboring Turkic cultures. Often found in borders, spandrels, and side panels, its form varies from stepped triangles to vertical comb shapes. While regional styles differ, the symbolic core — cleansing, protection, and order — remains intact.

### Conclusion

The comb motif is more than a decorative element in tribal and prayer rugs. It represents a profound cultural memory—one that connects personal hygiene, spiritual purity, maternal care, and the broader sacred structure of traditional life. In Azerbaijani weaving especially, its continued presence across generations and regions points to a rich, unbroken symbolic tradition. Whether placed at the threshold of a prayer rug or nestled within the border of a sumak bag, the comb stands as a silent guardian of both the physical and spiritual order of nomadic life. Its geometric simplicity belies the deep layers of belief, ritual, and protection that have been woven into its form for centuries.

