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Handweaving in the Everyday Life of Artisans, Merchants and Consumers in Fez, Morocco, in the 1980's

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My original desire to study an urban center which still produced elaborate handmade textiles was to provide some possible clues to more seriously consider the practical side of historic production. In other words, what were the physical concerns and limitations of cloth production. In the end I learned that textiles often function in a very complex, multidimensional form and cannot be truly understood without considering many facets of the society which produced them. Conversely, in societies where textiles are highly valued, their study can add much to understanding everything from cultural values, economics and technology to international politics.

In addition to the obvious subject of this paper, handweaving in everyday life of artisans, merchants and consumers in Fez, my object in this presentation is twofold. First I would like to help form a better understanding of the degree of specialization and complexity of cloth in a society which has traditionally depended upon handwoven production. Secondly I would like to provide a basic knowledge, a certain degree of comfort, and thus an appreciation about drawlooms and the fabrics produced by them. The means I have chosen to achieve this two point agenda is to introduce three weaving workshops which were active in the late 1980's in the old city of Fez, Morocco, noting the physical surroundings and learning of the weavers' training as well as their business concerns. We will conclude our exposure in the textile showroom of an old, well established crafts family that has successfully made the transition to industrial production while still maintaining much of the essence of the Moroccan cloth tradition.

As noted in the foregoing papers presented on this panel, Fez is an urban center which has long been associated with cloth production. During the 14th century when it was considered second only to Cairo in the Moslem world, Ibn Abi Zar¹ a contemporary writer cites documents that indicate that as early as the 12 century the city already had over 3,000 looms while a 16th century account, written shortly after the Andulian migration, states that there were 20,000 textile workers in the city.² Even today when most of the world's cloth is produced industrially the Handweavers Cooperative Association, a government sponsored organization supporting commercial handwoven production has a sizeable membership. This organization represents only the weavers who take advantage of group purchase of weaving threads and group marketing practices. The president of the association is Haj Tahar Hajoui who has a small workshop not far from Fez's famous tanneries.

Like most craft workshops in Fez, Haj Tahar's space is relatively small, but fully utilized. At the time of our visits in 1989 and 1990, two looms were in constant use. Both were counterbalance mechanisms with four shafts which were used to create a plain-weave fabric. The fabric is woven in standard lengths which are used to make up the *djelaba*, a man's traditional long coat. Haj Tahar Hajoui's workshop is known for this type of fine quality fabric. The top grade is woven of wool and silk threads and produced on a counterbalance loom, which because of the width of the cloth, requires two weavers. The plain woven cloth is composed of weft bands which appear as vertical stripes when made up into the *djelaba*. The width and spacing of the stripes have been associated with patterns favored by men of varying age. Traditionally it was the older men who wore the broader striped pattern while the younger men preferred a design of thin stripes. However today this is not a compelling tradition and younger men who want to be more closely associated with the national traditions of Morocco will wear the more respected wider striped pattern.

Like business men the world over, Haj Tahar Hajoui is concerned with problems related to supply and quality of raw material such as imported and domestic threads, skilled, motivated labor, and of course, an ever changing market. The *bzioui djelaba* fabric is the finest quality fabric woven in this workshop. It is made of a plied silk and wool warp thread, imported most frequently from Italy, and both silk and wool weft. The silk weft is also imported, while the wool weft is frequently handspun by Moroccan women. The two types of handspun wool thread, one a fine, even thread and the other a textured thread called *hubba* can be purchased in the morning on given days in a special local market, whereas the imported threads are obtained from the omnipresent "middle man." Haj Tahar Hajoui regrets the need of the importer, but realizes he doesn't have enough capital to place a sufficiently large order with foreign thread manufacturers. Two of the three weavers he currently employs have worked with him for many years, but he feels that many of the textile workers have lost a sense of responsibility in relation to quality production. Haj Tahar's same concern for quality is reflected in his view that for the most part Morocco's handwoven exports are of poor to medium quality and therefore do not represent the best of the country's traditional skills and ultimately will give Moroccan cloth a poor international reputation.

The other loom in use in Haj Tahar's workshop employs a fly shuttle attachment. This equipment is not geared to handle the sensitive wool and silk warp used to weave the finest fabrics, but is utilized to great advantage to produce a moderate priced fabric which is usually made with a fine polyester warp and frequently a rayon or synthetic weft. The stronger warp tolerates the rougher mechanical action of this loom and the fly shuttle permits the weaving of a wide width of fabric by just one weaver. Indeed it is this loom which keeps handweaving a viable occupation in Fez today. Apprentice weavers, who learn their skills in workshops like Haj Tahar's, can progress in their profession by purchasing newly constructed, counterbalance, fly shuttle looms and then rent work space in a weaving coop building.

