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Susan Schaefer Davis

*Independent Scholar and Consultant in Anthropology*

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FEZ FABRICATIONS: ARTISANS AND HANDMADE TEXTILES  
IN A COMPLEX TRADITIONAL CULTURE

SUSAN SCHAEFER DAVIS, PH.D.

Independent Scholar and Consultant in Anthropology  
4 College Lane  
Haverford, PA 19041

INTRODUCTION

This paper grows out of a group process of studying handmade fabric, embroidery, and trim in Fez, Morocco in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The group included three textile scholars, a video specialist and myself, an anthropologist.<sup>2</sup> While the textile scholars began the project with an interest in the textile products and their means of production, we all became interested in more social aspects of the work.

Other scholars have noted the cues cloth can give in understanding the social relations of a culture. Reddy (1986) looks for hints of the social tensions leading to the French Revolution in the changing ways merchants and others "talked" about cloth in a universal dictionary of commerce published several times between 1730 and 1784. He finds "...an odd combination of rigidity and flexibility...(264)" which he relates to the later upheaval of the 1789 Revolution, a throwing aside of the old order and difficulty in accepting a new one. In the dictionary's discussion of commodities, he sees "...the necessary intimacy that always subsists between social relationships and things (282)."

In their Introduction to Cloth and Human Experience (1989), Schneider and Weiner give an overview of the way textiles and their manufacture are important in "...the reproduction of social life and power (4)." Of special interest here is their discussion of cloth in large scale societies, like Morocco today. While such cultures have wide access to machine made fabric, some local handmade textiles persist "...as aspects of the consolidation of cultural identities...(16)." One of their examples is Ghandi's adoption of homespun cotton cloth in India as a symbol, and fact, of India's independence from British manufacturing.

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<sup>1</sup> The project was supported by several donors, including the Royal Ontario Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Near Eastern Art Research, the London School of Economics, and the Pasold Research Foundation. My participation was made possible by Mr. and Mrs. Herbert K. Taylor. We thank the Moroccan Ministries of Handicrafts, Social Affairs, and Culture for their generous assistance.

<sup>2</sup> We plan to produce a video on Fez textiles in 1992.

While the other papers on Morocco focus more on the textile products, though including social context, I will deal specifically with the social lives and interactions of the textile producers, merchants and consumers, and through them and their dealing with changing economic and social conditions, present a picture of one segment of Moroccan society today.

#### THE CONTEXT OF FEZ

The name Fez in association with handmade textiles may call up images of the exotic East, frozen in time. While a first visit to the old city or medina can reinforce this image, it is only one part of the total picture. Before we discuss the artisans and merchants and their products and customers in detail, the reader needs an accurate context in which to understand them.

The city of Fez is located in Morocco, on the northwest shoulder of Africa. While Morocco is an Arab Muslim country, for centuries it has been a crossroads for the cultures of Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. In size and climate Morocco resembles California, and grows wheat as a staple crop, a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, and citrus for export. Handmade carpets and factory-produced leather jackets, bags and shoes are also exported.

Fez is the traditional cultural capital of Morocco, the source of the quintessential forms of Moroccan music, food, and handicrafts, and longtime provider of the country's intellectual and political leaders. Fez is also Morocco's mercantile capital, where tradition is balanced with innovation, as you will see below. The coexistence of old and new is physically present in the city itself, which has modern Europeanized sections with broad tree-lined avenues strolled by young men in leather jackets and women in western dress. In older sections with narrow winding streets, one can still see traces of areas organized by different craft guilds. The city was founded in 829 A.D., soon after Islam arrived in Morocco, and "new Fez" dates from the 1300s.

Morocco is not frozen in time, but rather modernizing rapidly. In that modernization, one sees characteristics common to many other countries in the developing world, characteristics which influence today's artisans and their work. One example is the rapid change between generations, fueled by the expanding influence of education. Many of today's Moroccan artisans grew up under the French protectorate of Morocco (1912-1956), when education was mainly a privilege of the wealthy and the masses were



illiterate. Thus Hajj Tahar, a master weaver of jellaba<sup>3</sup> fabric and longtime head of the Fez weavers' syndicate, had not been to primary school, while his son Driss had attended public school and had specialized training in loom repair. Now in his thirties, Driss does not weave nor repair looms, but has a shop which markets the fine fabrics from his father's workshop. Another weaver, Abdelqader Ourregli, is the last weaver in Fez to produce elaborate brocade-like fabrics on his own drawloom; he learned weaving as an apprentice in his childhood. His sons have been to school, and none want to follow him in the trade, which they see as too much hard work for too little pay.

