Moroccan Boucherouite

From Marginal Object to Collectible Art

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This article is dedicated to my
mother-in-law Mama Lahcen Taghlaoui
of Qsar Mezguida

The exhibition “Contemporary Morocco” at the *Institut du Monde Arabe* (IMA) in Paris featured numerous brightly colored textiles hung on a bright orange wall. When I visited the IMA in 2015, I immediately recognized them as *boucherouite,* a type of textile made by women of discarded pieces of cloth. I first learned about this unique style of carpet in the 1990s when living in rural southeastern Morocco and discussed them briefly in my book *Amazigh Arts in Morocco* (2006). The name *boucherouite* is Tamazight and derives from two words: bou, meaning “one of/one made of,” and *acherouite,* meaning “a piece of cloth [*icherouiten*: plural]. While the name literally translates to mean “the one made of a piece of cloth,” people understand that it is made from hundreds of cloth scraps, using both flat-weave and knotting techniques. In the 1990s, Amazigh women experiencing economic misfortune and not having access to wool made textiles from discarded pieces of fabric that were repurposed to make a *boucherouite* [plural: *id-boucherouiten*]. They were typically used by families as an inexpensive form of bedding.

Figure 1
Fatima Ouadderrou weaving a boucherouite.
Unless otherwise indicated, photographs were taken by the the author, Cynthia Becker, with permission accorded by those photographed to publish the photographs.

Figure 2
Embroidered cloak with hood, Taznakht, 1900-1950.

The *boucherouite* is a textile considered marginal by women in rural Morocco. Many women refuse to make and to use them, believing that they bring bad luck and misfortune to a household (Becker 2006). The IMA exhibition brought these textiles into a museum context, even including the name of weavers on accompanying labels. Curators displayed them like paintings on the walls of the gallery rather than on the floor as they were used in their original context. For audiences in Paris, it seems then that the *boucherouite* has transitioned from a textile made out of desperation and necessity to an object worthy of curatorial attention.[1]

Numerous scholars have noted how artworks from Africa accumulate new meanings and values as they are placed in new and often unexpected contexts, such as museums in Europe and the United States (Appadurai 1988; Forni and Steiner 2018; Vogel 1991). Curators affiliated with institutions outside of an object's place of origin often have final word in deciding whether the object is deemed worthy of collection and display. Museums shape the narrative surrounding an object and, in doing so, often determine its commercial value (Forni and Steiner 2018, 2). This system of display and valuation typically arises due to unequal economic relationships between individual artists and the museums who exhibit their work. As noted by Silvia Forni and Christopher Steiner, the display of objects from Africa is particularly problematic due to the "brutal legacy of colonialism, racism, and global structural inequalities," making it difficult to disentangle museums and the art market from imperial histories (2018, 3). Institutions, such as the *Institute du Monde Arabe* and others, invent the criteria of worth and impact not only how viewers perceive objects but also impact the artists themselves and the types of works they choose to make and sell. Furthermore, exhibitions often involve cultural stereotypes that produce an essentialist view of a particular society, simplifying gender roles and denying artists both a past and a present (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 19).

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1 The *id-boucherouiten* displayed om the orange wall in the IMA were from the collection of professional artist and designer Françoise Dorget in Paris, who published a book on them entitled *Connexions: Tapis Marocains, Design, Art, Architecture* in 2018.

In this essay, I tell the story of the *boucherouite*, tracing its beginnings as a modest textile used as bedding by nomadic families and following its movement into the museum world. I concentrate on *id-boucherouiten* in the region of southeastern Morocco, an area where I lived for several years and have been visiting since 1993. As we will see, women reinvigorate inherited artistic forms to meet the needs of the present, responding to ecological needs and, in the process, they engage with a global commodity culture as their textiles enter into museums. A discussion of the *boucherouite* allows for an understanding of how such contemporary issues as climate change and the art market have impacted weavers in rural Morocco.

Amazigh Textiles and the Tourist Trade: the *Akhnif*

Unlike many African art objects on display in museums, the *boucherouite* is relatively new to the art market. Typically, scholars struggle to reconstruct an object's indigenous origins, since they are often overshadowed by the narrative of collection and ownership that begins once an object arrives to Europe or the United States (Forni and Steiner 2018, 4). Indeed, the larger history of textiles in Morocco cannot be understood without a consideration of colonization and the impact of the tourist industry. Much of what we know about early textiles comes from European travel accounts. One of the first mentions of textiles was made by the French missionary Charles de Foucauld, who observed a thriving textile trade in the small Moroccan town of Taznakht, writing that "an industry, the manufacture of khenifs flourishes in the village (1888, 110)," using the word *khenifs* to refer to the striking hooded capes woven in the area. In the arid, mountainous region surrounding Taznakht, wealth was determined by the size of one's sheep and goat flock and by the production of woven wool textiles (Naji 2007, 93). At this time Taznakht was home to a bustling weekly market located at the junction of caravan routes. The *akhnif* (plural: *ikhnafen*) was a cloak once commonly worn by

both Jewish and Muslim men in the area and was considered such a precious piece of clothing that an *akhnif* would be passed down from father to son (Naji 2007, 116). These are no longer worn today.

