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**EMBROIDERY IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF ARTISANS,
MERCHANTS, AND CONSUMERS IN FEZ, MOROCCO, IN THE 1980s**

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Many inhabitants of Fez welcome modern lifestyles. But they also value their Muslim faith and cultural traditions which identify their Fezi heritage. One prominent symbol of that distinctive heritage is embroidery. It is highly visible throughout the city on decorative covers used in daily life and on special occasions, especially weddings.¹

Although many cities in Morocco and abroad had distinctive styles of embroidery in the past, embroidery continues to prosper today almost exclusively in Fez. Its widespread manufacture and use provide insight not only into current practices but also into comparable customs elsewhere which have been mechanized.

The continuing existence of embroidery traditions, along with other handmade textile and handicraft practices, is a serendipitous result of geographic, economic, religious, and cultural factors. In addition, there was almost no European influence, apart from the Andalusian influx around 1500, until the late nineteenth century. Under French domination (1912-1956) French practices began to replace local traditions. A strong sense of cultural identity and regional pride has reemerged in Fez since independence in 1956 which is most evident in the city's renowned handicrafts, especially its embroidery.²

Three types of embroidery dominate in Fez today: Fez stitch, gold thread, and sewing machine embroidery. Each has distinctive features that affect its manufacturing process and its intended use. Most embroideries are made to serve specific functions, such as clothing, household furnishings, and even horse trappings. Some are indeed luxurious. Few embroideries are intended to be purely decorative, such as wall hangings.

Following general comments on embroidery in daily life, this paper includes a summary of each type of embroidery since they have more differences than similarities, embroidery practices in one Fezi family, and comments on the future of embroidery in Fez.

Most Fezis from all levels of society have some direct knowledge of embroidery, either from family members or from relatives who are involved in its manufacture or sale. Many tens of thousands of women in Fez do embroidery work in their homes. As girls, they started to embroider items for their trousseaus. As women, they make embroideries for their families and relatives, or for sale when income is needed or desired. For some, embroidery is

a matter of choice, but for many, it is a financial necessity.

The number of embroiderers is declining. Most women over about age thirty-five know how to embroider. Some even know more than one type of embroidery. However, fewer girls have learned how to embroider since 1956 when independence from France allowed increased opportunities for girls, such as more schooling. Therefore, instead of making embroideries for their own trousseaus, more girls are buying embroidery.

Given the widespread familiarity with embroidery, most consumers today are knowledgeable and discerning customers. They can recognize differences in quality and workmanship and accurately assess the time needed to make each embroidery. Equally important, they value embroidery sufficiently to pay substantial prices. For example, a good quality but not lavish embroidered bedsheet set with matching pillow cases (with either Fez stitch or sewing machine embroidery) costs about \$350, or about one month's salary for an elementary schoolteacher (Figure 3).

Consumers from all levels of society buy the best they can afford. Prices vary considerably, depending on the quality and amount of material used, the time required, and the expertise of the artisans involved. Ready-made embroidery is available in small shops clustered in the medina, or old city, but it is usually of medium or low quality. Most high quality work must be made-to-order, by commissioning either a shop owner or an embroiderer in her home.

The process of commissioning embroidery allows for choice but also requires advance planning. Consumers benefit since they can theoretically choose whatever they want. In reality, however, choice is usually influenced by tradition. Although many motifs exist, they are often used in established combinations associated with specific functions. Thus motifs and functions are interrelated. Continuity, however, should not be mistaken for static. Changes in embroidery are constantly occurring, albeit sometimes subtly. New styles often evolve from different combinations of old motifs or the introduction of new functions, and sometimes from novel color combinations. Fezi consumers recognize new styles immediately.

Advance planning is essential: the delivery time for embroidery can range from one day to one year, depending on the item. Large orders are sometimes worked by several embroiderers in order to speed up delivery. This, however, is not always advantageous; shared orders often result in inconsistent workmanship and thus inferior quality. Stitch tensions as well as individual embroidery styles often differ. Commissioned items do not have a quality control guarantee. The best guarantees are the personal standards and reliability of artisans and merchants. Each individual's work is therefore critical. For some, this provides a sense of personal worth.

FEZ STITCH EMBROIDERY

Fez stitch embroidery is the most culturally valued, the most difficult to learn, the most time-consuming to make, and the most durable. The Fez stitch is similar to a cross stitch but it is reversible, and is made without a pattern by counting threads (Figures 1, 7). Each stitch requires several passes. Cotton DMC embroidery thread, which replaced silk thread roughly fifty years ago, is worked on a plain weave cotton or mixed fiber ground. The angular contours of the ever popular floral and geometric motifs reflect the counted-thread technique.

