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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Fish in the desert – North Africa’s textile tradition between indigenous identity and exogenous shifts in meaning

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Nowadays, even people living in remote areas are experiencing changes to their lives that are not only radical and far-reaching but are also occurring at an ever faster pace. In these regions, as elsewhere, the need to adapt to new economic and living conditions, obligatory school attendance, satellite television, the internet, tourism and the ubiquitous availability of mostly imported industrial products shapes people’s needs and desires, while also influencing their aspirations and values. Not only in the urban centres of North Africa, but also in the mountain villages and oases, ancient knowledge seems to be disappearing and the interest of young people in their local traditions is fading away. Even in those places where the most important North African handicraft sector - the knotting, weaving and embroidering of textile fabrics - is still being passed on to the younger generation by grandmothers and mothers, the techniques and patterns, and the meanings associated with them, are undergoing change. The altered living conditions, the different sources of income and new educational structures result in people producing fewer and fewer carpets, blankets or clothing for their own use. Around the mid-20th century, the female-dominated domestic craft industry of Tunisia and Morocco saw an increasing trend towards market production. The state co-operatives that were established in many rural areas during that period succeeded in ensuring the preservation of local handicraft traditions, but owing to the regulation, standardisation and commercialisation of their products under the auspices of the *Offices nationaux de l’Artisanat*, which introduced state-approved quality seals, they left little scope for vitality and authenticity in the textiles created.¹

It is such authentic textiles that will be considered here. They are textiles steeped in tradition, suffused with historical references, fulfilling changed functions, and they are, above all, textiles possessing *baraka*, a force of blessing. Ultimately, all these factors mean that each of these individually made products is a component in a complex, religiously reflective world view and global context.

Upon closer observation, it is clear that continuity and change are always interconnected, and that those life strategies and life journeys are successful in which traditions do not ‘congeal’ but develop in an innovative way. It is equally evident that radical breaks with history and traditions can lead to a sense of rootlessness and a feeling that the material world, and earthly existence itself, has lost its soul. Finally, we can also observe the fascinating process through which these textile creations “become art” within the broader semantic framework of the

¹ Silvia Dolz, Produkte des textilen Frauenhandwerks aus Tunesien im kulturellen und historischen Vergleich, *Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde Dresden*, 50 (1999), 23. Abdelkebir Khatibi and Ali Amahan, *From Sign to Image: The Moroccan Carpet* (Casablanca: Lak International Edition, 1995), 28.

Western or European concept of art and in a completely open culture-historical and geographical environment.

Today, we are vaguely aware that the cultural diversity of the Maghreb is based on very old knowledge traditions, which have continually incorporated innovative technical and material developments and intellectual ideas. Yet we have merely fragmentary knowledge of the specific ways in which this transfer has taken place. This not only applies to what is presumably the oldest settlement layer dating back to the Garamantes, Numidians and Libyans (c.3000 BCE), who are regarded as the ancestors of the population group known today as “Berbers.”² It is equally true as regards the Phoenician-Carthaginian (11th-2nd cent. BCE) and Roman civilisations (2nd cent. BCE-5th cent. CE), and even to the Islamic era (since the 7th cent. CE), which is not only associated with a religious doctrine but is also a major sociocultural factor. Over the past 1300 years of the Islamic period alone, the Maghreb has been influenced by the very diverse cultural features of the Arab (Kharijites 8th-10th cent., Aghlabids 9th-10th cent., Fatimids 10th-12th cent.), the Berber Almoravid (11th-12th cent.), Almohad (12th-13th cent.) and Marinid (13th-15th cent.), the Moorish-Andalusian (13th-15th cent.) and the Turkish-(Anatolian)-Ottoman (15th-19th cent.) periods in the Maghreb. The graphic symbols of an ancient Libyan script, which later developed into *Tifinagh*, the alphabet of the *Imazighen*, survived into the modern era.³ The Jews who settled in North Africa from the 1st century CE onwards brought their own religious symbolism with them.⁴ Traces were also left by Christian Byzantium under Emperor Justinian (6th century), resulting in Greek and Coptic cultural elements. Contacts between north-western Africa and the regions south of the Sahara date back as far as the 5th century BCE, intensified with the expansion of trans-Sahara trade around the start of the Common Era, and led to intensive cultural exchange in the Islamic period.⁵ Finally, mention should also be made of European influence in the modern era, beginning with Portuguese and Spanish maritime trade (starting in the 15th century) on the coasts of North Africa.