Like many of the city's weavers, Haj Tahar's employees are paid by the piece. He provides the equipment and materials and is responsible for sale of the finished cloth. The independent weaver who rents space in the weaving coop buildings and is responsible for only his own production will purchase his own materials, often from the government sponsored weaving cooperative. The workshop owner as well as the independent weaver usually do their work on a commission basis either from individuals or sometimes from retail stores. Frequently workshops and independent weavers have special relationships with specific retailers. For instance, Haj Tahar's son Dris owns a shop in the cloth section of the Medina area of Fez where he specializes in *djelaba* fabrics. Dris's customers can choose from a variety of woven fabrics or can order cloth woven to their specifications. Another option for the weaver is to sell to the weavers' cooperative which in this instance functions as a "middle man" between the producer and retailer.

Although there is a variety of handwoven cloth made in Morocco today, the heart and soul of the better production appears to be connected with *djelaba* fabric. At this time, the *djelaba* is closely identified with Moroccan nationalism and cultural pride and therefore is a very popular garment. Even though many *djelaba*'s are also made of commercial fabric, it seems likely that as long as traditional values are honored the "simple" counterbalance handloom and the plain woven fabrics they produce will continue to be made in Fez for sometime to come.

Unfortunately the same cannot be assumed for the more complex fabrics of Fez and the equipment which is traditionally used to produce them. The Berber sashes and scarfs which were traditionally woven by the urban Arab weavers of Fez are now produced primarily in industrial mills. We found only three workshops with a total of five looms which were still making this cloth. The loom used by these weavers is similar to the counterbalanced one used by the *djelaba* weavers with some modifications made due to the different format and structure of the finished cloth. As the fabric is not so wide, the loom is narrower. The loom has also been elongated to accommodate the double warp and extra shafts required for the twill pattern. It is interesting to note that the change in size of the loom will affect the dimensions and utilization of workshop space. Whereas Haj Tahar and other *djelaba* weavers appeared to favor square or horizontal footage, weavers working on looms with extended warps seemed to prefer longer, rectangular rooms. All three workshops were housed in the same building which rented out space, primarily to textile concerns.

These Berber fabrics were traditionally made of silk, but today are woven of a black synthetic primary warp and a dark red, yellow, and green rayon weft with the addition of a yellow rayon supplementary warp. Occasionally there were special orders for pieces made with a silk weft. Because silk was not readily available in a variety of colors and the weavers did not have the capital to invest in extra materials, special commissions were dyed to order. The building's central courtyard could be used for this activity and thus production was centered in one

area. I do not know if all of these weavers knew how to use the chemical dyes which were employed, but in the situation we observed the procedure was done by a weaver. I also observed a drawloom weaver space dye a warp for a commission. He also did the dying in his workshop, heating the water in a pail on a small propane burner. The procedure was not particularly "scientific." In neither case were the dyes exhausted and color was achieved when it looked "right."

My initial fascination with Morocco and the city of Fez was the use of the drawloom. This type of loom is a very sophisticated piece of weaving equipment and is the result of hundreds of years of technological development. In the very simplest terms it is composed of at least two mechanical units which control warp threads as the pattern and cloth structure are developed. Each unit operates independently but when action is coordinated the production of elaborately patterned fabric with a complex cloth structure is possible. Abdelkadir Oragli owns the only remaining drawloom workshop which exists solely on handloom production. He weaves on a commission basis and much of the *lampus* fabric he creates is in direct competition with industrially produced cloth which is readily available and sells for the same price per meter. The major exception is the traditional Fez wedding veil which continues to be handwoven.

However it is the highly patterned upholstery fabric which is used in the traditional Fez living room which was the stock and trade of the drawloom weaver. During the latter part of this century the *behja* pattern has been particularly popular. Even though Abdelkadir has simplified this design so it now can be woven on a loom using only one drawboy rather than two, he finds it extremely difficult to compete with industrial production. In addition to the extra labor costs and the lack of capital to purchase weaving threads other than on a per commission basis, Abdelkadir is also handicapped by the diminishing availability of skilled labor. Drawboys, the artisans who control the pattern mechanism on the loom, are no longer being trained and so there are only a few older workers available. Ultimately these conditions have put Abdelkadir, the last remaining independent drawloom weaver, in a position that he can not match the quality of production of the jacquard woven product.

As has been mentioned previously, many Moroccans are motivated by a concern to maintain traditional aspects of their cultural when they purchase textiles and continue to favor designs which have been in Morocco for much of this century. They are discerning buyers and are able to judge the refinement of a piece of cloth, even though they don't know the specific loom on which it was woven. Due to the competition of traditionally patterned jacquard fabrics, the drawloom will soon become a venerated historical tool rather than the honored economically viable technology which it has been in Fez for hundreds of years.