Mrs. Rabea Mernissi, who has been teaching Fez stitch embroidery since the 1950s, stresses that the keys to learning are motivation and concentration, not education or special skills (Figure 2). She compares the process to learning alphabet letters. Gradually we learn to form words and then sentences. In her three year course, students start with the simplest elements and advance slowly to more complex motifs, making samplers as they progress for future reference. The motifs have names such as "half nut" or "half sesame" to facilitate communication, but they are not symbolic.

Embroiderers tend to specialize in one quality or another. Some make medium quality embroidery for merchants to sell in the medina, but many accept commissions for high quality work directly from consumers. Fez stitch embroidery takes several months to a year to complete, and payment is therefore infrequent and irregular, a condition that some embroiderers dislike.

Fez stitch embroidery is used for practical items that require washing. Mrs. Mernissi praises its durability: "You can have this [Fez stitch] embroidery...for twenty years and it won't change. Every time you wash it, it becomes like new....[It] lasts forever. The stitches don't come undone, the cloth does not tear. It lasts." The most popular items are tablecloths, tea-tray covers, and bedsheet sets with matching pillow cases, all of which are treasured items for trousseaus (Figure 3).

The French introduced the use of Fez stitch embroidery on the above three items and gradually, during the 1940s and 1950s, the new fashions began to replace established embroidered items, such as towels, cushions, and divan mattress fronts. The French had little influence, however, on artistic motifs which were adopted from the existing artistic repertory. Today, new applications, often influenced by European customs, as well as different combinations of motifs and new colors continue to be introduced.

Regardless of change, Fez stitch embroidery is unmistakably identified with Fez and is so highly valued that it is widely imitated-on plastic, paper, and fabric. Perhaps the most significant imitation is woven on drawlooms.³ Woven imitations of Fez stitch embroidery, used to cover cushions in traditional Moroccan reception rooms, are manufactured in hours, rather than embroidered in one year.⁴ They therefore cost a fraction of the

esteemed original. Discerning consumers can easily tell the difference, but others cannot.

GOLD THREAD EMBROIDERY

Opulent gold thread embroidery which has been renowned and widely exported for over a century continues to prosper.⁵ It is always bought or commissioned from shop owners because they coordinate its manufacture. Some stages are carried out by men in the marketplace while women embroider at home. Male artisans cut out yellow paper templates which they glue onto velvet-like or satin-like fabrics (Figure 4). The best template cutters, such as Lahcen Moussaid, are creative artists who can make any design, but since tradition often influences choice, geometric and floral motifs continue to dominate. However, they are often combined in new ways and sometimes used for new functions which contribute to constantly changing styles and a bustling market. Peacocks, for example, have recently become fashionable on wedding items (Figures 4-6).

Although the embroidery technique is quickly learned in several days from a family member or a teacher, it is not quickly mastered (Figure 5). Embroiderers place the gold thread back and forth across the paper templates and secure it along the edges with a waxed thread on a second needle from underneath in what is called underside couching. When the embroidery is complete, it is returned to the market where men do the finishing, such as sewing slippers, seaming garments, and lining covers.

Several qualities of imitation gold thread which some consumers can detect are used today. Real gold dominated until about 1930 when machinery replaced human skills and drastically altered the economic base of the Jewish community as well as the cash-flow for the entire city.

Some embroiderers prefer doing gold thread embroidery because they can receive a steady income. They can embroider small, high-demand items such as the uppers on slippers in one day. Gold thread embroidery on large items such as garments, however, takes several months.

Gold thread embroidery is used for showy items and is especially prominent at weddings. A special henna set is used at one wedding party when the bride's hands are decorated with henna (Figures 5, 6). Included are pillow covers which are placed under the bride's elbows, a mendil or cloth, a sugar-cone cover, and a kleenex box which is one of several recent additions. At the main wedding reception, in a distinctly Fez tradition, brides and grooms are raised on trays covered with gold thread embroidered velvet for everyone to admire and applaud.⁶ Some brides wear a gold thread embroidered kaftan as one of their six to eight different bridal outfits.

SEWING MACHINE EMBROIDERY

Sewing machine embroidery is the newest, most varied, most responsive to new ideas, and probably the most economically significant. In contrast with Fez stitch and gold thread embroidery, sewing machine embroidery is not identified exclusively with Fez. Girls learn how to use sewing machines in about three months from teachers or manufacturers. The most popular styles are open-work and solid areas of color, called Rbati (Figures 8, 9). Both the applications and the artistic repertory of sewing machine embroidery are constantly evolving. Design sources are international; some are even copied from television. Embroiderers may work for merchants or be commissioned by consumers in their homes.