Made from heavy, durable goat and sheep wool, Ait Ouaouzguite women mastered the complex weaving technique necessary to make the *akhnif*, which is best described as a seamless hooded cape. Weavers began by creating the hood, which required a narrow surface area, and progressed to the body of the cloak, which was much wider, gradually dropping equal portions of the warp on either side to create its semicircle shape. Weavers used local wool, which was a deep black color, and included geometric designs in the cape's central red or orange oval shape using a brocade technique (Sorber 2002, 251-52.). The large central oval shape has often been interpreted as representing an eye and has been understood as offering protection against the evil eye, deflecting the negative attention of a jealous person by attracting and absorbing the harmful first glance. Jewish men living in the region of Taznakht also used them but they wore them inside out, distinguishing them from Muslims.

By the 1930s, production of the *akhnif* became increasingly rare in the region of Taznakht. This period coincided with the French Protectorate (1912-1956), which resulted in the rapid rise of tourism in Morocco and the development of a textile industry for export. Between 1923 and 1934, the French colonial officer Prosper Ricard and director of the *Service des Art Indigènes* (SAI) in Morocco published a four-volume inventory of Moroccan carpets, *Corpus des tapis marocains*. Newly created museums displayed carpets collected for inclusion in the corpus. Women wove in government-controlled workshops, which encouraged weavers to copy the motifs and styles found in the corpus in order to produce textiles for export to Europe. While Ait Ouaouzguite women continued to weave, climatic desiccation and the migration of people out of the rural area surrounding Taznakht greatly impacted textile production.

The *akhnif* became unfashionable and was seen as outdated by men in the region (Naji 2007, 116). When the French writer and photographer Jean Besancenot traveled throughout Morocco in the 1930s, he wrote that the *akhnif* was in decline due to the large amount of labor required to construct one (1942).

By the mid-twentieth century, it was rare to find a woman who could make an *akhnif*. In an effort at economic development, in the 1950s the French colonial administration encouraged women to revive fabrication of the *akhnif*, but this was soon abandoned because of the high cost associated with their production. A large amount of wool was necessary and the amount time required to weave one was considerable (Naji 2007, 117). Today, the *akhnif* remains the most common Moroccan textile found in both ethnographic and fine art museum collections in the Europe and the United States, and very few women currently make them.

Although the *akhnif* was considered old-fashioned by Moroccans, European and North American travelers and collectors greatly valued them. Numerous museums across Europe and the United States acquired an *akhnif*, even if they did not actively display Moroccan textiles. They entered collections of such museums as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, the *Musée du quai Branly* in Paris, and the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. Despite their popularity in Europe and the United States, very little is known of the early history and meaning of these distinctive capes. Numerous questions persist: was their use limited to high status men? Why did both Jewish and Muslim men wear them and why did they wear them differently? Why exactly did they decline in popularity? Did their decline correspond with changes in herding practices due to colonization? Why were *these* textiles collected and not others? Who were the women who made them? Museums typically do not address such issues.

The biography of the *akhnif* illustrates some of the influences that impact textile production. First, the lack of knowledge about individual weavers illustrates the primitivizing premise of museums where artists from Africa are assumed to be anonymous. Also, the decline of the *akhnif*, does not mean that textile production entirely disappeared from the region. Textile scholar Myriem Naji wrote that since the 1980s, weaving production has intensified and diversified, with women weaving all year long and more than eight hours a day. This differs from the past when women worked on their looms when they had a break in their daily chores, creating over a long period of time (Naji 2019, 138). Further changes occurred when women began to purchase pre-dyed machine spun wool, bypassing the difficult jobs of spinning wool and dyeing it with natural materials, which impacted the quality of the textile. Some began to produce simpler flatweaves, which contributed to the oversaturation of the textile market with lesser quality carpets and caused prices to decline. Naji notes that sometimes the amount paid to a weaver only covers the cost of the materials used (2007, 102-103). When women sell their carpets in the local market in Taznakht, they receive little financial compensation for their work. Hence, Naji characterizes the relationship of women to weaving as ambivalent: women wish to help their families but the work is hard and the financial gain is minimal (2019, 138).