Another trend Morocco shares with much of the developing world is an initial infatuation with things Western, now being tempered by a renewed appreciation of their own traditional culture. Most of Morocco was colonized by the French, with a Spanish influence in the north. French was taught in the schools, and French culture greatly influenced Moroccan taste in architecture, fabrics, and home decoration. An upper class home in the 1960s, soon after Independence, would have plain white walls, French upholstered furniture and gauzy white curtains; it would be hard to tell if one were in Bordeaux or Casablanca. Today that has changed. Since at least the early 1980s, newly-built upper class homes nearly all have a Moroccan "salon" or entertaining room which has tiled walls topped by a band of carved plaster, a hand-carved wooden ceiling, and Moroccan upholstery fabric and rugs. This search for authenticity, for beauty in one's own tradition instead of the West's, is important in many cultures.

The reader must keep in mind that our emphasis on the traditional here does not mean static. For example, traditional Fez bridal garb includes a special headshawl, most commonly a green and gold geometric design on a white ground; this msellka is still woven only on the handloom. However, recently Fez brides have begun wearing other wedding attire as well in the several changes during the celebration. These include a Moroccan Berber outfit of a lacy white fabric with a red, sequin-spangled headscarf, an Indian sari (Hindi films are popular, and people love sumptuous fabrics), and often a western-style white wedding gown.

#### ARTISANS, MERCHANTS AND CONSUMERS IN TODAY'S MOROCCO

The other papers on Morocco in this volume describe the work and products of Fez artisans, and the merchants who sell them to local consumers. How do these three groups fit into Moroccan society today? To what extent, and in what ways,

<sup>3</sup> a long outer garment with a hood, worn like a coat by both sexes

do they interact with each other? Do men and women function differently in these domains?

Initially, it is tempting to see the three groups in a hierarchy. The artisans would be at the bottom economically and socially and have a more traditional lifestyle, doing mostly hand work and living in the old city or the surrounding shanty towns. The merchants would be socially and economically a rung higher, living in both the old and new parts of town, depending on their prosperity. The consumers would be the wealthiest and most modern, since they can afford and appreciate the handicrafts; most would live in the new city, since the cars they often own cannot negotiate the narrow terraced streets of old Fez.

Although it fits reality to some extent, the picture above is far too simplified to describe the situation in Fez today. Artisans do in fact tend to be less well-off, which is both a cause and an effect of being more traditional. As a cause, they often lack the funds to buy more modern machinery to do their jobs, so Mr. Ourregli cannot afford a mechanized loom and continues on the hand-operated drawloom. As an effect, hand work often pays poorly, and older people with little or no formal education have access to few other jobs. When people have other alternatives, they often leave the artisan sector. For example, rug weavers are having trouble finding small girls as apprentices because many today attend school instead, or when older find better-paying jobs in factories sewing clothing for export.

The situation of merchants is more varied. Small-scale sellers need somewhat more money than bottom level artisans: the latter sell only their labor, but the merchants must have some capital to buy stock. Like the artisans, these merchants can have little or no formal education. However, those working on a larger scale need much more capital, and more education to manage their large operations. The Ben Cherif fabric showrooms were located in the new, high rent section of Fez, and their extensive textile inventory and many mechanized looms represent huge investments.

Consumers exist at all economic levels. Certainly, the rich can and do buy the highest quality handmade work. They purchase hundreds of yards of fabric to upholster the banquettes lining the walls of their "salons", and can pay artisans to carve the wood and plaster and set the tiny mosaic tiles decorating the walls. One of the few people who ordered the traditional behja<sup>4</sup> fabric to be made on Mr. Ourregli's handloom was a local doctor. Women who can afford them order gowns made with machine embroidery or

<sup>4</sup> a multicolored design of a bouquet with a ribbon and crown that was popular earlier this century and which has made a comeback



open-work from Mrs. Bennis, known as producing the best work in Fez in her home workshop. Yet people at all levels of society have at least some traditional textiles in their home furnishings or their wardrobes; there are examples in each of the craft areas studied in this project.

