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## Trimmings in Fez Morocco

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### Introduction

Decorative finishes are an integral part of textiles in many traditional cultures, both past and present. Unfortunately they have often escaped the attention of textile scholars. Published material on detailed observation in the field is often lacking. However, research into trimmings can give valuable information on technological, social and economical aspects of a culture. The city of Fez is an excellent place to study the production and function of trimmings in an urban setting with a wide variety of crafts<sup>1</sup>.

### Types of trim made in Fez

Research into trimmings in Fez started with detailed field observation of a variety of techniques such as tabletweaving, fingerloop braiding, button making, fringe knotting and trim made and/or applied by tailors. Female and male artisans participate in the manufacture of trim. The trimmings consist of fringes, cords, braids and woven borders applied to many items of traditional costume, both male and female, to furnishings and to many items used in ceremonies like weddings and circumcisions.

The production and distribution of trimmings involves a complicated network of dealers, intermediaries, producers and consumers. Fez caters for different markets. The most fashionable products are destined to a wealthy urban clientele, both in Fez and in other major Moroccan cities. Often commissions are made to order. A lower grade of more or less mass produced items is destined to less wealthy clients both in the cities and in the villages influenced by urban trends. A small number of distinct items, like head decorations and belts is made for use in Berber costume in several rural areas of Morocco.

Within the limited framework of this presentation a complete survey of products and technologies currently used in Fez is impossible. Let us visit just a few of the many artisans scattered throughout the old city, the medina.

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to express gratitude towards all the artisans, dealers and consumers of Fez who willingly took time to share their knowledge, also towards M. Abdelali Tlemçani, Fez, Mrs Amal Bennani, Fez, and Ms. Leila Abouzeid, Rabat, who acted as consultants and translators.

### 1. Tabletweaving

About ten small workshops are said to be in business in Fez. In these the owner usually works with about 5 or 6 employees, some of them quite young. Apart from these workshops we were told about women exercising the craft in their homes. Contrary to the situation in other Moroccan cities like Sale, Meknes or Marrakech, where the weavers very visibly work in passementery shops, the Fassi weavers work outside the commercial areas of Fez. Their commissions come from trim dealers, gold embroidery patrons, tailors and the occasional private client.

Only a few types of trim are made : narrow borders to trim women's and men's jellabas, wider borders to trim the long hooded cape, the selham, and borders and fringes for upholstery, horse trappings, and many gold embroidered items like hennasets and pillows used for weddings.

The technology is relatively simple. The shed of the weave is always made with a set of plastic tablets with 4 holes (cut from vegetable oil bottles), through which the warp ends are threaded. Designs are created by using different colors in the warp, or by using only 3 warp threads per tablet. Designs with zigzag lines, diamonds and parallel stripes result from this technique. Fringes are made with highly overtwisted wefts (prepared by the weavers themselves). While weaving, loops are formed around a cord parallel to the warp. After removing the cord the loops twist.

### 2. Braiding

Diagonally braided borders are commonly used on women's lebsa outfits and on sofa pillows. Some of these are hand braided, some are produced on electrically powered braiding tables. Small square braids, now always mechanically produced, are used on a variety of traditional clothing. Larger handmade square braids are still used in women's gold belts and on the tassels used with doorcurtains. The handmade square braids are plaited with loose ends by male tassel, and belt makers. The handmade flat interlaced borders are made by women working in their homes. Currently only one structure, with a few variations, is made, using nine loops of twisted rayon. The women get commissions from tailors or passementery dealers. For one lebsa outfit they make several 2 to 2,5m lengths. The loops are kept under tension between a special tool and the fingers. Careful manipulation results in a structure resembling a twillweave. The colors can be arranged in different ways to create designs that are well known by many Fassi. Loopbraids were quite fashionable in the late 80's. Similar, though slightly different structures are made in workshops on braiding tables. Men and boys make small commissions, which means that the machines never reach high production figures. The customer pays about the same price for hand and machine made braids.



the thread wrapped elements decorating some of the women's jellaba's and lebsas.

### **7. Belts**

Metal thread belts consisting of wrapped and braided elements are fashionable throughout urban Morocco. They are sold in huge quantities in the areas where goldembroidery is sold. They are made in small workshops. Usually the belts consist of a number of wrapped elements. The core is often plastic tubing or copper wire.

