


Fall 2017

Women Who Surf in Morocco

Anna Esposito
SIT Graduate Institute

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [Education Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Life Sciences Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Esposito, Anna, "Women Who Surf in Morocco" (2017). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 2663.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2663

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

Women Who Surf in Morocco

Esposito, Anna

Belghazi, Taieb

Bates College

Psychology

Africa, Morocco, Essaouira to Agadir

Statement: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for MOR, SIT Abroad, Fall 2017.

Abstract

In 1960, the first wave of Europeans and Americans found their way to the now bustling Taghazout Bay. From Essaouira to Agadir, expatriates lived out of vans and/or inside the houses of the *Amazigh* villagers. Many of these expatriates made Morocco their home from upwards of ten to fifteen years, even giving birth to children in these rural villages. The American and Europeans shared with the locals and vice versa, bartering food, skills, athletics, language, and friendship. Naturally, as surfing became a popular pastime among hippies in the United States in the 1960s, the expatriates began to bring early models of surfboards and wetsuits to the villages of Taghazout Bay in 1975. In the forty-five years hence, Taghazout Bay has changed drastically. In the last fifteen years, the number of surf schools has skyrocketed from around five to eighty-two. This research acknowledges that many of these surf schools are run by English and Australian companies and entrepreneurs, that extreme development due to tourism has overtaken the area, and that explicit measures must be taken by the community to prevent the exploitation of the coastline and the people who live their. In talking to surf associations/NGOs and local business owners, the study explores the measures being taken to augment the community development, which arguably, has been overlooked in comparison to tourist infrastructure. Free and accessible opportunities for exercise and play is essential to community. Sport keeps people healthy and happy and help to solidify identity and place within a group. Taghazout bay is world renowned for surf, therefore the local youth should be given fair access to the sport. The waters are crowded with European tourists and twenty-something Moroccan men who instruct them. In addition, very few Moroccan women can be found in the waves on any given day. Although Morocco has famous female surf champions, it is difficult to find women out for a casual shred or employed as an instructor. This study also aims to give female Moroccan surfers and skaters voice. Their stories of first surf/skate, their group dynamics, perceived identity and source of support or lack thereof will be recorded.

Gender Studies

Physical Education

Anthropology (other)

Acknowledgements

Nawal Chaib
Taieb Belghazi
Fadma Ait Mous
Hamid Akhyame
Youseff Tachron
Loubna Boutcha Bam
Reda Habzi

Table of Contents :

1. Title page
2. Abstract

3. Acknowledgments
4. Table of Contents
- 5-6. Introduction/Literature Review
- 7-8. Assumptions/Methodology
- 9-12. Analysis
13. Conclusion
14. Bibliography
15. Appendix

Introduction

According to historian Nick Carroll, the first surfing was invented 3,000 years ago in Samoa, New Guinea, Tahiti and “eventually among the Hawaiians, where surfing really

blossomed during the second millennium, crossing the thin line between sport and cultural essential.” (Carroll, 2012). Captain James Cook wrote that it seemed to be of “most supreme pleasure.” In Hawaii, surfing was beaten out of the locals by missionaries and colonists. The horrifying realities of western colonization subverted the first surfers and retired the sport of surfing for nearly half a century (Carroll, 2012). Upon its revival in Hawaii during the second half of the twentieth century, surfing quickly spread to many other nations with surfable coastline, including Morocco.

It took only a short number of years for the first wetsuits and handshaven wooden boards that were produced in Hawaii and the United States to reach the shores of Taghazout Bay as early as the 1970s. Brought by ‘hippies’ from the U.S. and Europe living in vans, the equipment was often left or given to the local Amazigh¹ children to use. Through the globalization of the sport, surfing has become a cultural and economical essential in many beach front towns and communities, like Imsouane and Taghazout, with extreme quickness. Some may credit the hippies to bringing surfing, now, a multimillion dollar tourist industry, to the fishing villages of Morocco, although the adolescent boys of the area were using pieces of foam and wood to play in the water for many years before (Interview 1, 2017).