The current situation described by Naji resembles my experiences in the Middle Atlas region, which is one of the primary areas of textile manufacturing in Morocco. I once heard a woman in the market complain in a loud voice about the low price she just received for a carpet. She told the other weavers to take down their looms, stating that she made only a pittance for all of her hard work. “It’s not worth it. We make nothing,” she shouted. In the last few decades, the Moroccan government has encouraged female weavers to form craft cooperatives, providing them with modest financial assistance and some business workshops. However weaving, which is understood as a craft taught in households or in cooperatives to rural, uneducated women, is not given the same

respect as formalized education (Nicholas 2014, 4).

In southeastern Morocco, few young women today learn to weave. The weavers themselves see weaving as a physically tough and tedious chore and discourage their daughters from doing it. In fact, farming and herding, types of manual labor typically performed by men in the region, have also been on decline since the 1970s. Many families have relocated from the rural southeast to the cities of Meknes and Fes, looking for wage labor and encouraging their children to graduate from high school; some study at universities in order to improve their family's economic status. As we will see, intense drought has made farming and the herding of goats, sheep, and camels almost impossible, which has profoundly impacted the textile industry.

Textiles in Southeastern Morocco

I began this essay with a discussion *id-boucherouiten* and their entrance into the museum setting. While the *boucherouite* is made in many areas of Morocco, Ait Khabbash Amazigh women, in particular, were recently featured in an exhibition entitled "Desert Design: Contemporary Rugs of the Oriental Region of Morocco." The exhibition featured thirty contemporary *boucherouite*-style rugs woven by Ait Khabbash women and was exhibited between 2019 and 2020 at the *Musée Bargoin d'archéologie et des arts textiles* in Clermont-Ferrand (France) and the *Musée Yves Saint Laurent* in Marrakech (Morocco). Unlike the *akhnif* (cape) discussed earlier, Ait Khabbash textiles did not catch the attention of European and American collectors in the twentieth century. Rather Ait Khabbash textiles were made on a small scale for family use, and unlike other Amazigh groups, they did not feature complex weaving techniques or intricate geometric motifs. Ait Khabbash women wove flat-woven blankets, floor coverings, bags, and pillows that consisted of solid horizontal bands of undyed wool. By the late nineteenth century, women were using synthetic dyes imported from Europe

to dye wool, creating textiles with alternating red, green, yellow, black, and white bands. The most intricate textiles woven by Ait Khabbash women included the *taghnast*, a flatwoven woman's shawl, or the long gown for men, *tajellabiyt*, which was woven from undyed wool. Ait Khabbash textiles were not acknowledged as worthy of collection and are not included in museum collections. Also, until the conquest of the region by the French in the 1930s, few Europeans traveled to the area.

Ait Khabbash historically occupied in the desert surrounding the Tafilalet oasis and participated in long-distance caravan trade. Until the early twentieth century, the majority of Ait Khabbash lived a nomadic lifestyle, raising goats, sheep, and camels in this Saharan region, which receives less than four inches of rainfall per year. Families measured their material wealth by the amount of livestock they owned, which provided them with meat, milk, leather, and wool for textiles. Women used strong coarse goat hair to weave the tent panels that they sewed together to make their nomadic tents. The soft wool from sheep and camels was used to make flatwoven floor coverings, blankets, and clothing on vertical looms set up inside nomadic tents.

Ait Khabbash, who were herders and occupied the desert surrounding the Tafilalet oasis, entered into reciprocal relationships with Arabs living in the oasis, trading animal products for dates and wheat. In the early twentieth century, some Ait Khabbash moved into villages (qsar: singular, qsour: plural) occupied by Arabs in the oasis, such as the villages of Mezguida, Haroun, and others. These were vulnerable to attacks as they were on the fringe of the oasis. Arab farmers gave Ait Khabbash nomads homes in the *qsar* and land to farm in exchange for protection. While the majority of Ait Khabbash continued to live nomadic lifestyles, this ended with French occupation of the region in the 1930s. By the early 1960s, most nomadic Ait Khabbash had folded up their tents and built adobe houses on what had been their traditional grazing territory, creating the settlements of Taous, Maktaa Sfa, Wattara, Hafira,

Tabaht el Khir, Merzouga, and others. These small towns are near water supplies found in this desert area, which provides them with water to drink and to irrigate newly planted crops of wheat and vegetables. Despite making the transition to a sedentary lifestyle, Ait Khabbash women continue to keep small herds of sheep and goats. However, the availability of imported cotton in the markets means that women no longer weave clothing for their families.