Many types of fabrics are decorated with sewing machine embroidery for many different purposes. Some items take only days to embroider, providing a steady income, while others require months. The most luxurious and desirable items include wedding dresses, tablecloths, and bed coverings.

ONE FAMILY OF EMBROIDERERS

One family of very modest means suggests how widespread embroidery is in Fez. Until her death in 1990, the widow Zineb Bennani lived with her two unmarried daughters on the ground floor of a traditional house, perhaps three hundred years old, in the medina. Her younger sister, who embroiders wedding kaftans with gold thread, lives upstairs with her family. Mrs. Bennani was an expert Fez stitch embroiderer (Figure 7). She learned in about three years when she was ten to twelve years old from a professional teacher in her home, around 1940. She continued to embroider for the teacher who gave her presents instead of money, which was considered dishonourable. Eventually, she started working on her own, making fashionable cushion covers. By the 1950s, she started doing "modern" items such as the sheets, tablecloths, and napkins that had been introduced by the French (Figure 3).

Typical of most embroiderers, Mrs. Bennani devoted mornings to housework and afternoons to embroidery, from two until ten as time and light allowed. She worked in the best light beside the open air courtyard.

Mrs. Bennani has four daughters, all of whom embroider. The oldest made Fez stitch embroidery until her prosperous husband made her stop because he did not want her to work. Her second daughter, twenty-five year old Fatiha, is married to a wood carver and has two young children (Figure 8). She can do three types of embroidery. She learned Fez stitch embroidery from her mother, beginning at age seven, and when she was old enough to use a sewing machine at age eleven or thirteen, she learned sewing machine embroidery. Later she learned the less popular Yugoslav embroidery. Fatiha never attended school. She says that she prefers sewing machine embroidery "because it is quick. Fez stitch is old and

good, but it is too slow."

Fatiha never sells in the market. She has sufficient orders from women who come to her house. Clients provide the ground fabric and embroidery thread, often in established color combinations although any color can be chosen. They select designs from her old samplers, other work, or graph paper designs. She says it is equally easy for her to copy designs from graph paper or from fabric, but it is hard to draw stitch patterns on graph paper.

Her fee is based on the density of the ground fabric and the number of skeins of embroidery thread needed to make a design. Fatiha also considers the ability of the client to pay. Ground fabrics with fine thread are more difficult to count and therefore more expensive than those with thick threads. The time required to complete a commission is affected not only by the ground fabric and the design, but also by the season. Fatiha averages about one skein of DMC thread a day in winter and two skeins a day in summer when daylight lasts longer.

The third daughter, twenty-two year old Naima, attended one year of school. At age fifteen, she paid a skilled woman nearby to teach her sewing machine embroidery, a process that took three months (Figure 8). At seventeen, she started to learn Fez stitch embroidery from her mother but did not like it. She knew that it bothered her mother's eyes and it hurt hers. She was afraid it would ruin her eyes so she stopped. Naima can also do gold thread embroidery.

Naima prides herself on doing good quality work. She refuses to work for shops because they sell poor quality work which she refuses to do. Her clients supply the cloth and the thread and she provides a variety of designs for them to choose from, on paper and on cloth. She is paid by the design, which implies time required, and works during the afternoons from about three to eight o'clock. Although she does not specialize, her most frequent orders are for open-work on long traditional dresses (Figure 9).

Naima prefers sewing machine embroidery over Fez stitch embroidery because the latter is too hard and takes too long to finish, and over gold thread embroidery because it is not paid as well.

The youngest daughter, seventeen year old Asma', is a slow learner. Nevertheless, she does medium quality gold thread embroidery on the uppers of slippers. She receives the necessary materials from a shop keeper and returns the finished embroidery to him for a modest payment.

As with many families, the income from embroidery is essential, although it is unlikely that embroiderers ever earn sufficient to actually support a family.

THE FUTURE OF EMBROIDERY IN FEZ

Who benefits, we might ask, from the embroidery in Fez? Both consumers and merchants seem to benefit. The answer, however, is far more complex for the embroiderers and related artisans, many of whom work long hours with little variety, year after year, and receive only small earnings. Yet for those with minimal education or lacking other skills, embroidery can provide a steady, albeit modest, income.

Whether training in embroidery and related skills should be recommended for the young of today and tomorrow is controversial and beyond my scope. One point, however, is clear; good quality embroidery cannot be equalled by existing machines.

