



Essay

Çeyizlab: Women's Solidarity through Designing the Future of Hope Chests (Çeyiz)

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Abstract

A hope chest (çeyiz) is more than the simple gathering of household goods; it is a tradition steeped in history, culture, and love. Across Anatolia and beyond, preparation of çeyiz and çeyiz itself represent a maternal ritual that begins the moment a daughter is born. Mothers, with the assistance of friends, relatives, and neighbors, meticulously knit, crochet, and gather items that will one day accompany their daughters into their new lives after marriage. This paper examines the collaborative design process of the Çeyizlab project and reflects on new ways of collective future generation, starting from a matriarchal yet disappearing ritual of making through handcrafted artifacts.

Keywords

Çeyiz, Speculative Design, Design Research, Ritual, Handcraft

Introduction

Age-old traditional rituals have profound meaning in different cultures, and çeyiz (hope chest) and the activities surrounding the preparation of çeyiz have been a core element in women's lives in Turkey. Historically, çeyiz is a set of handmade goods brought together by the mother for her daughter. However, family, family friends, and neighbors are known to contribute to knitting, stitching, sewing, and purchasing these household and personal items. Once, this was a gesture of solidarity, but it also represented a woman's isolation as she transitioned into her new role in a new place. In the past, çeyiz consisted of handwoven textiles, carefully chosen kitchen appliances, and handmade goods. Now, it has a much different meaning and diverse content, embracing mostly mass-produced products, serving as a form of monetary exchange, or even disappearing altogether. The world changes, so does the tradition. Over the years, the shape of çeyiz and the products related to it changed, but the idea stayed the same: helping young women to adapt to their new lives after marriage. As time marches on, the needs of women and the fabric of society itself evolve.

In recent years, we realized that there are two mainstream approaches to çeyiz in Turkey. One is more of an uprising and denial, as it relates directly to marriage and women being considered primarily as housekeepers and homemakers. The other is a subculture that centers around show-off and extravaganza, tasking women with the domestic life planning (Kebeli & Inan, 2020), which is evident in 'reality TV shows' showcasing newlyweds' lives. Therefore, as design researchers, we inquired about the meaning of çeyiz in contemporary Turkey and how people from different age groups perceived çeyiz and the transformation it was undergoing. In this study, what we discovered was a profound shift, not just in the practice of çeyiz but in the very essence of what it represents. Our conversations with women demonstrated changing values and emerging priorities, leading us to speculate on an alternative future for çeyiz, one where its beauty and significance are preserved, but its form and meaning are

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reimagined.

A Review of a Traditional Ritual

Over hundreds of years, women's solidarity has been solidified through many different acts. Some had political and official roots, while others have flourished through matrilineal traditions, such as *çeyiz* rituals in Anatolia. In Turkey, mothers traditionally start assembling a daughter's dowry from a young age, with grandmothers, aunts, and other female relatives contributing, an important part of girls' socialization, though its traditional significance has diminished in more modern or less traditional contexts (Çok & Atak, 2016).

Across numerous traditional cultures, the bride's family offers a reciprocal gesture for the groom's wedding preparations (Pamuk, 2020). More than a financial transfer, the exchange affirms the union and reinforces ties between the families (Çavuşoğlu cited in Pamuk, 2013, p. 27). Women today are increasingly focused on education and entering the workforce, so the dowry's traditional significance has waned; instead, setting up a new household has become the more dominant marker of the transition to adulthood (Çok & Atak, 2016). Where *çeyiz* once comprised utilitarian textiles, handwoven covers, rugs, and wool quilts that outfitted a household, contemporary sets showcased on [reality shows] skew toward ornamental pieces (e.g., towel edgings, pan covers, slipper cases) whose everyday utility in modern living is minimal (Kebeli & Inan, 2020, p.111). These items come in a chest when gifted, and these chests are known as *hope chests* or *çeyiz sandığı* in Turkish. Although the chests have been a long-standing tradition in Anatolia to carry and store belongings, today they are also used for decorative purposes in living spaces, such as coffee tables or seating elements in bedrooms (Ozgen et al, 2015).