In 1990 a central element consisting of wrapped cardboard squares was very fashionable. It superseded the knot designs, the latest cry in 1987.

### The use of trim on clothing and furnishing fabrics

The wealthy population of Fez values trim, that closely matches the fabrics to which it is applied. Through the intermediary of tailors, passementery dealers, furnishing makers and embroiderers, they place orders for trim that color coordinates exactly with the object purchased. This makes mass production an impossibility. Most of the trim has to be made to order, in small workshops involving manual or semi-industrialized processes. One of the most noticeable facts about the production is the infinite variety of designs, and the close link to fast changing fashions, especially in women's clothing. New fashions within the framework of traditional women's costume, are mainly determined by the trim decorating them.

Fashion trends are by no means new in Fez. Although information for previous centuries is scant, there is enough to show that fashions around 1900 were distinctly different from those in the 16th century. In his monograph 'Fez avant le Protectorat' (Rabat, 1987, p.500) Roger Le Tourneau states that the costumes are one of the few elements that changed dramatically in Fez between the 16th and 19th centuries.

### **1. Trim in the traditional room setting**

A traditional reception room includes door curtains and sofa's, lining the walls. Many houses and apartments, both old and modern have at least one traditional reception room. Depending on the wealth of the inhabitants this room is more or less ornate. Well to do Fassi have western style drawing rooms next to traditional ones. In the traditional room the doorcurtains and upholstery fabrics are made of silk or rayon fabrics with often with a design called behja, with carnations and crowns. The favorite colorarrangement is blue and white, with colorful flower designs. The sofa pillows and doorcurtains are decorated with tabletwoven or braided trim, and knotted tassels in matching colors. Fashion trends influence the shape and the decoration of the pillows. The older style of wide orange knotted borders on the sides of the

### **3. Knotting**

Knotted rayon fringes are used on sofa pillows and on many western items like bath towels. The knotting is done by women in their homes. They receive commissions from male and female tailors, passementery dealers, and the occasional private client. The knotted borders are sometimes done with the long warp ends from a handwoven textile, as in the drawloom woven weddingveils. More often they are made with separate color coordinated strands of rayon. The women work on a pillow on their lap, and use a pin to push the knots in place. Designs depend on the spacing of the knots and on the colors.

### **4. Tassel making**

Tasselmaking is a male occupation done in small workshops or even on the street. The equipment used is very simple. A working table with a post with nails to attach the work, a few sticks and needles and a tool to twist rayon are enough to start a business. Some artisans specialize in the small tassels used on women's jellaba hoods. The styles of these are subject to small variations. Bigger tassels are used on the hood of the long cloak, the selham. More intricate examples are used to end doorcurtain ropes, an item not very fashionable nowadays.

### **5. Buttons**

Almost all the hand sewn buttons used in Fez are made in the small town of Sefrou, about 30km east of Fez. Fassi passementery dealers and tailors place their orders with intermediaries in Sefrou, who distribute the work among the many women working in their homes. The needlemade buttons are made over paper cores. A large nail serves as a temporary support while needle weaving the rayon thread in a twill like structure over the core. A complete set of buttons for a lebsa outfit may take 150 or more buttons. A skilled worker makes a button in a few minutes. Different styles and sizes are available. The structure can be made in several colors. Sometimes the top of the button is decorated with a rosette of buttonhole stitches.

### **6. Sewn decorations**

Male and female tailors apply a wide variety of trimmings on traditional outfits. Some of these, like buttons, tassels and braids are ordered from other artisans, but many are made by the tailors themselves. The most noticeable is the warptwined edge used to link two pieces of fabric or to decorate a seam. An assistant, always a small boy, holds long looped ends of rayon thread over his fingers. By loop manipulation he creates a shed through which the tailor sews the thread used to connect fabrics or to decorate a seam. 2 to 8 loops are used. Loop manipulation is a boy's first introduction to the tailors craft. Another important aspect of the tailor's craft is the application of twined and braided cords in a variety of designs : straight lines, scrolls, circles, meanders and even large scale geometric and dagger designs. Tailors also make



large corner pillows, irrespective of the colors of the fabric, is now largely superseded by knotted borders in two or three colors matching the woven fabric.