Every bride plans to have some items in Fez embroidery in her trousseau, but the amount and quality varies greatly depending upon what she can afford. The most standard items are a sheet and pillowcase set, to be used on her wedding night and when guests visit after the birth of her children. After that she may order large and small tablecloths with napkins, tea tray covers, and other items. In the past, nearly all young women did this embroidery themselves for years before they married, and knowing how was a mark of culture, of coming from a good family. With more girls attending school today, fewer have this skill; they pay others to do it for them, which increases the market. A sheet set may cost 2400 Dirhams, or the equivalent of about a month's salary for a primary school teacher. This may sound profitable, but it takes several months to produce and an embroiderer may earn one or two dollars a day.

Gold-embroidered women's slippers were another traditional wedding item, but their popularity has declined. Today they are worn mostly by older rural women. Young brides feel they are too heavy and prefer more delicate footwear, like Italian sandals.

The trim or passementerie on the gowns women wear at celebrations comes in all levels of quality and thus prices. A poor rural woman may buy a gown, or have her husband buy it, readymade at a country market. The sewing will be shabby and the trim minimal and machine made. A rich Fez woman will plan the garments for her daughter's wedding a year in advance, and carefully choose trim colors to match her fabric, and trim design to be in the latest style.

Handwoven nubbly jellaba fabric (hobba) is so valued that it is imitated in a synthetic, which is much cheaper and also moth resistant. Other woven fabric imitates the Fez embroidery stitch, and is used to make pillow covers to place in the corners of richly upholstered salons. It is still expensive, but a printed fabric is also made, so even the poor have access to the design.

Thus handmade textiles are important at all levels of Moroccan society, with their quantity and quality varying with a family's economic and social level. For all families, these textiles are a living tradition. Further, in some cases there is a renewed popularity of the older styles, as with the behja upholstery fabric and with finely-woven men's jellabas.

## GENDER IN TEXTILE PRODUCTION

There is the most variation in gender among artisans. Embroidery is done almost exclusively by girls and women; this is true for the gold thread, Fez, and machine-worked types. In the past, the gold thread work on saddles may have been done by men, but today is contracted out to women. Women embroiderers usually work in their homes, but sometimes work in home-based workshops, as in the home of Mrs. Bennis.

Both sexes are involved in making trim, but each has its own technologies and products. The handmade trim for gowns is produced by women, usually in their homes. The version made on a simple, hand-powered machine is made only by men, usually in shops. Machine production is faster, so men can produce, and thus earn, more than women in a given time period.

There is also variation in gender among weavers. The few people who still work on drawlooms are all males; we never heard of a woman using one. However, both men and women work on the simpler loom used to weave jellaba fabric. Men produce fabric for sale, often in workshops containing several looms. Women produce fabric for family use in their homes, on upright rather than horizontal looms. One exception to family production by women is the famous bzou jellaba fabric, which women in one town produce for sale. Bzou is woven of silk and wool, and is so fine it is nearly transparent; robes of bzou are worn by Court and other high officials on ceremonial occasions, and sometimes by bridegrooms. Bzou fabric is also woven at Hajj Tahar's workshop, but the top quality is said to be that handwoven by women.

In general, artisans of both sexes are becoming rarer as better-paying jobs become available. Since a wider range of jobs is available to males than to females, and since several of the women's crafts can be balanced with household chores and child care, we can predict that male-dominated crafts will be more likely to decline than those of females. Discerning consumers are another necessity for the continued support of artisans; if they decline in number, the livelihood of both sexes will be threatened.

The merchants who sell the artisans' products are mostly male in Fez; this is closely related to the view of most traditional Moroccans that women should not be on display in public places, or have contact with large numbers of unrelated men. Thus shops selling gold thread embroidered items, or the rayon used for trim, or Fez or machine-embroidered linens, are run by men. However, the highest quality Fez and machine embroidery is ordered directly from the producer by the female consumer, so many women "sell



direct" from their homes when embroidery is commissioned from them. In addition, a few embroidery shops run by upper class women have opened in the new city of Fez. They carry high quality and sometimes innovative items, and are patronized by well-off brides and their mothers who do not have the necessary year's lead time to commission embroidered linens or gowns.

As suggested above, the customers for handmade textiles are mainly women, who choose the trim for their gowns, the gold thread, Fez, and machine embroidery to decorate gowns and linens, and the fabrics to decorate their rooms. Women spend much time observing and discussing textile quality and cost, and their expertise ensures a market for high quality artisanal products.