The fame of Taghazout Bay has attracted travelers and surfers from all over the world, champions to beginners alike, but are the residents of these small villages getting equal opportunity? With the changing dynamics of tourism, what aspects of surfing within this region are exclusive? Why are there so little Moroccan women in these waves.

Literature Review:

There is very little literature on specifically Moroccan women who surf or skate. However, there are some journalistic and blog-like articles to be found on Google. Many of these

¹ The indigenous people of North Africa

articles cover Meryem El Gardoum, one of the few professional Moroccan women to compete internationally, articles such as, *2 Moroccan women first to compete in world surf championships*, *Salt in my Hair: Meryem El Gardoum - Female surfer of Morocco*, and *Shredding the Patriarchy: Two Moroccan women just surfed onto the world stage*. I could find only one other piece on Moroccan women who surf non-professionally. It was a journalistic piece focussing on one woman's experience.

While reviewing literature on female surfing in other parts of the world and from sociological journals, I was able to draw connections to female Moroccan surfing. However, all of these pieces were written in western frameworks and were not exactly what I was focussing my research on. Otmar Weiss's *Identity Reinforcement in Sport* proved to be helpful. He argues, "Sport is shaped by and derived symbolic significance with its close links with society. With its classic, sociocultural and transparent norms...it forms a social subsystem in which different kinds of identity reinforcement or social recognition are possible. Identity reinforcement can be found through membership of a sports group,...a sports performance, or it can be experience vicariously as a spectator-either live or via media" (Weiss, 2001). In my conclusion, the Moroccan women's connection to their friends as well as towns in which they surf support Weiss's claim.

Assumptions:

The assumption of maltreatment. I assumed because of the lack of women who surf or skate that there was teasing or harassment. This is something I grew up with when I played sports with boys, therefore, I assumed it was present here, that it was part of the reason women refrain from these sports in Morocco, but not one of my interviewees reported harassment.

Methodology:

_____I began my research, by contacting profiles of Moroccan women who surf/skate on Facebook and Instagram. I also emailed surf associations for meeting times and hours of operation. My third step was to move to the Southwestern coast. I traveled from Essaouira to Agadir. I found most of my interviews and contacts just by speaking to people who lived and worked in these places. I made a questionnaire that I had translated into french by Reda Habzi. The questionnaire asked many questions about the participant's surfing habits, attitudes, and how they started the sport (see Figure 1). I sent this form out to many women and got few responses. During in-person interviews, I explained my positionality as a student before anything else, and used the questionnaire as a template, but I mostly wanted women to openly share their story however they felt comfortable. Open-ended questions seemed to work well, but my small number of interviews make the study less strong. All of interviews were in English, except for 2 that I was lucky enough to work with translators. I conducted 14 total interviews: 3 Moroccan men who surf and work in hospitality (20-30yrs), 1 Moroccan man in his 60s from Taghazout village.

4 Surf Association/Club by the names of Imouran Surf Association (Tamraght) (club of several champions), Royal Surf Club (Anza), Taghazout Surf Association, Rabat Medina Surf Association as well as 6 Moroccan women that surf/skate (19-25yrs), 2 from Rabat and 4 from Agadir. Note, none of the women I interviewed were from rural towns or villages including the ones I was studying in. Participant observation was a large part of my project. I accomplished participant observation by living and traveling in the coastal region between Essaouira and Agadir.

Analysis:

After sometime, I established that there are indeed less girls and women surfing and skating than men and boys in Morocco. This finding can be substantiated by a series of quotes by different genders and demographics. There is a general lack of women in the sport and they themselves are aware of it, “So yes I do feel like I have to be good and prove myself especially in Morocco where we don’t see a lot of girls surfing, most of the time I find myself alone with a bunch of guys .. and want to prove that I could be just as good, and sometimes I am” (Interview 2, Salma 2017). Upon showing my video, an Amazigh man in his thirties from Taghazout Bay, states, “You never see these girls in the water” (Interview 3, Youssef, 2017).