## **2. Trim in women's garments (jellaba, lebsa outfits, khamis, belts)**

The Fassi woman of today has a variety of clothing styles to choose from. Many involve a mixture of traditional and western elements. Under the traditional outdoor garment, the jellaba a long straight dress with a hood, anything can be worn. From a stylish western outfit, over a traditional chemise, to a western nightgown with long pants. Especially the younger women may choose to go out in a jellaba one day, and adopt a western outfit the next. Though considered modest female attire now, older people remember the time when the jellaba was exclusively reserved for men's wear (as late as the thirties). Jellaba fashions for women center around the cut of the armhole, the width of the sleeve, the size of the hood and the kind and the amount of trim used. Tailors, both male and female have folders with photo's of different styles for the client to choose from.

Indoors women wear western clothing or long loose gowns with long sleeves, the khamis. Fashionable khamis of the late 80's are decorated with needlelace, mainly coming from Oudjda, a border town with Algeria, or with machine embroidery.

Khamis are usually worn with a belt, often in gold embroidery or braided and wrapped gold elements. These belts are also used with the formal festive lebsa or mensouria outfit.

Traditional lebsa outfits, are subject to fast changing fashions in Fez. Even in the short time span of our investigations (1987-1990) changes in the fashion scene were noticeable. The types of goldthread belts though on first sight similar in 1987 and 1990, were distinctly different for the local clients. Differences were mainly due to small alterations in design and workmanship introduced by the producers. There is a high level of general awareness about new trends. These spread fast, even without the help of fashion or women's magazines. A relatively new influence is Moroccan television. But there are many more traditional ways to spread new trends. Large wedding parties both in Fez and in other towns, mainly Casablanca, where many Fassi families have relatives, constitute a real season of partying for many urban Moroccan women. The weddings are the perfect occasion to see and be seen in the latest attire, which is most certainly discussed among the female guests. Fabrics purchased abroad, mainly in France, or during the pilgrimage in Mecca come up in conversations. So do the necklines of the outfits and the type of trim. Within the simple frame of the lebsa or mensouria outfit, a long caftan, under a second semitransparent caftan with sideslits, worn with a belt, infinite variation is possible. An outfit a few years old, such as the attendants of the ngaffa, the master of ceremonies, will often wear, is easily spotted as out of fashion. In the season of 1990 V-necks with narrow trim were definitely out. Round necks with



very wide braided bands were the latest thing. Skilful artisans and dealers constantly invent new things, or try to pick the right moment to reintroduce old styles.

### **3. Trim in men's garments (jellaba, selham, gandoura, kiswa tlatia)**

Fassi men rarely adopt completely traditional outfits nowadays. Even at weddings or for the weekly prayer on Friday only older men are seen in jellabas, with tarboosh (Fez) hats and yellow pointed slippers. The younger generation prefers western clothing, sometimes with the occasional traditional element like a selham, long hooded cloak worn over a western business suit. Notable exceptions are the Fez tourist guides, who almost uniformly adopt a white jellaba, red tarboosh and yellow slippers, hotel attendants who wear a more or less fancy version of a traditional three piece suit with baggy trousers, a vest and a short jacket, and some of the workshop owners involved in the production of traditional garments. Even at his wedding the groom only wears a jellaba and slippers for one short section of the ceremony. The long straight jellaba with a hood is less subject to fashion changes than the woman's jellaba. Men's jellaba's are often made of plain handwoven woollen fabrics or of striped wool and silk or wool and rayon fabrics, handwoven in Fez. Gray, white, brown, dark blue are the usual colors. A heavier jellaba may be worn over a finer one as a coat. The trim made by the tailors is sophisticated but simple, and very much like the trim on 19th century men's garments. Narrow loopbraided finishes and a few handmade buttons are the only decoration. The 3 piece suit, kiswa tlatia, consists of a vest and short jacket and short baggy trousers. These outfits can be bought ready made in the shops. Usually they are made in lightweight cotton fabrics in white, light blue or grey. Sought after is handwoven striped cotton fabric from Egypt, purchased during the pilgrimage to Mekka, for superior tailor made outfits. The 3 piece outfit is worn for informal occasions at home. The decoration on the 3 items of the suit involves a lot of applied cords in intricate designs. The suits are made in bright colored woollen fabrics for hotel attendants. 30 to 40 years ago these were still in general use and even exported to West Africa. Similar outfits are known from 19th century Algeria and Tunisia.

