



Textiles, Craft, and Precarity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Morocco

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This paper compares three separate discourses that converge on artisanal textile production in colonial and post-colonial Morocco: fair trade and development-motivated representations of “craft” in the 20th and 21st centuries; French colonial administrative and scholarly analyses of the Moroccan craft sector; and the words and biographies of contemporary Moroccan artisans. These discourses partially overlap in their mutual ambivalence regarding the promise and perils of capitalism. But they differ substantially in terms of how they frame the relationship between artisans and their labor. My discussion draws on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Morocco, research in the archives of the French Protectorate (which lasted from 1912-1956), and analysis of published colonial ethnography and historiography, post-colonial handicrafts policy, and representations of “traditional” crafts and their makers in today’s global marketplace.

In the broadest sense this study responds to the question: What does it mean to be a “traditional” textile artisan in a modern, globalizing economy? Following work on the concept of “craft” and the disparate practices it encompasses (Wilkinson-Weber & DeNicole, 2016), I argue that the experiences of contemporary Moroccan artisans are constituted by these official and commercial discourses, in part because the objects they produce have themselves become what Fred Myers (2002) refers to as “intercultural” objects. That is, the desires of their consumers and the hopes (and despair) of artisans are shaped by social imaginaries informed by colonial histories and 20th and 21st century globalization (Herzfeld, 2004; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

Artisanal experiences today reflect a century and a half-long process of diminishing socio-economic status as other domains of the economy grew (government employment, the industrial sector, large-scale agriculture) and as formal education offered the possibility of social and material advancement. Artisans, in effect, were largely left behind. Not surprisingly, the concept of alienation (in Marx’s structural material sense and in a social and psychological sense) punctuates these discourses. Colonial and post-colonial state officials, along with global commercial actors and social activists, deploy both idealized notions of un-alienated artisans and critiques of artisans’ “backwardness” to justify the value of traditional craft and legitimate intervention through political and economic projects (Lyon & Moberg, 2010). However, much like the 19th century French workers discussed by Rancière (2012), the narratives of Moroccan artisans challenge the neatness of a distinction between alienated labor and work as a vocation, as well as the homogenous categories of “artisan” and “craft.”

After sketching the colonial and post-colonial official and commercial discourse, the paper draws on field-based interactions with Moroccan weavers and embroiderers to outline artisans’ perspectives and stories about their work and lives. Artisans often frame the economic and social value of textile craftwork today in terms of how it compared with the past and whether it has a future. With a few notable exceptions, the majority of artisans experience craftwork as an

obligation rather than a vocation, an imposed circumstance accompanied by conditions of economic precarity. For every weaver professing the dignity of artisanal labor and a longstanding passion for the trade, four others describe work histories marked by movement in and out of the craft sector, trials in different trades, and the near constant risk of loss due to injury or poor health. Hedging, or occupational multi-tasking, is one strategy to mitigate this structurally marginal position within the broader economy. Artisans' awareness of a history of decline surfaces in nostalgic comments about mastery, social value, and guild authority of old. In this respect, their discourse recalls constructs of the un-alienated artisan that appear in colonial and post-colonial official and commercial representations of craft. In other respects, their views contrast significantly, thus revealing how official or scholarly representations and artisans' words about themselves seem to miss one another entirely.

Both the structural-material and the psychological dimensions of practicing craftwork, then, could potentially be thought of as alienating. But this does not adequately account for the internal heterogeneity of persons, circumstances, and viewpoints within the category of "traditional" Moroccan artisans. In addition, the concept of alienation, often framed as primarily a question of one's relationship to one's labor, or to the product of one's labor, misses those aspects of precarity that have to do with transformations in social and cultural meanings or values across generations. This begs the question: To what extent is the analytical paradigm of alienation (or its absence) itself an artifact of traditions of expert or official (bureaucratic, scholarly, philosophical, and commercial) representations of craft? Indeed, scholarly and popular discourses on "craft" in the 21st century perpetuate this paradigm, inflected by Euro-American histories of craft and design and the social and political movements in which they participate. While the study of craft and artisans in other cultural contexts must grapple with how these histories and discourses shape the experiences and markets of artisans in places like Morocco, this research reveals how much this analytical framing leaves out of the picture.

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