Subsequently, there is a particular lack of women who work in instruction of surfing. A man working in instruction and hospitality said, “Now you’re making me think, I’ve been working and surfing here for 6 years and have not seen one Moroccan women working as an instructor, but countless Moroccan men” (Interview 4, Simone, 2017). However, the disparity of women making careers in instructing is unique because within the four weeks of research I found Moroccan women who compete at the international level, compete domestically, as well as women and girls who consider surfing a casual hobby or source of exercise, and yet I did not come across one Moroccan woman employed as a surf instructor. When I asked why, I got answers such as, “They (women) leave the area for school to become doctors, and engineers. They start families and get married” (Interview 5, Imouran Association, 2017). and “Moroccan men are satisfied with the lifestyle of teaching surfing and working in hostels with tourists....the tourists are on vacation for one week or two (drinking and smoking) but sometimes the Moroccans who work with them will be on an infinite holiday” (Interview 5, Imouran Association, 2017).

Similarly, a visit to the Imouran Association during a youth surf lesson, gave me any idea of the ratio of young girls to boys. There was 3 girls ages 8-12 and about 10 boys of the same age group. While walking the shores of these surf spots, I found the ratio quite similar for adult surfers perhaps even more skewed towards the male side.

Once I established that there is a lack of women and girls participating in surfing on the coast from Essaouira to Agadir, I set out to determine what challenges women have faced in the past and what setbacks they face now. Before I assert any type of gendered critical theory to the information, I must evaluate the affordability and accessibility for all people regardless of sex. To do this, I spoke to surf associations that support community engagement in the sport by the

locals. For simplicity purposes I will give Imouran Surf Association's offerings as most functioning surf associations in Morocco follow a similar framework. They offer memberships for a flat, annual rate of 200 DH for which the member gets a wetsuit, board, and 2 sessions a week with an instructor. Some clubs organize and fund the instructor certification which is facilitated through Royal Federation of Surfing in Rabat. Most of these associations get their funding from regional government and donation from surf camps (businesses for teaching tourists) who donate equipment/funds. Imouran Surf Association, which is the club of many Moroccan champions, receives funding from the Moroccan Federation as well, but this is more uncommon (Interview 5, Imouran Association, 2017).

The vice president of Imouran Surf Association attributed a lack of accessibility to some locals due to membership expense and lack of free time away from work or school (Interview 5, Imouran Association, 2017). The accessibility of the waves is obvious, but the time and equipment is not.

Girls and women share the same obstacles, but also have separate challenges on top of these. Reasons stated by locals and surf association representatives alike are as follows: deeply ingrained cultural norms/expectations (which are hard for me to define as an outsider) such as, social taboo of co-ed lessons, and that traditionally women in this area take care of the home. In substantiation, VP of Imouran said, "To be a good surfer, you must travel. Many parents don't want to give their daughters to somebody for many hours or the whole day especially in this town. The girls are expected to be at home learning their skills" (Interview 5, 2017). It was also mentioned that parents being cautious because it is considered a dangerous/extreme sport as well as the history of the sport in the region. Before surfing was associated with the hippies who partook in drinking and smoking. However representatives reported that, "It is changing, in the

70s the villagers watched the hippies smoke and drink and surf, the local parents were afraid their girls would be apart of that culture. Now, people are starting to see that it can be good for girls for health and exercise. It gives people jobs in this town” (Interview 5, 2017). One man from Taghazout, age 63, said “If I had a daughter, she’d be the first champion of Taghazout village” (Interview 1, 2017).

Finally, I want to share some of the findings of the interviews with women. Through 6 interviews, I was able to conclude a handful of trends. The first, an overwhelming report of connection to friends, place/ocean and empowerment. Quote examples being: “It makes me strong and after surfing I am able to study well.” (Interview 6, Lhbiba, 2017) and ”Gosh, I feel like that’s seriously THE question, I got addicted to surfing because of the way it made me feel, free, confident, the moment I get in the water , and I’m sitting on my board, surrounded by infinity of blue, waiting to catch the right wave. That’s is literally just heaven to me.” (Interview 7, Salma, 2017) and “It’s true, since I’ve started surfing I really feel empowered, strong, confident, when I catch the right wave the right way, the wave, the speed, I feel like a super woman, I feel like I’m doing something really special with my life, not just a sport. I do feel connected to water and spirituality, water just takes away all my worries, the moment I’m in, I just forget everything I have to worry about, and I fully enjoy the moment without thinking about anything else” (Interview 7, Salma, 2017). A few other conclusions include: Waves can be crowded in Rabat as well as the Southwest coast, all interviewees reported high ambitions for their future in the sport, but not fame, some people travel long hours to their favorite spots and some do not. I spoke to one woman who surfs with hijab and other interviewees said “this is no problem.” especially with wetsuit hoods. And, finally, social media is has a huge presence in Moroccan surfing culture. All of these were reported by four or more women. Another important