Today, most women in Fez are discerning consumers since so many of them know how to embroider and use embroidered items daily. Knowledgeable consumers are essential to the continuance of embroidery. If, in the future, the number of discerning consumers decreases considerably, the quality will inevitably deteriorate, and eventually, embroidery will disappear, as it has in other cities in Morocco and elsewhere. In the meantime, many Fezis proudly acknowledge the stature of embroidery as a cultural symbol of Fez.

1. All information is from personal notes recorded daily in Fez in 1986, 1987, 1989, and 1990, with translations primarily by Amal Bennani Benghazi; from notes recorded daily by anthropologist Susan S. Davis in 1990; and from translated, taped interviews in 1990.

2. Impressive French scholarship earlier this century recorded textile and handicraft practices which provide invaluable references for evaluating change. They include:

Goichon, A. 1939 & 1940. "La broderie au fil d'or a Fez. Ses rapports avec la broderie de soie, ses accessoires de passementerie." Hesperis XXVI, XXVII.

Guerard, M. 1967, 1968. "Contribution a l'etude de l'art de la broderie au Maroc; Fez." Hesperis-Tamuda VIII: 5-22, IX: 123-155.

Jouin, J. 1932. "Les themes decoratifs des broderies marocaines." Hesperis XV: 11-51.

Jouin J. 1935. "Leur caractere et leurs origines, Chechaouen, Fes, Sale, Rabat et Meknes." Hesperis XXI: 149-161.

Stone, Caroline 1985. The Embroideries of North Africa. Harlow. Le Tourneau, Roger 1987 (1949). Fes avant le protectorat. Etude

economique et sociale d'une ville de l'occident musulman. Rabat: Editions La Porte.

Vicaire M. et Le Tourneau R. 1937. "La fabrication du fil d'or a Fes." Hesperis XXIV: 67-88.

3. Drawloom woven imitations have been woven since at least the early 1920s, see acc. no. 24.266, Batha Museum, Fez. Its streaked appearance suggests greater age. The drawloom is discussed in the paper by Lotus Stack.

4. For an illustration plus additional discussion, see, Mackie, Louise W. 1991. "The Threads of Time in Fez, Morocco." Rotunda, the magazine of the Royal Ontario Museum 24, 3: 18-23; *ibid* 1992. "New on Old, Handmade Textiles in Fez." Hali, The International Magazine of Fine Carpets and Textiles 66: 120-125.

5. Gold thread embroidery far surpassed all other exports around 1900. See Goichon 1939, 1940, and Vicaire and LeTourneau 1937.

6. Mackie 1992, p. 125.



Figure 1 Fez stitch embroidery, detail from sampler showing reversible front and back



Figure 2 Fez stitch teacher Mernissi, with student, measures to see if design is square

Figure 3 Fez stitch embroidered bedsheet set by Zineb Bennani

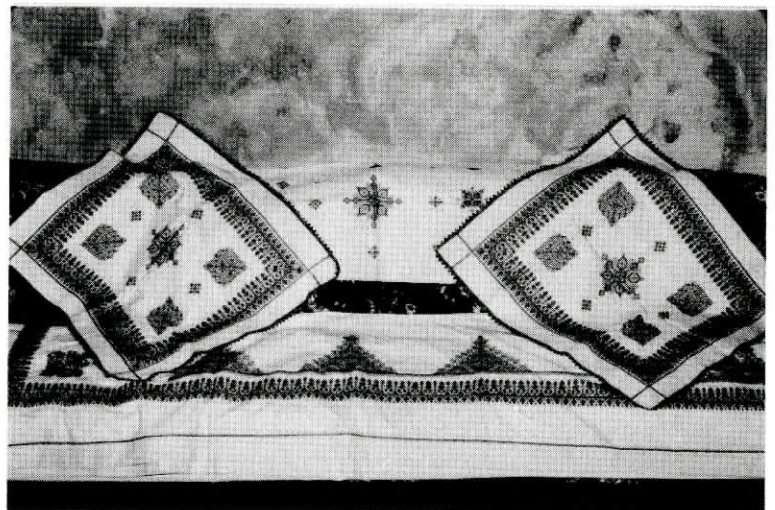




Figure 4 Gold thread
template cutter Lahcen
Moussaid holds kaftan
ready for embroiderer

Figure 5 Gold thread
embroiderer Khadija Naji
el Malki making cover for
henna set

Figure 6 Bride Myriam
having her hands
decorated with henna at a
wedding party, 1990



Figure 7 Fez stitch
embroiderer Zinib Bennani

Figure 8 Two sisters,
Fatiha doing Fez stitch
with child, and Naima at
sewing machine

Figure 9 Sewing machine
embroidery, detail of
open-work

Photos by L. W. Mackie
except Fig. 6 by F.
Sorber