Recently, fashion designers have been investigating the transformation in *çeyiz* culture with their practice. Pamuk (2020) is one of the academics exploring how textile artifacts found in hope chests can be reused, repurposed, and upcycled, with sixty-three pieces she collected from seven participants. Some other examples, which are not academic work but rather a call for action, are from renowned designers. Aslı Filinta's (2025) Art of Anatolia collection upcycles handmade dowry pieces that are crocheted by women across Anatolia into contemporary garments, remunerating women's handwork while safeguarding regional embroidery practices and dowry traditions. Perveran is another fashion brand that partners with women's cooperatives to spotlight traditional craft labor, recast trousseau pieces as timeless, contemporary designs, and foreground the maker's story behind each product, positioning *çeyiz* as a living practice that belongs to the past, present, and future (Perveran, 2024). Contemporarily, critical fashion practitioners interrogate the industry's power relations and, rejecting technocratic, industrialized visions of sustainability and circularity, cultivate situated ways of making and wearing that are organized around care, solidarity, and wellbeing (Bruggeman, 2025). These explorations of designers can be seen as an extension of a search for sustainability and a rebellion against the fast fashion industry. These works highlight the significance of intangible culture, the values tied to heritage, and sustainable fashion practices. The heritage and textiles, as "dormant things" (Woodward, 2015), which were kept in drawers for years, can tell a story that has long been forgotten.

Our Approach: Design Research into the Future

We -two design researchers- started working on the project in 2021, and our initial research question was how *çeyiz* would survive in the changing times through design interventions. We have researched the history of *çeyiz*, which is not much attended by academia. When explaining what Futures Studies entail, Inayatullah (2008, p.5) writes "We know we need to change but we seem unable to. The image of a new future, while emergent, is pulled down by the weight of the industrial era. What can we do? What should we do?" Therefore, we employed a Design Futures approach for our research.

We held focus group discussions to comprehend the women's insights, feelings, and ideas about *çeyiz*, conducted expert interviews and practiced auto-ethnography (Fig.1). Our lived experience shed light on *çeyiz* since both of us were gifted lace doilies, handkerchiefs, and knitted items from our *çeyiz*, even though we lived far away from our home country.

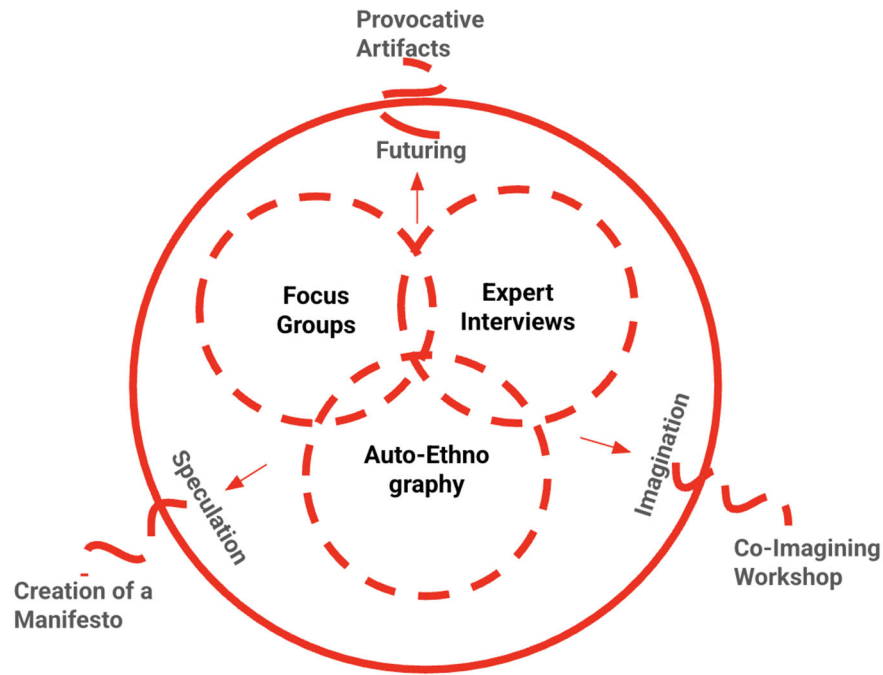


Fig. 1: The Research Phase

The more seasoned generation (women 55+) had experiences of working on their own *çeyiz* and faced an expectation from their peers and relatives to prepare a more comprehensive *çeyiz* and work on it diligently. Whereas the younger generations (women below 40 years of age) had some experience to an extent about preparing *çeyiz*; however, they were not as involved as their older peers, and even if there was an expectation of some sort, they did not care as much. This finding needs to be taken with a grain of salt since our group consisted solely of urban living, college-educated, working women.