Although I have discussed the categories of artisan, merchant and consumer separately, their interaction is a very important factor in the shaping of Moroccan handmade textiles. The trim for a woman's gown is a good example of "cooperative creation" of a final product. A woman first selects fabric, from Morocco or often brought as a gift from France, or Saudi Arabia - where it has probably been exchanged with another pilgrim visiting Mecca, and may have been brought from India, Thailand, or elsewhere. Since gowns are closely observed by all the female guests at weddings and other celebrations, a unique imported fabric provides special cachet. Favored fabrics are silk or silky prints with several colors. A woman takes her fabric to her favorite rayon seller in the old city, and together they select usually three to five colors from the scores of shades that gleam on the spools covering his walls; he may suggest particular color combinations. Next she goes to the tailor, who will construct the gown, but more importantly twist the trim into a complex design that will run up the front and around the neck and sleeves. The tailor will have samples or photos of the latest designs for her to choose from, and they will collaborate on a choice. Her new gown becomes one of this year's styles, and may influence next year's choices for women seeing it. Women value both good workmanship and new styles; the latter limits the life of an outfit. A bride and her mother can wear the several gowns they prepared for the marriage for about one more year, and then they will be dated and probably given to a less style-conscious (or less affluent) relative to wear. In fact, this is true of women's gowns in general: once they have been worn to two or three occasions, they are said to have "appeared", and a woman is embarrassed to wear them longer; people will wonder if she cannot afford something new.

An upholstery fabric manufacturer gave us another example of cooperation with consumers to shape the final product, although in this case the fabric is machine made. He and his sales staff keep a close eye on what customers coming to



their salesroom want. If demand changes little and sales are slow, they explore and create new designs to stimulate the market.

#### CONCLUSION

The reader may have expected a product based on "simple technology", handmade textiles, to be produced in a simple cultural context; this description of Fez today should dispel that idea. The varied roles, economic levels, and expertise of artisans, merchants and consumers, and their interaction in forming the final product, are anything but simple. The range of products is as large as that in our society, from discount stores to designer fashion.

The Moroccan artist Ahmed Ben Yahya provides a clear example of the complexity of handmade textiles in Fez in both the production of his gold thread tableaux or "pictures" and in his discussion of the process. The pictures consist of Arabic calligraphy designed to fill a space creatively, embroidered in gold thread on black velvet, and meant to be hung on walls. Mr. Ben Yahya conceives and draws the design for the calligraphy, often based on an Arabic word or phrase from the Quran, the Muslim holy book. Then a male craftsman specialized in cutting paper templates for the embroidery cuts out the original design, and it is sent to the most skilled female embroiderers: it is especially important to have smooth coverage and even stitches in such a work. Finally, the finished works are exhibited at galleries for purchase by sophisticated consumers.

Mr. Ben Yahya described to us his view of the interrelation of arts and crafts involved in his work:

"When we look at my calligraphic phase, we find that I went through many stages. First I did decorative calligraphy, and then I shifted to calligraphy as an artistic symbol: I used it in painting, not as meaningful writing, but as an aesthetic value. What I am after is the aesthetics of calligraphy in the first place. Now I try to use calligraphy in a traditional technique, and that's gold thread embroidery."

"[I] use two noble Islamic arts: Arab calligraphy, which existed among the ruling class and the class of the wise, that of sultans (it was the highest of the Islamic arts), and gold thread embroidery, which is also one of the noble arts in Morocco, and in Fez in particular. I try to use these two techniques in a united work...Calligraphy existed before, [and] so did embroidery, but the form or manner in which I present it is new, like construction. The stone has always been there, the mortar has always been there, but you can build different houses with them. It is the same with creativity."

"[The embroiderer] plays an important role, in perfecting the work. Don't forget, my role is to search for form. I draw the sample...We cut it out before starting the second stage: embroidery. I contribute fifty percent in searching for the form, and embroidery contributes another fifty percent...It is also important, because the more attractive and glamorous it is, the more beautiful the work will be. We must not devalue it's importance."

"This work is a skill, simultaneously an artistic craft and a skill...I provide fifty percent of the work and the artisan provides fifty percent. When you say painting, you say one man's work...but I combine art and craftsmanship...I return to our authenticity, but in a new form, because I created neither embroidery nor calligraphy. I use personal designs, but calligraphy is taken from the culture. It's a return to the source - and a new style."

Schneider and Weiner point out that "...cloth represents the key dilemmas of social and political life: How to bring the past actively into the present (1989:26)." Mr. Ben Yahya is doing this, and provides an articulate summary of the dynamic combination of traditional and modern, a theme that we found in several aspects of our study of Moroccan handmade textiles.

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