

BOLD WEAVERS

Captivated by Morocco's strong women and delicate designs

By Susan Schaefer Davis

Moroccan artisans lead a hard life. In addition to practicing their craft, they cook three meals a day, feed the cows and sheep in rural areas, wash clothes by hand, and some haul water from the village well. But these Moroccan women do enjoy many freedoms. They can drive, attend school, and work outside the home. From my first contact with Moroccan women in the 1960s, I was struck by their openness, intelligence, and wit. They did not sit quietly and wait to be given orders or lessons. They laughed, told ribald jokes, and sometimes got into hair-pulling fights.

Women in Morocco do not live under many bans and when left to themselves are far from submissive. Universally, single-sex groups are empowering. In women's colleges in the United States, women fill all the leadership roles. In women's associations in Morocco, talents also come to the fore. There is the best organizer, the best informed about the neighborhood, the one who travels and knows her way around the capital, or the one who can sell embroidery or rugs through her connections.

How do Moroccan women react to male dominance? All too often I've heard men say, "Women are worthless." Moroccan women are always quick to react, often saying, "Men are worthless." One woman told her son-in-law, "You're

like that watch you wear: it gives the time, but it's never right."

Morocco women

Morocco changed my life. I fell in love with the country and the people, especially the warmth and connection of a vibrant women's society. The experience turned me into an anthropologist. I wanted to understand why the women were so fun and feisty, not the passive, submissive beings I had read about in the pages of *National Geographic*. I went back to the United States and

the field with Moroccan women rather than in a classroom with undergraduates. So I became a consultant on economic development for the World Bank, the Peace Corps, and USAID. My work focused on potable water projects, education programs for girls, microcredit for women, and child labor and youth activism issues in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel.

I began collecting Moroccan rugs. Friends in the States admired them, and soon I was buying and selling rugs to people back home. My husband was an

early computer geek, and when I had the idea of selling online, he helped me set up a website, Marrakesh Express and in 1994 I became one of the first cyber-merchants.

I moved on to the next step: selling rugs directly, and pro bono, from weavers in two villages, N'kob and Ben Smim. By selling online the women could bypass the middlemen in the market and receive higher prices for their work, and reach a worldwide audience. The site shows photos of the rugs, along with a photo and brief

biography of each weaver. In a way, I was still teaching about Moroccan culture, this time online to clients, and was still "in" the Peace Corps, helping the women.

I worked with these women until 2016, when I encouraged them to join a new online group. Anou ("The Well"; www.theanou.com) takes my idea of online marketing to more expansive levels

JOE COCA



Fatima Lrhachi of Ben Smim in the Middle Atlas spins the wool for flatweave carpets and clothing from the fleeces of sheep in the neighborhood.

eventually explored that contradiction for my doctoral dissertation, which was later published as *Patience and Power*. I have been making the case for women's strength and agency since the 1970s and hope this book will contribute to that effort.

I taught at the university level for ten years, but found I preferred being in

and was founded by another RPCV from Morocco, Dan Driscoll. Since marketing is so important for artisans, a full description of this innovative enterprise appears in the concluding chapter of this book.

Even though I have handed over Marrakesh Express, I am still teaching about Morocco by leading cultural and textile tours. My husband says they should be called “American friends of Susan meet Moroccan friends of Susan,” because that’s what we do. In addition to touring the major sites, we encourage social interchanges by visiting artisans and activists in their homes.

I was thrilled to be asked to write my new book, *Artisans of Morocco; Their Stories and Their Lives*, because it gave me an opportunity to increase my knowledge about crafts and their roles in women’s lives. Some of the artisans are good friends, some are members of my “Moroccan family” dating back to Peace Corps days when their grandparents befriended me, and some are dynamic women whom I greatly admire. It was a joy to travel with photographer Joe Coca,

If given an inch, Moroccan women will take a mile.

whose curiosity, sensibility, and fortitude never wavered as we moved through a strange land. His photographs capture the beauty of the women, their work, and Morocco. In photos and in interviews—even when I had to rely on a translator when speaking to Berber artisans—the women’s personalities shine through.

Years ago, my friend who has compared her son-in-law to a watch in slight disrepair had been promised to an older man she didn’t like. When he brought her family a wedding gift of grapes, henna, and a few chickens, she dumped them on the ground. The chickens pecked at the grapes and mixed them with the henna, ruining the lot. Her angry father shackled her ankles as

punishment. Instead of submitting, she and a girlfriend worked off one shackle, which she slung over her shoulder, and ran off to the farm of a French colonist. When her father came looking for her, the Frenchman told him that if he forced his daughter to marry, he’d report him to the authorities. The young woman ended up marrying a man of her choosing.