Additionally, we were curious about the items in the hope chests' place in daily lives and the meanings behind each product. Being inspired from methods like "object interviews" (Woodward, 2020) and "wardrobe studies" (Klepp & Bjerk, 2012), we asked participants to bring an item that they consider to be from the hope chests to talk about their materiality towards exploring the emotional and social relations embedded in these possessions. These artefacts ranged from books to a handcrafted mirror to a knitted shawl.

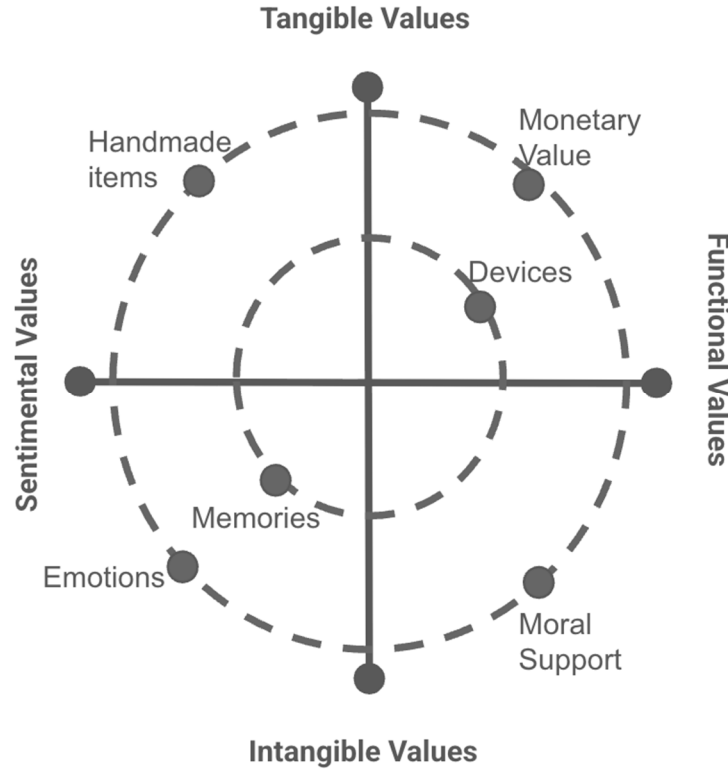


Fig. 2: Values embedded in Çeyiz

Through a thematic analysis, we identified four key dimensions of value: sentimental, functional, tangible, and intangible (Fig. 2) (Yavuz & Gumus, 2021). These conversations with the women and an expert who is an educator at an institute for handmaking in Turkey (Olgunlaşma Enstitüsü) paved the path for our next phase of futuring and imagining the next steps for a ritual that is already undergoing transformation.

The Future of Hope Chests

Tradition refers to ‘a way of thinking, behaving, or doing something that has been used by the people in a particular group, family, society, etc., for a long time’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d). As Milojevic (2024, p.30) points out:

“However, beyond the strong, powerful, and rebellious women of the past, the collective attempt to address women’s oppression and subjugation within patriarchal societies began with feminism”.

Therefore, our goal with this project was to highlight the eco-feminist approaches that could direct the evolution of çeyiz preparations and the meaning for women’s place in society. We crafted a manifesto coming from our findings, discussions, and lived experiences. Hanna (2019) highlights the important role of manifestos in transformation “by presenting alternative possible futures, and in some cases outlining concrete actions; by making it clear that the status quo is intolerable” (p.2). By asking what if questions, our manifesto was inviting readers to speculate and question the mundane. Through “critical imagination” (Fuad-Luke, 2013, p.xxii) it introduces a counter-narrative that aims at disrupting existing stories. Speculative design can “challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life” (Dunne and Raby 2008, p.265). In our case, our speculative proposals we posed through our what if questions in the manifesto serve as probes to unpack

existing cultural narratives, provoke reflection, and open space for imagining alternative futures for this traditional ritual and its materialities.

The manifesto (Fig.3) was our first provocative and critical artefact, embroidered onto a textile, emerging from a wooden chest (making a reference to the hope chest term) and given a voice through a video (Gümüş Çiftçi & Uğur Yavuz, 2021). The manifesto video was exhibited online (between 2021 and 2022), and it has been published as a conference paper (Uğur Yavuz & Gümüş Çiftçi, 2021).