In the *qsar* of Mezguida, where I lived in the 1990s, women did not take their small flocks of sheep and goats to graze. Rather they traveled great distances by foot or by donkey to locate animal fodder that they carried back to their livestock. Women felt very protective of their animals, especially their sheep, which they regularly sheared to make carpets. In the 1990s, I lived with my husband's family, who were among the area's most prolific weavers. My mother-in-law (named Mama) explained to me that she began to weave actively after her husband passed away in the early 1980s. She had a divorced daughter with a small child and six of her own children to support. Her eldest son joined the military to help provide for the family but this was not enough to support such a large household. As she explained to me, "A poor woman who knows how to weave is better than one who goes out and begs for money." Mama taught her daughters how to weave and everyone worked together, doing everything from caring for the family's sheep to helping construct the loom. The money they earned selling woven carpets to local families helped them survive.

Mama's husband was among one of the families who settled in Mezguida in the nineteenth century, living among Arabs. People who self-identify as Arabs in the region are religiously conservative, as many traced their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammed. Mama recounted to me how her Arab neighbors often criticized her for leaving her house to collect food for her livestock, warning her that she might encounter unrelated men while working outdoors. Arab women, except for very low status women, stayed indoors and their husbands did such chores as collecting firewood, working on

agricultural plots, and visiting the market. Ait Khabbash women were not restricted by similar modesty requirements and Mama resented these criticisms, stating that she needed to support her family.

Mama took care of her sheep, shearing them and painstakingly carding, spinning, and dyeing wool to make a belt for her eldest daughter's wedding. Ait Khabbash brides wore belts dyed from red, green, yellow, and black wool gifted to them by their mothers, continuing to wear them after their marriages to mark their status. These belts had faded from fashion by the 1990s, and while some families sold their belts to local tourist shops, others continued to guard them as valuable heirlooms, demonstrating the value given to wool.

Wool and wool working, which includes washing and combing the wool and then spinning it into thread, is labor intensive. Women often complain of sore backs, pain in their wrists and arms as well as their legs from sitting so long. Mama explained how she never worked alone but relied on the assistance of her daughters and sometimes even her neighbors helped her. Every aspect of weaving, from start to finish, is a communal endeavor, demonstrating the Amazigh concept of *adwal* or "cooperation," a word used to describe mutual aid involving shared labor. When I watched Mama and her daughters construct a wooden loom in their home, it required at least three or four people working together to mount the warp threads onto the loom. Once the actual weaving process started, usually two women would weave on the same loom. On days where there was a great deal of work to be done around the house, women took turns weaving. Sometimes one would weave in the morning, and another took over in the afternoon. Textiles were intended to benefit the entire household. If a carpet was sold, the money was used to buy necessities for the household rather than kept by one weaver. "Since everyone helped, how could one person keep the money?" Mama explained.

The access of Ait Khabbash women to wool declined in the 1970s when the Moroccan government constructed a dam at the River Ziz in the province capital of Errachidia. The dam provided people with fresh drinking water and was released to irrigate crops a few times a year. However, it prevented seasonal flooding and caused the landscape to dry up, limiting available grazing land. Lack of grazing land meant that most of the remaining nomads sold their sheep and goats, left their tents, and built houses in the previously established oasis towns of Rissani and nearby Erfoud. Drought conditions and increased desertification meant that Ait Khabbash were obliged to buy wool in the local market. Due to its high cost, some women began to economize by unraveling sweaters, cutting worn clothing into strips, and using them to create the *boucherouite*.

Mama explained to me that she never planned to make a *boucherouite* in her home. “Only very poor nomads made them out of old cloth. They made saddle blankets for their donkeys or blankets to cover themselves at night when it got cold.” After Mama’s husband died, she and her daughters made a *boucherouite* for someone and were paid according to the size of the piece. Myriem Naji describes this method of payment as the “old local value system,” which does not take into consideration “the technical skills of the weavers nor their creativity” (2019, 138). For Mama, a *boucherouite* was easier to make than wool carpets, which require a great deal of time to spin and prepare the thread. However she said, “it still took us time to tear the fabric into thin strips. And it might take more than a year to gather the fabric necessary to make a *boucherouite*. Fabric was not in the market then like today.”

Fabric became more plentiful in the market in the late twentieth century. When I was living in southeastern Morocco in the 1990s, I remember that merchants would bring bundles of used clothes to the market, once finding a pair of lederhosen apparently from Germany in the pile. They would cut open the bundles and place mounds of clothing on tables and women looked through the piles of old clothing, trying to find disregarded sweaters that they could unravel or brightly colored clothing that they could shred.

Figure 3
Fatima Ouadderrou standing next to her loom

Women moved from making a flatwoven textile to creating a *boucherouite* using both flatweave and knotting techniques. Women set up a textile's warp, which serves as the basic foundation and consists of thread that runs the length of the carpet. They then fill out the textile with weft threads, weaving them in and out of the warp. After doing this for several rows, they stop and begin to tie rows of knots to the warp using pieces of cloth, returning later to the flatweave technique. Mama's daughter Fatima explained to me how the family learned this from a friend who visited their home one day. She married and moved away, bringing this weaving style from her husband's family and encouraging the women to try something new.