Gandoura are long rectangular dresses with the arm openings in the side seams. They are made out of lightweight fabrics. The arm openings and the neck slit are decorated with applied cords or needle made lace from Oudjda. The Gandoura is an informal house dress, available in many qualities.

The long hooded cloak, known in the west as the burnous, and locally as selham, is seen in Fez streets in the winter months. High quality selham are made to order from handwoven woollen fabrics that are woven to shape and purchased on markets in the Middle Atlas region. The trim consists of a

large tassel for the hood, tabletwoven bands to trim the seams and the hood, handmade buttons and loopbraided cords. A few dealers in the passementery area of the medina specialize in sets of trim for selham, in different price ranges. Selham have always attracted the attention of western visitors, who often adopted them as part of their costume. Several 19th century examples of urban Moroccan selham are preserved in European museum collections. They show that the current production is somewhat coarser. But all the trim elements found in the 19th century are still used today.

### Conclusion

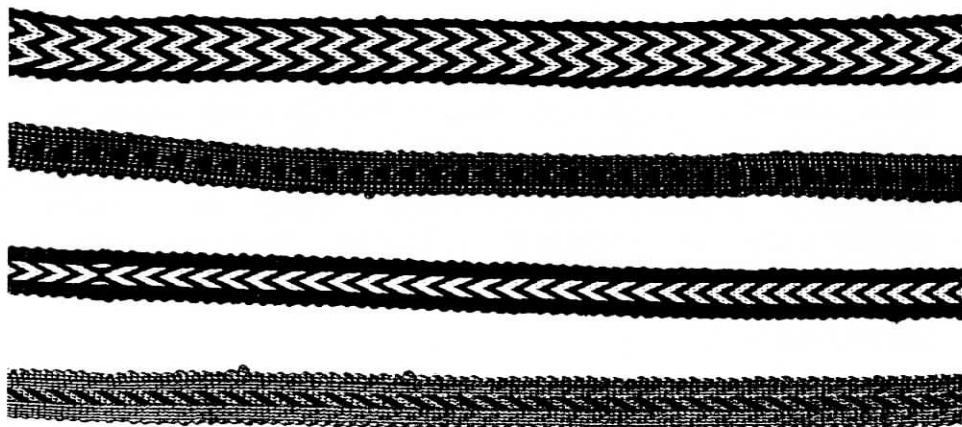
In many ways, studying passementery in Fez, was like witnessing a survival of practices long obsolete in many other cultures. But it also shows that in the unique settings of the old and the modern town of Fez, the trimmings successfully manage to combine age old traditions with new fashion trends. As long as the wealthy inhabitants of Fez continue to see traditional objects as a vital element of their culture, the crafts of Fez have a future. The key factor to maintain or improve on high standards of workmanship however, is not only the appreciation of a wealthy, trend setting clientele, but also the ability to recognize and demand quality. As soon as the client loses the ability to judge the quality of the product offered, the standards of workmanship will inevitably decline.