I, Çeyiz. I have an old, tired soul that has accompanied many women in the past. Today, I am still alive, but a bit different. I am going through a transformation, changing as women who are exchanging me are changing. I am crafted, bought, exchanged, shifted from one hand to the other, used, put aside, kept in drawers; while witnessing many stories, stories of women, stories of their society and how the society is shaping them. Now, I am here to ask questions to those who would like to rediscover me, to know what I am, and what I am becoming. Here is my manifesto, for the change I am in, and for the change I bring, to whom prepares me, keeps me somewhere in their cabinets, or will own me one day in the future:

What if I am not a burden, an accumulation of useless artefacts, a must-do, but a joyful ritual to make you connect with your past, present, and future? Embed your stories into me, give me a meaning. Leave your future messages and hopes inside me. I will for sure carry them to the next generation for a better future.

What if I become the voice of women? What would you like to say to me? What would your message be for the others?
 What if I am not gender-biased anymore? Why does not a father put together Çeyiz for their children? Why am I not given a son?
 What if I support women not only to decorate their homes, but also help them to be empowered in their society? What kind of support do women need today?

Can I really help them? What if I am a seed of life, love, and humanity? What if I grow over time and feed others? What if you do not craft me, but grow me over time? Slow and with care. What if I am not passing from a mother to a single daughter, but I become a big collective archive owned by everyone? Can I become a museum of women's solidarity?
 Last but not least, what if I disappear? Do you really need me? Can I also exist in an intangible way? Or have I already disappeared?

Fig. 3: *Manifesto of Ceyiz (Reproduced from Uğur Yavuz & Gümüş Çiftçi, 2021)*

Discussion: Women's Solidarity Extending through a Matrilineal Tradition

As part of our futuring process, we conducted a pilot workshop for co-imagining with designers. We convened a multicultural cohort of six designers - including us- to open a dialogue on gift-giving rituals across contexts. Using speculative prompts drawn from the manifesto, participants developed "what-if" scenarios and documented outcomes on archive cards which we designed as a probe to collect items from existing and future hope chests. As co-participants, we, the researchers, advanced a scenario for an intergenerational digital archive of women's wisdom, then backcasted (Santer, 2019) from a dystopian future toward present, actionable forms. Rather than a wooden çeyiz chest of crafted goods, we envisioned an open, online platform where çeyiz becomes an intangible repository of shared knowledge. In this prototype, women's avatars interact, contribute, and transmit situated wisdom to future generations. While we imagined çeyiz as a digital artefact – an intangible knowledge archive, we wanted to keep its physical presence as a form of conversation agent that still represents its decorative aspect with the lace covering it (Fig.4). Our provotype functions not only as a tool for visualizing our speculative scenario but also becomes a representation of a possible future that, through its uncanny and disturbing appearance, provokes questions about çeyiz, its evolving meaning and transformation.



Fig. 4: *Provotype - AI based Digital Çeyiz (a dystopian artefact) designed by the authors*

With this project, we aimed at understanding the past, present, and imagining the future of çeyiz and the traditions and rituals surrounding çeyiz preparations. In our work, we imagined a changing tradition and a positively evolving social structure in which the women would have equal rights in all aspects of life. Our realization during this study was that there is a profound transformation in the application of çeyiz, but the meaning of çeyiz remained the same. Çeyiz, in essence, was to support women at a time when their lives had to go according to society's expectations. However, the undeniable change in women's power, both intellectual and financial, and the evolution in society's view of women could become a radical change - a movement for the solidarity of women in Turkey. As Milojevic says:

“Social movements in general, and women's and feminist movements in particular, are focused on social change and thus are inherently oriented towards the future. This brings them into direct conflict with individuals and groups who want to maintain the status quo” (Milojevic, 2024, p.33).

Moreover, Bilginer sheds light into the feminist solidarity practices in Turkey criticizing that only shared oppression is not a commonality to hold a group of women and invite us to “move beyond the illusionary homogeneity among women and be more open to identities other than woman” (2009, p.116). Therefore, thinking of çeyiz as a solidarity action not only limits it to a gender identity, but can expand itself to a mutual support that builds on reflections on patriarchal and oppressive systems including all diverse voices. As once mothers collected crafted items for their daughters, can we imagine a collective effort to gather learnings, stories and concerns crafted as a form of a mutual toolkit that inspires critical reflection, collective learning, and actions for social transformation for more just and resilient futures?