This example illustrates how contact between weaving communities due to marriage and travel leads to the circulation of designs and techniques, which is something not often recognized by scholars. Mama and her daughters began to incorporate the triangular patterns common to Ait Khabbash beaded jewelry and modesty coverings into their textiles. For example, Ait Khabbash women once commonly wore beaded necklaces and chokers that featured repeating triangles made from brightly colored seed beads. Mama's daughter Fatima explained to me that these beaded necklaces are no longer in fashion, but she keeps her necklace close to her loom, often replicating its repeating triangular pattern into a new textile. She is also inspired by the embroidery on Ait Khabbash modesty coverings called *tahruyt*. On the large pieces of dark blue or black fabric women drape around their body, they embroider triangular patterns and other motifs to depict flowers, bird tracks, trees, and shafts of wheat, creating an overall design that resembles a plentiful and fertile landscape covered in vegetation. They arrange the colors so that hues categorized as "light" (any shade of red and yellow) are placed next to "dark" colors (shades of blue, purple, or green). This is said to balance the textile and women typically follow the same color scheme when creating a *boucherouite*. Designs and color schemes cross artistic media, contributing to the creation of a visual style that people in southeastern Morocco associated with their Amazigh Ait Khabbash heritage.

The money made from selling a *boucherouite* along with money earned by Mama's three grown sons allowed them to build an adobe house on a plot of land outside of the *qsar*. This provided the family with a much larger house for her married sons and their growing families. Mama made a red knotted wool carpet for the family's sitting room in triumph, using the new technique she had learned. The textiles sold by the family did not bring in much money but they helped the family nonetheless. For example, Mama and her daughters made *id-boucherouiten* to use as beds. Fatima, one of Mama's daughters, explained:

> When we make a textile from wool, moths eat it and it gets ruined over time. But we can wash the *boucherouite* so that it lasts a long time. It is economizing that we can take our old clothes apart and use them to make something new. But wool textiles have more value; a *boucherouite* is for the poor.[2]

Clearly, the *boucherouite* is treated ambivalently and not given the same value as a textile made from wool. Mama passed away more than ten years ago and then Mama's eldest son died of cancer. Mama's daughter Fatima had just completed a *boucherouite* and she declared to me that she was going to stop making them:

> Other women in the area made *boucherouite* but we did not have them in our family. We did not make them because my grandmother did not want them in our home. She said that they did not have any valor. Because they were made from old, discarded fabric, she believed that they would make our family look poor and bring bad luck. People believed that if you made a *boucherouite* someone would get sick in your family or something terrible would happen. And now look what happened.[3]

Despite this proclamation, Fatima continues to weave *id-boucherouiten* from wool and strips of discarded fabric. She understands her weaving as engaging in the virtuous behaviors of patience, hard work, and industriousness. She never remarried as she wanted to remain in the household with her daughter until she was married. While she did teach her daughter how to weave, her daughter gave it up when she married, declaring the work too difficult.