The typical Moroccan family is still headed by a strong, macho father, but Mama runs the household behind the scenes. This is similar to Southern U.S. women, who are often described as the iron fist in the velvet glove. Moroccan women have independent ideas, and like many women, rely on skillful management rather than confrontation.

JOE COCA





Neighbors in N’Kob hold up a gloui rug woven in flatweave, pile and twining with a meteedareen—it means diamonds with little feet—border motif, chickens on a gray background and brooches surrounding a blue center.

If given an inch, Moroccan women will take a mile. Increasingly, women are assuming an active role in fighting abuses. In the face of domestic violence, many women’s groups are working to change the laws. In 2004, Morocco was the regional poster child for the reform of laws related to family, such as raising

the age of marriage and granting women greater rights in divorce and child custody cases. Although these laws are not yet fully implemented, women are taking matters into their own hands and groups are working for change.

The struggle for equality is taking place on many levels. In 2012, 56 years

after independence, 17 percent of the Moroccan parliament was composed of female members, almost as many as in the U.S. Congress after more than 200 years. You’ll find concrete examples in this book. A few years earlier, Amina Yabis, the button maker, ran for local office, just to show that it could be done. Aicha Duha

COS'ING SOON?



That Doesn't Mean We
Can't Still Be Friends

NPCA
MEMBERSHIP
=
FREE



National
Peace Corps
Association
RPCV.org

supports a family of four by serving as a middlewoman in a male domain. As a little girl, Fadma Wadal stole wool off the sheep she was herding and hid it under a gravestone at night, because she was so eager to learn to spin and weave. These actions belie the stereotype of passive, submissive Muslim women.

The women I know

Images of Morocco have been shaped by the media and by a generation of American writers like Paul Bowles and Tennessee Williams, who were drawn to the exotic yet kept their distance from the culture. By contrast, my book presents a close-up of its people. Storytellers like Fadma Wadal and her granddaughter Aziza provide an intimate view of

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desert life as it was 60 years ago. Over the mountains in Marrakesh, Samira Benayad, a traditional seamstress and also a teacher, offers a glimpse of a married woman's life in the modern world.

Along the way the women explain the technical aspects of their crafts, the meaning of the designs, and their attitudes toward their work. Fatima Fdil of Ben Smim, who has been weaving for more than 50 years, tells us that a rug on the loom has a soul, and when it is cut off, the soul dies and is reborn into a new life in someone's home. For Jamila Samaa of N'kob, weaving is a creative act, and she sees her rugs as art. Most weavers in N'kob are more pragmatic and regard rug sales as an important way to help or even support their families with household expenses. Women like Fatima El Mennouny have earned enough to help build a new home.

These artisans are models of strength, and their power is increased when they work in groups. The Assabirate Cooperative is composed of women with disabilities whose superb embroidery affords greater self-reliance. Amina

Yabis is a tireless grassroots feminist who organizes button makers into self-sufficient cooperatives. After Kheira Ilahiane organized a weaving association, she became involved in local politics as another way to help women achieve economic and social status. "Thank God that the king gave us our rights. And praise God that we're going to go further."

The delicate designs hidden in rugs, embroidery, and buttons represent flowers, insects, foodstuffs, tools, and more. It's almost impossible for the average eye to recognize these objects, much less learn their deeper meanings. As Kenza Oulaghda tells us, handsaws and horse bridles wood symbolize the complementary relationship between men and women: they need each other

to function. In the changing society of modern-day Morocco, the overall pattern stands for pride and independence.

*Susan Davis is an anthropologist who has taught and conducted research on economic development and women artisans at several universities and has published widely on gender in Morocco. As a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco from 1965 to 1967 she worked in a rural women's center. She consults with the American Friends Service Committee, the World Bank, USAID, and several NGOs and leads cultural and textile tours through Morocco. This text is excerpted from her new clothbound trade paperback, *Artisans of Morocco; Their Stories and Their Lives*, with photographs by Joe Coca, and published by Thrums Books and is available on Amazon at <http://amzn.to/2FrbMNe>. To learn more about purchasing Moroccan rugs directly from the artisans go to MarrakeshExpress.org or TheAnou.com.*