notation is that of the women I spoke to, no one reported anyone being against them participating in the sport.

Conclusion:

Yes, surfing in Morocco is male dominated, but surfing can also be exclusive to only those who can afford it regardless of gender. The reasons for male domination are clear and unrare because they are seen all over the world in many athletic communities. The main purpose of this study was to give female surfers voice. When given a platform to speak, most did not speak of sexism, but instead empowerment. With this information, I had many new questions: how and why are the perspectives of locals changing and why exactly are there no Moroccan women working as surf instructors? What is difference between urban and rural women who participate in surfing? What does the future of female surfing in Morocco look like? How does tourism impact young girls?

Works Cited:

1. Carroll, N. (2012). The Origins of Surfing . Surfology. Retrieved Nov. & dec., 2017.
2. Lassine (2017, December 1). Interview 1: The Hippies: History of Taghazout Bay [Personal interview].
3. WITW STAFF. (2017, June 15). *2 Moroccan women first to compete in world surf championships*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2017/06/15/2-moroccan-women-first-to-compete-in-world-surf-championships/>
4. Weiss, O. (2001). *Identity Reinforcement in Sport*.
5. Salma (2017, December 4). Interview 2: Surfing and Being a Woman [Personal interview].
6. Youssef (2017, December 6). Interview 3: Surfing in Taghazout [Personal interview].

7. Simone (2017, November 23). Interview 4: Surfing and Being a Woman and
Imsouane [Personal interview].
8. VP of Imouran Surf Association (2017, November 26). Interview 5: Youth
Surfing [Personal interview].
9. Lhbiba (2017, December 2). Interview 6: Surfing as a Woman [personal
interview]
10. Salma (2017, December 5). Interview 7: Surfing as a Woman [personal interview]

Appendix:

Figure 1:

#SistersInSweat :P Women Who Shred Morocco. Tell your story however you like, but here's some questions to help you :0

Questions:

1. What is your name? Where are you from?
 2. How many years did you have when you first surfed/skated? How old are you now?
 - 2a. When you surf/skate, how do you feel? What was it like to learn?
 - 2b. Why did you want to start surfing/skating (reasons behind) the first experience (when, where, with whom?)
 - 2c. Who encourages you to surf/skate? who supports you and who was against you surfing/skating?
 3. Where do you surf/skate most often?
 4. Do you ever travel for surfing/skate? Where?
 5. What's your favorite place you've ever surfed/skate?
 6. Do you like to do other activities at these places or just surf/skate? Do you have a special memory?
 - 6a. Connection to place? Do you feel connection to the places (cities/towns) you surf/skate?
 7. How does surfing/skate empower you? how does surfing/skating empower you as a woman?
 8. Do you feel connected to the earth, water, tides, health, God, or spirituality? Do you feel strong when you surf/skate?
 9. If you veil, what is your relationship to the hijab? while you surf/skate?
 10. Are the waves crowded where you surf/skate?
 11. Do you ever have to fight a group of men for a wave or space? or a group of tourists?
 13. Do you ever feel you have to prove yourself in the water just because you are female?
 14. What does your family think of you surfing/skating?
 15. What is your future/dream for your surfing/skate?
- Sisters in Sweat Group dynamics:
- Do you have a crew, a group of women or men or both you shred with?
 - Do you have special friends you met shredding?
 - Do you have a surfing/skate role model? if yes, who?
 - When you surf/skate, do you feel connected to other women athletes?
 - Do your friends feel more like sisters when you surf/skate and play sports with them?