Othman ben Cherif and his uncle Abdelkarim own a large textile showroom in the new city of Fez which specializes in upholstery fabric. Members of their family have been weaving for well over a hundred years, and in fact the ben Cherifs' are among the very few weavers who have made a successful transition into the industrial age. Othman's father and uncle were drawloom weavers who almost went out of business from the pressure of French imports between WW I and WW II and greatly prospered with the rise of Moroccan nationalism during the late 1940's and 1950's. By the early 1960's they had four workshops which employed over 60 weavers and yet were not able to keep pace with demand. With Moroccan independence and the country's greater involvement with the western world, the ben Cherif brothers realized that they must industrialize their production. In 1966 they purchased a few used jacquard looms from France. Over the last 25 years they have totally modernized production and today they own the latest computer operated jacquard looms which produce designs suited to Moroccan tastes. Othman ben Cherif was trained as a child to operate a drawloom and although today he is the manager of the very modern fabric showroom in Fez, he still honors the handloom tradition. Off the courtroom area of the building four drawlooms are kept operational. Occasionally experimental designs are tried out on these looms before industrial production is begun and periodically small special orders are made. Often one loom is used to fulfill special orders from the king who frequently gives handmade objects as diplomatic gifts to visiting dignitaries.

It is likely that textiles will continue to be an important product of Fez, but it is impossible to tell how long handloom weaving will be able to hold its own in the urban environment. At this point it is likely that within a very short time none of the weavers using the more sophisticated looms will be able to earn a living. At the present time there is a demand for handwoven plain-weave cloth which provides a living for numerous craftsmen. It is likely that the market will remain viable for a number of years and at least this form of handwoven fabric will exist until the 21st century.

1. Lopez, Robert S. and Raymond, Irving W. (no date) Medieval Trade In The Mediterranean World: Illustrative Documents Translated with Introductions and Notes. (Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies. Edited under the auspices of the Department of History, Columbia University) p. 75. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

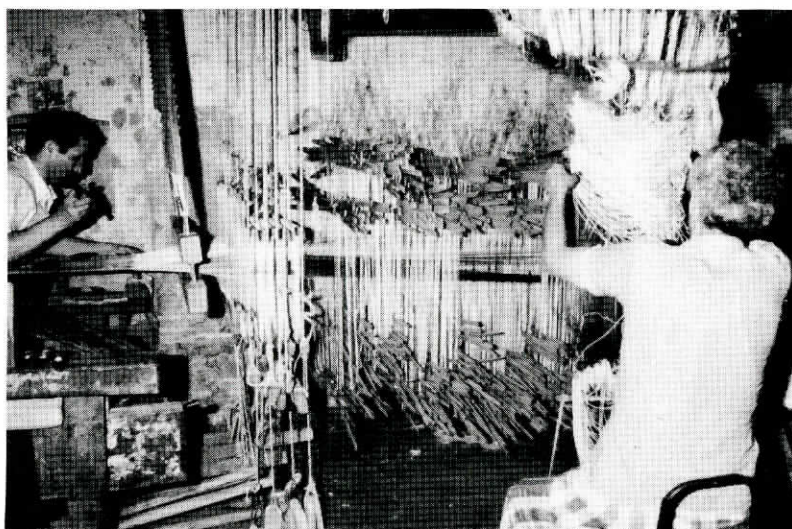
2. Tourneau, Roger Le. 1961 (second printing 1974). Fez In The Age of The Marinides. (Translated from the French by Besse Alberta Clement) p. 89. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.



Illustrations:

Historically the drawloom has been used to weave Morocco's most sophisticated patterned fabrics. Lampus is the favored structure and the cloth is traditionally used for everything from elaborate belts and caftans to fine upholstery fabric. This 1960's caftan fabric was woven to shape in one of the ben Cherif workshops. The belt, which is older, is also associated with the ben Cherif weaving family who produced many different patterns in this style.

The *behja* upholstery fabric was inspired by 18th and 19th century French brocaded imports. Moroccan weavers knowing that their clientele favored a heavier fabric adapted the pattern to a lampus structure. It has been exceedingly popular at several times during this century and its use is frequently considered a symbol of Moroccan patriotism.



Illustrations:

The drawloom most frequently used in Fez today employs three harnesses to create a lampus fabric with a 4.1 satin ground and a 1.4 pattern tiedown. The cloth is woven face down with the back of the fabric visible to the weaver. The first two harnesses are controlled by the weaver's feet depressing selected treadles. The first harness which is closest to the weaver controls the tiedown warp which secures the pattern weft in place. Individual shafts are lowered as required by the structure. The second harness controls the ground warp and individual shafts are raised as required by the structure. The third, or pattern harness, is controlled by the drawboy who pulls a series of separate cords as required by the pattern. These cords are attached to individual shafts which rise when activated by the drawboy. The interaction of all the harnesses is controlled by the weaver as he interlaces the weft with the warp.