All these cultural phenomena left their traces, especially in North African textiles, one of the most important mobile material artefacts testifying to urban and rural culture over the centuries. What makes North African textiles such a precious cultural asset is not only their functional diversity: carpets and flat woven fabrics as floor coverings, seating mats or sleeping rugs, partition walls or even accommodation (nomad tents), prayer rugs and coverings for holy sites, ritual textiles associated with the circle of life (birthing sheets, wedding veils and death shrouds), bags (transportation and storage sacks), horse equipment (saddle blankets) and finally clothing. Their inestimable value lies in the stories that these textiles narrate through their motifs and patterns, which display an infinite range of compositions and colour variations, including pictograms and figures from many periods and all areas of life.

² The foreign term “Berber” refers to an ethnic group in northern and north-western Africa that is both socially and culturally highly heterogeneous. These communities originally belonged to a single language family and are regarded as the indigenous population. They generally identify themselves as *Imazighen* (plural of *Amazigh*). Although islamised, they have an important peculiarity: their religious tradition involves the veneration of local saints, a phenomenon known as maraboutism, which centres on old schools and tombs (called *marabout* or *zawiya*) associated with revered scholars and saints.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Angelika Tunis, *Juden und Germanen im Maghreb al-Aqsa*. In: Kurt Rainer, *Marokko – mon amour. Glanzvolle Textil-Tradition im Königreich Marokko* (Graz: Culture and more, 2005), 19-25.

⁵ Christopher Spring and Julie Hudson, *North African Textiles* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 11-25.

Life cycle and status

The women of the Nafzawa oases in southern Tunisia produce shawls and cloaks for various periods of life which indicate the status of the wearer: as a young woman of marriageable age, as a bride during the wedding phase, as a mother, or as a revered elderly woman. Particularly colourful shawls with rich patterns incorporating individual ideas are used for the most important event in life – the wedding. The images symbolise change and transition, movement and rhythm, growth and balance. These emotions and conditions are reflected in (often narrative) design elements, such as certain compositions, symmetry and colour. Realistic individual motifs, and abstracted versions of them, in repeated geometric shapes have a high symbolic value as magical or ritual elements. They are bearers of *baraka*, the power of blessing. These include the “fish,” “snake” and “scorpion,” as well as the “hand” and “eye.”

Woman's shawl *bahnug* from Sened, Gafsa region, Tunisia, around 1980, 134 x 121 cm, made by Taguta Nasri, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden (MVD) 72782

Such symbols are meant to protect against the “Evil Eye,” i.e. envious looks and misfortune; they are a reminder of the constant presence of danger, chaos and struggle in life. Good fortune, prosperity and fertility, on the other hand, are associated with the “fish” or the (mostly eight-pointed) “star,” and these powerful symbols are indispensable at weddings. The fish is associated with water, the essential elixir of life; like the star, it stands for growth and harmony in life. Thus, these two motifs are among the protective symbols known from prehistoric or pre-Islamic times throughout the Mediterranean region.⁶ Although it is fervently wished for at every wedding, motherhood is rarely depicted in the way it is on the carpet fragment produced by the Rehamna of Morocco. The rhythmic pattern of contractions

⁶ Paul Vandenbroeck, *Azetta – L'art des femmes berbères* (Amsterdam, Bruxelles: Ludion Gand, 2000), 219. Edward Alexander Westermarck, *Ritual and belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926), vol.1: 64, 96, vol.2: 49, 252.

during labour – represented by a series of lozenges – symbolises not only movement and change, but even creation of life itself. In the textile fabric, the weaver or knotter manifests her destiny and the structure of her life cycle.

Knotted pile carpet fragment with birth scene, Rehamna, Plains around Marrakech, Morocco, 1910-1920, MVD, 87616

Worldview and religiosity

The textile becomes a testimony to a specific worldview in the context of divine mystery. Religiosity permeates all phases and aspects of life. The inexpressible is encoded in symbols. Through the repetition of motifs, an illusion is created and transcendence becomes tangible. The henna-painted shawls of the Feija in the central Anti-Atlas region of Morocco are used by the *Chorfa*, the descendants of saints, to concentrate *baraka* and achieve maximum protection. They are produced for the shrine of the marabout Beni Yâacoub in Imi n'Tatelt but are also sold from there. They seem to be painted quite intuitively with henna, the beneficial “herb of Paradise”, and are worn by the bridal couple at every wedding. Motifs such as the “sandals of the Prophet,” the “gate” *bab*, “moon” and “star” constitute coded symbols which create a connection with the divine.⁷ Many of these symbols derive from pre-Islamic ideas and have a multicultural background. That which is ingrained in the collective consciousness as having proven useful and beneficial over long time periods is often continued in new social, political and religious contexts. For example, the *bab* symbol can be traced to an ancient Libyan or Tifinagh glyph corresponding to the letter “B.”