2 Interview by the author with Fatima Ouadderrou, 2019.

3 Interview by the author with Fatima Ouadderrou, 2019.

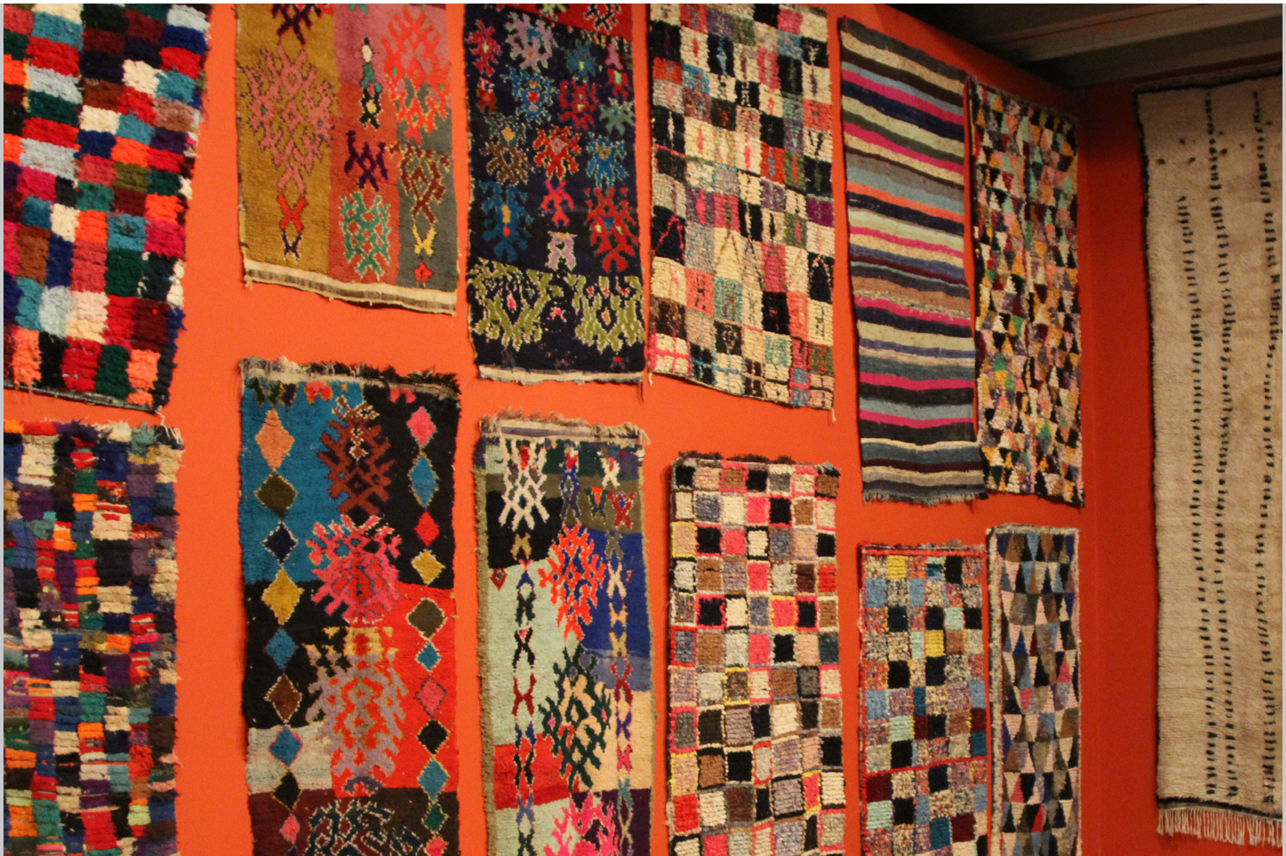

Figure 4
Boucherouite on the walls and floor of the Institut du Monde Arabe. The colorful carpets were made by Fatima Oukharbouch, Setra Aït Hammi, and Zahra Fatah and were from the Musée Bargoin, Clermont-Ferrand and the Collection Maurières & Ossart. The white carpets were from the city of Azilal from the collection of Françoise Dorget, Paris.

Boucherouite Moving into the Museum

In the last decade, western museums and galleries turned their attention to *boucherouite*. The most recent was the exhibition "Desert Design: Contemporary Rugs of the Oriental Region of Morocco" in 2019. The recent interest in *boucherouite* can be attributed to the fact that older carpets are no longer available in the market for purchase and "European carpet dealers had to expand their hunting ground," declaring contemporary carpets as art (Naji 2019, 143). In their essay on the African art market, Forni and Steiner write about a common trope found in exhibition catalogs on African art: collectors and curators congratulate themselves

for removing art out of obscurity, giving themselves credit for discovering the worth of previously "undiscovered" works. In the beautiful catalog filled with color illustrations that accompanied the "Desert Design" exhibition, the curators recounted how they discovered the *boucherouite* style of textile while traveling in southeastern Morocco:

> In the middle of nowhere, two earthen dwellings and an open courtyard housed the entire family. Nine people shared these close quarters, defined by raw, unpainted walls and no furniture. The only thing that looked like furnishings was a pile of rugs and blankets. To welcome us, the rugs were unfolded and the pillows placed against the walls. When we first set eyes on them, we were dazzled by colors that, until now, we had never seen in Morocco… That was the beginning of an adventure (Njami, Maurières, Bouilloc, and Croissant 2019, 16).[4]

This discourse is common among Western collectors, who portray themselves as adventurers going into "isolated" and "undiscovered" places so remote and so small that they remain nameless (Forni and Steiner 2018; Naji 2019, 142). In reality, the authors of *Desert Design* were accompanied by an Amazigh male guide Lahcen Aït Khouya who offered to introduce them to other weavers. Aït Khouya is listed as one of the contributors to the catalog.

Forni and Steiner discuss how dealers and collectors of African art have historically invented the criteria of worth and authenticity, deciding the value of an object's market value. African artists, however, have very little "control of the market within which their

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4 The catalog for *Desert Design* indicates that it was a collaborative book project with Simon Njami, Arnaud Maurières, Christine Bouilloc, and Charlotte Croissant working together on the publication. The textile collection was built up between February 2011 and February 2018 by Lahcen Aït Khouya, Arnaud Maurières, and Eric Ossart. The photography of textiles in the publication and the graphic design was done by Nicolas Schimp, Rachid Bouzidi, and Chérie Tomate.

objects are bought and sold" (2018, 3). An increase of public awareness has the ripple effect of increasing the monetary value of the artworks themselves. The book *Desert Design* mentions that they asked a weaver named Zahra Ouhya to show them her oldest carpets, which they apparently considered more desirable and/or more authentic. According to the text, she was happy to sell even the most threadbare ones to them (Njami et al 2019, 120).