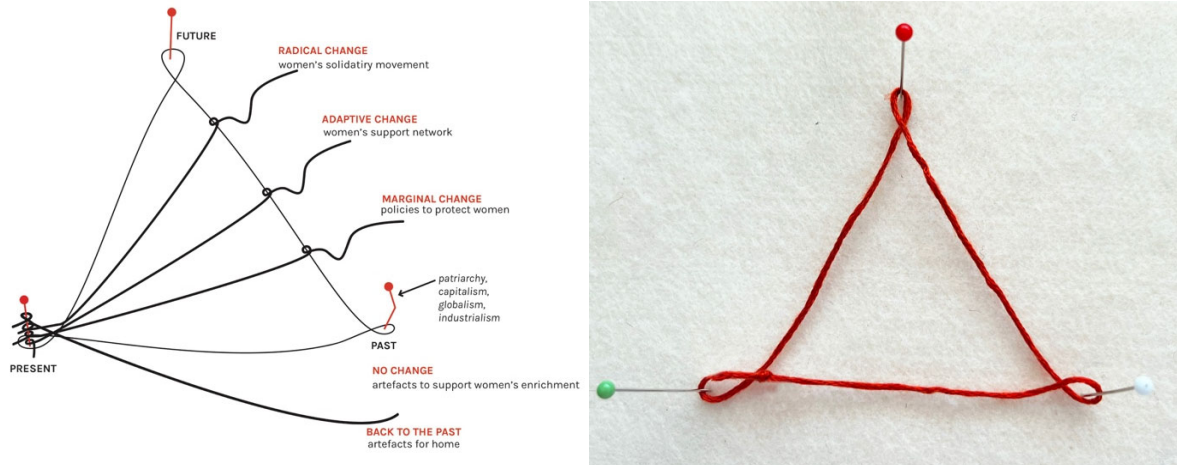


Fig. 5. The diagram (on the left) was adapted from Milojevic, 2024.

We put a lens to our work through the futures triangle (Inayatullah, 2023) in which we intended to comprehend the past, the present, and the future (Fig.5). In this diagram we re-interpreted the Futures Triangle as a form of weaving demonstrating the pulls and pushes of the yarns and their directions towards the future scenarios. The photo (Fig.5 - on the right) shows an artefact, representing The Future Triangle, was constructed to help us develop the diagram with the metaphor or weaving.

The outcome of both the workshop and our idea generation phase proved that there's a transformation in this age-old tradition. Additionally, the conservation of the heritage and the desire to revive the tradition give way to the younger generations, the designers, and the society inspiration and a momentum to build a just, more equitable future for women. Through the futures triangles lens, we can foresee that there's potential for the artefacts created for household which were supposed to enrich the women's lives could turn into a solidarity movement comprising a support network for women, which could be backed by policies for supporting women in all streams of life. We imagined these speculative tools as nests of a learning repository, a hub for memory keeping, and a circle of trust. Maze (2020) says that futures can make us think "that things can be different also raises political questions about what can, or should, change and difference that makes" (p. 38). For transformative work, the "weight of the past" can be read constructively as what we choose to carry forward; the stabilizing continuity of values and identity; such that naming these essentials turns transformation from a feared ending into a felt metamorphosis (Leong & Kornet Weber, 2023).

Conclusion

With this work-in-progress project, we started exploring a tradition and a ritual that has been present in women's lives for ages. In this journey, we learned the meaning behind preparing çeyiz, its importance in women's lives, and how it has evolved over the last few decades through discussions with women from different generations and our personal experiences. By tradition, these items are thought to support women in their adult life, which happens after they marry, and over time, it has transformed into a burden for some. However, with our work, we aimed at exploring a plethora of scenarios in which this age-old, meaningful tradition could become in women's lives. Our design process highlighted the role of design to materialize futures, through artefacts, narratives, and participatory methods, making social questions tangible. Our discussion between us and with our participants directed our study to question women's place in society, leading us to craft a manifesto as a speculative tool for investigating potential ways of being and becoming. The questions we posed in the manifesto were then explored through a pilot co-imagining workshop with a group of designers, giving rise to a couple of scenarios in which meaningful change in women's lives became visible. Our next goal is to bring this workshop to a broader and more diverse audience and continue

the debate about *çeyiz*, how it transformed, and how it could turn into women's wellbeing and solidarity hub worldwide.

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