⁷ Annette Korolnik-Andersch and Marcel Korolnik, *Die Farbe Henna. Bemale Textilien aus Süd-Marokko* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, Art Publishers, 2002), 39, 64-65, 68-110, 131-135.

Left: Headscarf adrar with bab (gate) motif, Erkoune, Feija area, Southern Morocco, around 1930, 118 x 66 cm.
 Right: Headscarf adrar with itri (star) symbols, Imi n'Tatelt, Feija area, Southern Morocco, around 1930, 100 x 62 cm
 (both Collection Annette Korolnik)

Orientation in life

Contemplation and quiet provide orientation in life, which is also interpreted as spatial orientation. Edification, wellness and cheerfulness are associated with the Garden of Eden, but also with earthly gardens. This includes architecture (the dwelling house, the mosque, the *qubba* or shrine), which demarcates a safe space.

Wedding planket tahdicht, Erkoune, Feija area, Southern Morocco, around 1950, 145 x 315 cm (Collection Annette Korolnik)

Design elements mostly incorporate symmetry or balance between composition and colours. Floral motifs, which are often derived from the eight-pointed star (originally based on the Seal of Solomon), the flower garden with pools and watercourses, the tree (the tree of life, date palm), birds and gazelles stand for harmony between culture and nature.

Left: Knotted pile carpets zarbiya with star or floral motifs (Jasmin flower), Gafsa, Tunisia, second half 20th cent., 232 x 126 cm, MVD 72879

Right: Flatwoven rug margum with patterns of gazelles, fish and tree of life, Tafertaset, Tunisia, around 1990, 222 x 107 cm, MVD 72781

Beauty and aesthetic excellence

Beauty and aesthetic excellence for the pleasure of God and as an incentive to stimulate the highest level of human creativity are evident in the “parade textiles” influenced by the Middle East. These are mostly knotted carpets intended for display, which were used by wealthy families and were laid out in mosques. With their hybrid floral and geometric symbols, they emphasise and exalt fundamental aspects of life, such as birth and death, marriage, the relationship between nature and culture, and divinity. Their designs feature frames and the careful structuring of patterns, as well as the balanced use of colours.

Knotted pile carpet with multicolored aprons, Chiadma or Oulad Bou Sbaa near Essaouira, Morocco, First quarter of 20th cent., 363 x 149 cm, MVD 82738

Individual creativity

Individual creativity seems almost to burst out of some of these textile works. They are made in Morocco and Tunisia for the producers’ own use. Some of the “wild” compositions show their makers to have given free rein to their imagination, experimenting with possibilities,

taking risks and expressing their curiosity or simple joy in making them. Often several women would work together on one item as a social activity, chatting and joking and apparently letting things take their course, curious to see what the final result would look like.

Left: Flatwoven rug with pieces of knotted pile, Rehamna, Morocco, 1940-1950, 166 x 435 cm, MVD 82886
Right: Carpet, Rehamna, Plains around Marrakech, Haouz region, Morocco, early 20th cent., collection Annette Korolnik

Abstract archetypal symbols are nearly always present. They concentrate magical powers and are known throughout all the different regions of North Africa as signs of protection (the “hand” with its symbolic meaning of “*khamisa*/five,” “star,” “eye/amulet”). The loss of meaning of certain signs and patterns is compensated for by local experiences of life and the environment. Thus, new symbols come into being, such as a coloured embroidered motif on the south Tunisian *melhafa* (a wrap-around robe worn by women) that can be identified as representing the footprints of desert animals in Sahara sand, or the Solomon’s seal motif (star), which mutates into a jasmine blossom.

Woman's Robe melhafa with footprints of desert animals and fish motif, Marazig, Douz, Southern Tunisia, 1995, 396 x 124 cm, MVD 73725

The old *Tifinagh* script symbol for “Z” is turned into a dancer, or simply into the footprint of a dove, on a women’s wrap-around robe worn by the Feija in Morocco.⁸

Woman's wrapper haik with dancing figures, Erkoune in Feija area, Southern Morocco, around 1900, 462 x 147 cm, Collection Annette Korolnik

*Left: Tifinagh script symbol for „Z“, detail of haik, Erkoune in Feija area
Right: Dancing figures, detail of haik, Erkoune in Feija area*

Another ancient Libyan symbol corresponding to the letter “D” is transformed into a weaving comb, *mschot*, in south Tunisian textiles. The names given to many motifs can often be traced to animals, plants or objects that are familiar and useful, such as “camel,” “palm,” “corn,” “scissors,” “comb,” or “tent.”