This form of acquisition imposes the idea that women in rural Morocco are oppressed and that buying directly from the weavers benefits them in greater ways than through intermediaries. However, this assumption does not take into consideration larger family structures that involve mutual cooperation and support. In southeastern Morocco, many continue to live with their extended families and everyone contributes to the economic well-being of the entire household. Even if a man leaves the rural south and moves to Morocco's urban centers, his wife and children often continue to live with his parents, as it is often too expensive to move everyone with him. Men continue to send money home and visit during major holidays. In fact, if women sell carpets, they typically give the money to one of the men in the household who uses it to buy groceries at the market or pay the home's electricity bill. Due to drought, the plots of land cultivated by the family are not very successful, requiring them to buy wheat to make the bread that accompanies almost every meal. Also, they often purchase animal fodder or dates in the market, as many palm trees have died due to disease or the lack of rainfall. Fatima often asks her brothers to buy food for the sheep that she keeps in the barn attached to the family's house.

In the catalog *Desert Design*, the authors indicate that they preferred aged carpets to newer ones and women gladly sold their older textiles. For most weavers, it is a sign of wealth to own brand new carpets. The inability to weave new textiles, even ones made from synthetic fabrics, is seen as a sign of poverty (Naji 2019, 142). However, in southeastern Morocco, older

id-boucherouiten that have been used in a home typically feature faded colors, as the pieces of cloth fade through use and exposure to the sun. These muted tones appeal to European sensibilities but families in Morocco prefer bright colors because they indicate that the textile is new. Outsiders prefer to purchase older textiles, which appear more authentic due to the fact that they were used in a household. These buying decisions can impact contemporary textile production, as local dealers and guides recognize that "today's products will become tomorrow's antiquities," causing local people to prematurely age new carpets (Naji 2019, 142). A similar process was recorded by Christopher Steiner in his book *African Art in Transit* (1994), where he documents the process of artificial aging by artists to create "authentic" African sculptures.

Desert Design also tells a short story about Fatima Oujil, who lives alone with her youngest son who suffers from diabetes. Due to hardship, Oujil "has been forced to sell her rugs to get by, and the living room is losing its luster…(Njami et al 2019, 186)." What is never clear is how much the authors are paying for the artworks they acquire. The authors mention that they set a base price for a carpet that would cover the cost of materials and time spent weaving a rug. They specify that they sourced each rug directly from the woman who wove it, referring to male merchants who sell carpets as "scalpers" and "hucksters" (Njami et al 2019, 234). Such an approach suggests that cutting out the middlemen results in more money given directly to the weavers themselves. However, it fails to recognize that the organization of the textile trade relies on the work of entire families and benefits every single member, including the sons and husbands who sell the carpets woven by their sisters and mothers in the marketplace. Men within a family, rather than women, are responsible for the financial welfare of their parents and the other family members in a household (Naji 2019, 144). The tourist industry, especially in southeastern Morocco, is the primary livelihood of most men, as drought has made agriculture and animal husbandry almost impossible. Breaking the network of middlemen could have a negative impact on families. Ironically,

the authors of *Desert Design* worked with a middleman, Lahcen Aït Khouya, who they credit as key to establishing their collection. He worked as an intermediary in the region and through this capacity introduced the collectors to families and served as an interpreter. One assumes that he was paid for his efforts.

Figure 5
Interior of an Ait Khabbash house filled with *id-boucherouiten*.

Figure 6
Beaded necklace once commonly worn by Ait Khabbash women.

Boucherouite into the Future

The art market impacts not only what is bought and collected by museums, but it can impact local production for the international market (Forni and Steiner 2018, 506). Ait Khabbash women have grown to appreciate the *boucherouite* as a unique economic resource. While they arose due to economic misfortune and desertification, women use secondhand clothing purchased in the market or shred their family's discarded garments to make them. Women appreciate the fact that the materials they use are very cheap and sometimes free. They feel that they are helping their families in a region severely impacted by climate change. Female weavers are part of a larger family network where everyone supports each other.