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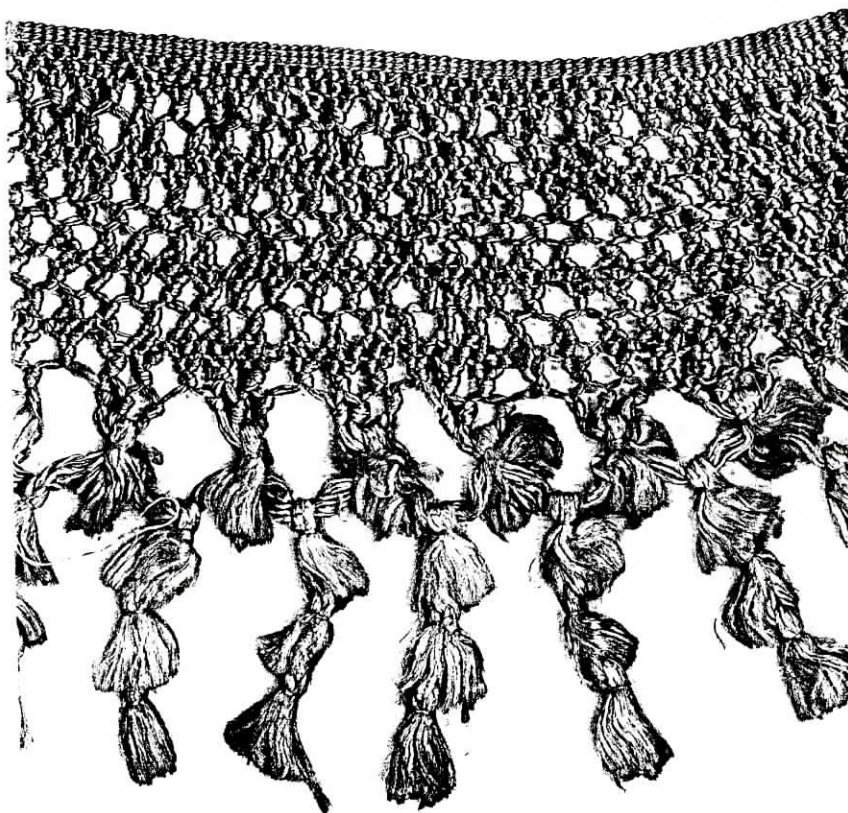
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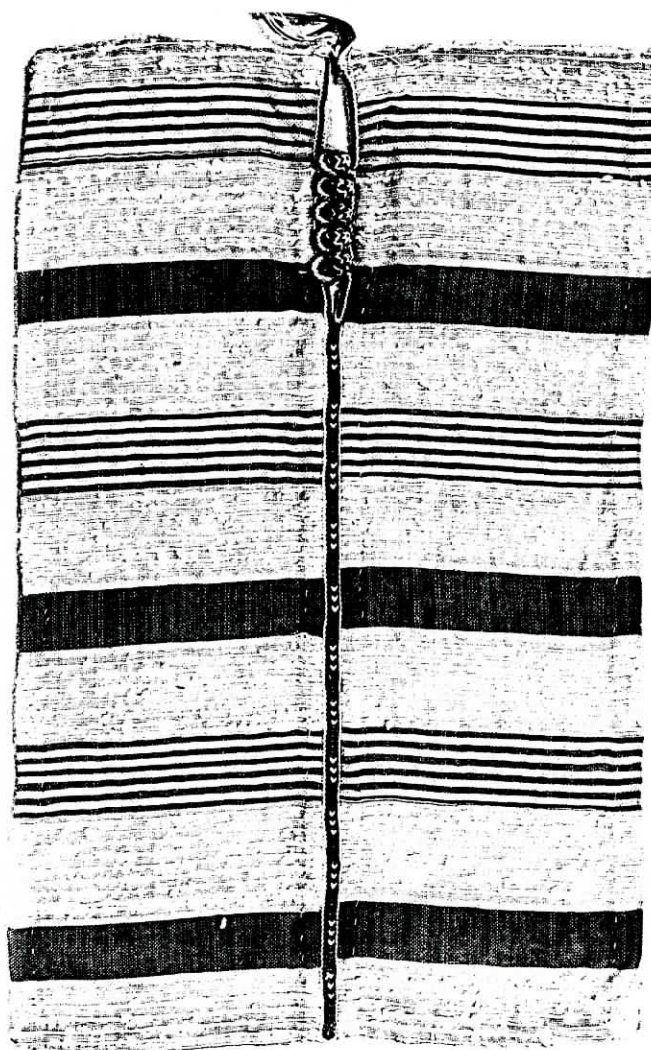
Tabletwoven bands, Fez, 1989



Knotted fringe for a pillow, Fez, 3/4 20th century

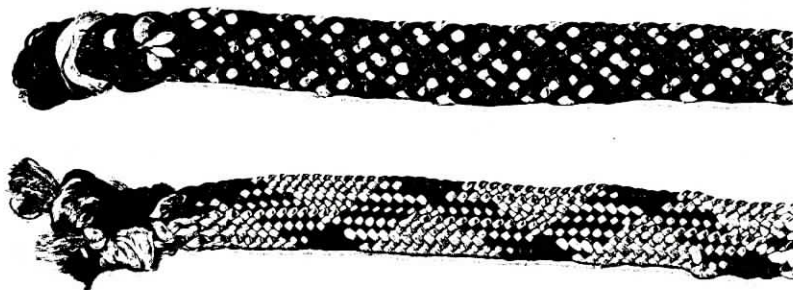


A button on its temporary metal support. Also shown are some paper cores. Sefrou, 1989