⁸ The representation of this modified symbol on the wedding robe is presumably a reference to the *agoual*, a dance of the Feija, Annette Korolnik-Andersch and Marcel Korolnik, *Die Farbe Henna. Bemalte Textilien aus Süd-Marokko* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, Art Publishers, 2002), 27, 105.

Lateinische Umschrift	Tifinar Zeichen	Arabische Buchstaben
b	ⵍ ⵍⵍ ⵍⵍⵍ	ب
m	ⵎ ⵎⵎ	م
f	ⵑ ⵑⵑ ⵑⵑⵑ	ف
t	ⵐ ⵐⵐ	ت
d	ⵏ ⵏⵏ ⵏⵏⵏ	د
ḍ	ⵔ ⵔⵔ	ض
ṭ	ⵓ ⵓⵓ	ط
n	ⵎ ⵎⵎ	ن
ñ	ⵏ ⵏⵏ	ن
l	ⵍ ⵍⵍ	ل
r	ⵕ ⵕⵕ	ر
s	ⵑ ⵑⵑ	س
z	ⵝ ⵝⵝ	ز
ẓ	ⵞ ⵞⵞ	ظ
sh	ⵔ ⵔⵔ ⵔⵔⵔ	ش
j(dsch)	ⵢ ⵢⵢ ⵢⵢⵢ	ج
y(i)	ⵢ ⵢⵢ ⵢⵢⵢ	ي
k	ⵙ ⵙⵙ ⵙⵙⵙ	ك
w(u)	ⵡ ⵡⵡ ⵡⵡⵡ	و
gh(r)	ⵣ ⵣⵣ ⵣⵣⵣ	غ
kh	ⵕ ⵕⵕ ⵕⵕⵕ	خ
h	ⵕ ⵕⵕ ⵕⵕⵕ	ه
a	ⵏ ⵏⵏ ⵏⵏⵏ	ا

Right: Flatwoven rug klim, Central plateau, Gafsa, Tunisia, around 1950, 200 x 300 cm, MVD 72788

The individual, creative and often highly abstract textile works of art can be interpreted as reflections of practical everyday life and also of their makers' yearnings and desires. However, they can be read in many different ways and arouse different thoughts and dreams in every observer. A shimmering red surface on a Rehamna knotted carpet can be associated with a striving for light and the sun; it is as if one can feel the heat and observe a sunset. The blue and black colours evoke the atmosphere of an impending thunderstorm, with the promise of refreshing rain and pleasant coolness.

Left: Carpet, Rehamna, Plains around Marrakech, Haouz region, Morocco, 1930-40, 235 x 410 cm,
Right: Carpet, Beni M'Guild, Middle Atlas, Morocco, 1925-35, 215 x 130 cm, both Collection Annette Korolnik

All these wonderful textiles have practical functions, of course, but at the same time they are expressions of art. Especially in modified techniques and materials (recycled fabrics), which often have strong and flamboyant “wild” colours and compositions,⁹ they constitute innovations and reveal creative adaptation to changed conditions. As individual and expressive creations, they were discovered by textile lovers decades ago and have been collected as works of art. This has inspired many women, particularly in Morocco, to produce the same fabrics for sale as those intended for their own use.¹⁰ The value and charm of these textiles is not the rigid preservation of traditions, but rather the power of resilience and repositioning while consciously coming to terms with new influences under the rapidly changing conditions of everyday life. With unbridled creativity, the weavers, knotters and dyers from the Maghreb continue today to create textiles featuring highly formalised, abstract symbols that have a profound meaning, as they have long done in the past. It is an art consisting of symbols and colours. And they create works of art both as intuitive and as carefully thought out expressions of all dimensions of the human spirit and all shades of the human soul. The textile art produced by women in the Maghreb reflects something fundamental: the act of creation in life and in spirit, which manifests itself in constant motion and never-ending narrative.

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⁹ Paul Vandenbroek, *Azetta – L’art des femmes berbères* (Amsterdam, Bruxelles : Ludion Gand, 2000). Arnaud Maurière et al., *Maroc, Couleurs Désert* (Genève, Clermont-Ferrand: Ethnistory, Musée Bargoin, 2014).

¹⁰ Annette Korolnik-Andersch and Marcel Korolnik, *Die Farbe Henna. Bemalte Textilien aus Süd-Marokko* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, Art Publishers, 2002), 65.

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