Most exhibitions of *boucherouite* claim to empower women by bringing their stories to the world for the first time. The New York-based Cavin-Morris Gallery created a catalog entitled *Rags to Richesse* to accompany a 2010 exhibition of *boucherouite*. The catalog compared the carpets' bright colors and vibrant patterns to paintings and described the carpets as expressing "creative freedom," "wild poetry," and an "improvisatory style," that is liberated from tradition (Morris, Blazek, and Steinmann 2010, 5). Such terminology conveys stereotypes that Muslim women are oppressed and forced to follow social conventions. Writers take a patronizing attitude when they describe rugs that lack symmetry as expressions of a so-called oppressed woman's creative potential, allowing her to imagine a life "free from all rules" (Morris, Blazek, and Steinmann 2010, 5). Most recent exhibitions identify each individual female weaver by name and include photographs of the weavers themselves, claiming to make the anonymous, invisible weaver visible. The press kit for the exhibition "Desert Design," for example, proclaimed "A curtain has been lifted: We recognize now that they [rugs] are anything but anonymous." (*Press Kit* 2019, 8). Such approaches are admirable, since scholars and travelers in

the past failed to record the names of weavers. Complicating this gesture of individual recognition is the fact that groups of women often work on the same textile together. There may be one woman who does most of the weaving, but others join her. The financial return from carpets sold does not benefit the primary weaver but the entire family.

As I end this essay, I want to return to the story of Mama and her daughters. After Mama passed away, her daughter Fatima became the primary weaver in the family. Fatima makes colorful *id-boucherouiten* to decorate their home and her younger brothers and sisters admire her industriousness. As Fatima explained to me, her brothers do not need to buy machine-made carpets and bedding in the market. Rather they can use the ones that she makes, which saves them some money. At the same time, weaving is regarded with ambivalence. While Fatima learned weaving from her mother and taught her daughter how to weave, her daughter abandoned the practice when she married and had children. Fatima also never taught her granddaughter. Rather, Fatima's granddaughter studies at a nearby university in Morocco, and everyone is expecting that she will gain more money with her degree than if she tried to support herself through weaving. In Morocco, having a university degree is considered more prestigious than engaging in craft production.

Fatima, however, remains proud of the textiles that she weaves and often creates new designs, expressing her creative spirit. She told me that her aesthetic choices are impacted by historical textiles and jewelry, but she continues to look for outside inspiration. I once gifted her a small carpet from the Kabyle region of Algeria and she copied some of its designs. Although she never attended school, Fatima sometimes borrows the books that her nieces and nephews use to study *tifinagh* (the Amazigh script) and weaves the Amazigh letters into textiles. Fatima, who is fluent in Tamazight, wants to show pride in her family's Amazigh heritage. As Myriem Naji states, weavers have a dynamic aesthetic taste that has been historically ignored by collectors and consumers (2019, 141).

Figure 7
Boucherouite woven by Fatima and Khira Ouadderrou that features tifinagh letters.

Fatima never remarried and as an elder in her extended family household, she has become the family matriarch. She spends a great deal of her day in front of her loom. While her sisters Erqia and Khira weave with her, they also do embroidery and other sewing projects. When Fatima takes breaks from weaving, she leaves the house to visit her daughter and grandchildren or she collects dates and cuts alfalfa to feed her small flock of sheep. When I asked her what she thought about when she wove, she said:

I think about everything that I have to do. I think about how I need to get food for the animals. I think about when I need to say my prayers or what I need in the market. When I weave a textile, I think that God will make things easy for me. I don't like to waste time gossiping. We must all use our talents to support ourselves and help our families. We live from wheat, dates, and the loom.[5]

All contributors called into the Un/Engendering research project were asked to think outside their respective specializations. Without their courage, openness, humility, and without the peer reviewers' generous attention, such an interdisciplinary project could have never taken place.

5 Interview by the author with Fatima Ouadderrou, 2019.

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Images

Unless otherwise indicated, photographs were taken by the the author, Cynthia Becker, with permission accorded by those photographed to publish the photographs.

Figure 1: Fatima Ouadderrou weaving a boucherouite. Photo by the author, 2019.

Figure 2: Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen Coll.nr. TM-2838-1: Geborduurde mantel met capuchin Taznakht 1900-1950.

Figure 3: Fatima Ouadderrou standing next to her loom. Photo by the author, 2019.

Figure 4: *Boucherouite* on the walls and floor of the Institut du Monde Arabe. The colorful carpets were made by Fatima Oukharbouch, Setra Aït Hammi, and Zahra Fatah and were from the Musée Bargoin, Clermont-Ferrand and the Collection Maurières & Ossart. The white carpets were from the city of Azilal from the collection of Françoise Dorget, Paris. Photo by the author, 2015.

Figure 5: Interior of an Ait Khabbash house filled with *id-boucherouiten*. Photo by the author, 2002.

Figure 6: Beaded necklace once commonly worn by Ait Khabbash women. Photo by the author.

Figure 7: Boucherouite woven by Fatima Ouadderrou that features tifinagh letters. Photo by the author, 2019.

We publish these articles as the museums consolidate into one nominal entity, het Wereldmuseum: since the articles were written between 2020 and 2023, they do not yet reflect the March 2023 name change.