
Embroidery in Morocco

Laura Shannon

with an introduction by Jane Bayley

Introduction

It is topical to wax lyrical about embroidered clothing as there is currently a revival of interest in ethnic clothing strongly featured in fashion this year. Laura's article examines the fascinating links between traditional Moroccan embroidery, our guest house in Morocco, and circle dancing.

For centuries, the people of Morocco have been producing magnificent embroideries, pile rugs, and flatweaves with designs of much visual intricacy and an avoidance of literal subject matter. This preference for abstraction and repetition generated a wealth of patterns with symbolic significance. Principal amongst these, as Laura Shannon helped us to understand, are images of female deities, designed to protect and encourage fertility of crops, livestock and families. A common motif is the Tree of Life or Mountain Goddess (lkabab pattern signifying birth, growth to maturity, death and rebirth. There are strong threads running through the fabric of my connection with Moroccan embroidery. When I set up my Morocco travel business in the 1990s, one of my first contacts was researcher and museum curator, Ivo Grammet. Through my collaboration with him in renting rooms in his guest house, I was inspired to learn more about the fabric heritage of Morocco. Now the coordinator of a new museum in Morocco, he contributed to a book to accompany an exhibition of Moroccan fabrics in the USA: *The Fabric of Moroccan Life*.

Another vibrant thread was woven in when circle dance teacher Laura Shannon first came to Morocco to lead a holiday at our guest house in Taroudant, Morocco.

Jane Bayley

The Taroudant Embroidery Adventures

As some of you know, I've been researching Goddess embroideries for many years in connection with the traditional dances and women's ritual traditions (Sheila Paine and Mary Kelly are the pioneers in the Goddess-embroidery field), so I was very excited, on our first day in Taroudant, to catch glimpses of a couple of local women carrying their babies in Goddess-embroidered wraps. I could

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Photo 1: A detail the apron Dounia's cousin Warda was wearing when she served us lunch in her home in a village near Taroudant. Photo by Laura Shannon

not get a close look at them without the babies falling out of the caleche, however, so I was even more thrilled to see the apron Dounia's cousin Warda was wearing when she served us lunch in her home (Photo 1).

This was the same pattern I had seen on the baby-carrying cloths and is a classic Goddess embroidery, incorporating extremely ancient motifs of the Goddess, mountain, mother-daughter, Tree of Life, signs of life energy, and the zigzag.

Warda and Dounia told me we could find those aprons in the Berber market, so Patricia bravely accompanied me through the labyrinth on a hunt for them. To our great disappointment, we only found crude machine copies of the goddess pattern on horrible polyester fabric that even I could not bring myself to buy. Later, Jacinta and I had better luck in the Arab Souk and purchased machine-made copies of a better quality, still showing the importance of this



Photo 2: Machine-made embroidery in the Arab Souk, showing the importance of the traditional Lakbab pattern with the 'winged Goddess' motif at the top of the triangle. Photo by Laura Shannon

traditional pattern and emphasizing the 'winged Goddess' motif at the top of the triangle (Photo 2).

Then Dounia kindly accompanied me back to the souk (twice), where we discovered several vendors of machine-made aprons and wraps featuring the traditional patterns and colours (dark red, dark blue, hot pink or green) but could find nothing handmade. She asked everywhere and everyone said the same: nobody does that hand-work anymore, nobody can afford to buy it, the machine work is so much faster and more affordable. Interestingly, they assured me that the luck-bringing patterns 'still work' whether made by hand or by machine! Eventually, with Dounia's help, to make a long story short, I did find and eventually purchase an exquisite set of hand-embroidered sheets and pillow slips (Photos 3 and 4)

Again, you can see the basic Goddess/Tree/triangle motif (called Lkhabab or Lakbab) which, according to Dounia, brings health, wealth, fertility, prosperity and all good things.



Photos 3 (left) and 4 (right): Details from the set of hand-embroidered sheets and pillow slips embroidered for someone's dowry.

Photos by Laura Shannon

Keen-eyed observers can easily spot this recurring motif on leatherwork, carpets, pottery, jewellery and other items throughout the souk. It is also found on the earliest archaeological artifacts dating from Neolithic times, which gives an idea of how ancient and how important it is.

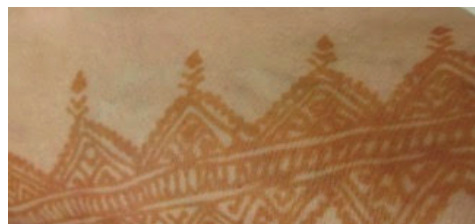
The sheet set had been for sale for several years, but nobody had bought it because nobody can afford this expensive handwork now. The women who still know how to hand-embroider no longer do it, because they cannot sell it. This is exactly what Little Saïd was talking about when he described local potters going out of business because their clay tagines cost 10 dirhams and the Chinese imports cost only five. The same process is behind the disappearance



of folk art, music and dance all over the world.

The feeling that I had perhaps rescued the last of the handmade embroideries of Taroudant made me wonder whether there was something we could do to encourage this vanishing women's art and perhaps help enable its survival – much the way Jane is enabling the survival of the yellow Saharan bee! So we talked to Faysal, whose mother embroiders, and initiated a conversation about supporting village women to embroider small items with the traditional goddess patterns to sell to visitors. Hand-made, on natural fabrics, with traditional patterns in traditional colours, with good working conditions and fair pay for the artisans, they make great gifts and souvenirs, as they weigh hardly anything and don't take up much room in a suitcase.

Even better, these embroideries would help women keep their traditional skills alive, and enable them to earn good money for their time since they can charge a decent price for them. I have seen, from similar endeavours I have helped to initiate in Bulgaria and Greece, how this in turn increases women's



craftwork too. And of course, the patterns transmit the ancient vibration of the Great Goddess which has been honoured for nearly ten thousand years, here and through the European, Asian and North African world.

Happily, Faysal's mother and her friends were eager to revive their embroidery traditions and in this way the Pigeon House Embroidery Project (Embroidery Dar Alhmam) was born! (See update below.) Meanwhile, we've heard about other embroidery projects in Midelt and Tazenakht, so there are existing models to follow.

The story ends on my last evening at La Maison Anglaise. When the henna artist visited, I asked Dounia to ask her if the Lkhabab pattern is ever traditionally painted on feet. 'Of course', was the reply, and this was the result: dancing feet blessed with the ancient pattern of the Great Goddess.

Photos 5 and 6: The ancient Lkhabab pattern painted in henna on my feet. One possible interpretation of the row of Goddess figures is that they are *dancing!*
Photos by Laura Shannon

self-esteem and status in the family and the community, and encourages younger generations to learn traditional

Update by Jane Bayley

The irony was, after all the searching, that we then discovered that some of the best quality embroidery in Taroudant was being produced by the wife of Rachid, one of our drivers, and that our manageress, Latifa, owned some beautiful embroidered bed linen when many women still prepared these for a bottom drawer – in anticipation of finding a husband; she'd stitched some 20 years before she met and married our chief guide, Said.

The efforts of two of our regular circle dance guests, Angela Lockwood and Stephanie Rose, led to a new branch of the project. They undertook to raise funds to repair the roof of a family's home in a mountain village visited regularly by our clients. So generous were members of the CD network that they raised a surplus of cash. The village women chose to use the surplus to learn the lost art of embroidery.