Sample of the loopbraided sewing techniques used on men's jellabas, Fez, 1987

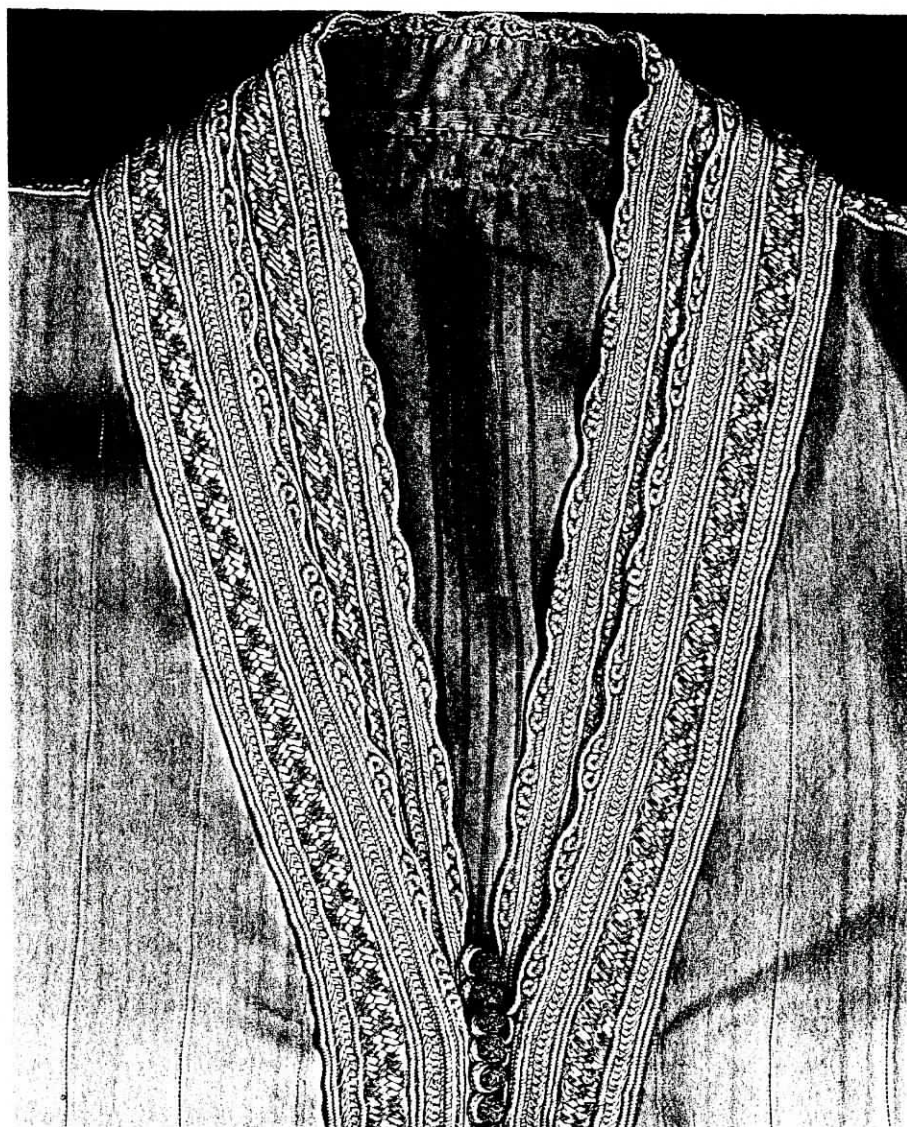




Samples of loopbraided bands, Fez, 1989



Neckline of a woman's kaftan, Fez, 1990  
A double loopbraided band and several twined cords are  
handsewn onto the rayon fabric.



Neckline of a woman's lebsa outfit, Fez, about 1980-1985  
Narrow loopbraide bands and plied cords are handsewn onto the  
rayon fabric



