The Hands that Weave Stories

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The Hands that Weave Stories

Elanna Hawkins

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Acknowledgments

Many people supported me throughout my Independent Study Project. I’d frequently find myself lost, and through their helping hands, I navigated this academic adventure and lived abroad in Morocco. I have been encouraged, cheered on, listened to, advised, and most importantly, befriended. For this and so much more, I am thankful.

To all my teachers/advisors, both formal and informal, I appreciate that you challenged my existing ways of learning and gave me the tools I needed to rework my perceptions of the world. My time in Morocco has allowed me to grow in tremendous ways. Through the exploration and endless questioning of positionality facilitated by my teachers, I feel more connected to the world and the people around me. I have gained a sense of reciprocity and radical love for the strangers who travel this life with me.

To my Arabic instructors, I thank you for ensuring I can properly order at cafes, and beyond that, creating a classroom setting that was energetic and engaging. I never thought of myself reading or writing Arabic; however, I now find pride in having these skills. The language is one of the links I hold dear, as it connects me to the second home I have in Morocco.

To the wonderful people I met who live all over Morocco, the warmest people I had the pleasure to meet, I appreciate you. I look back fondly at every meal I shared and the numerous gestures of kindness that needed no language to translate. Through these friendships, one sees how much more we are similar than different, that borders are arbitrary, and we all belong to one another.

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Abstract

There is a narrative encoded in carpets of Morocco, and I set out with the initial intention to learn how to “read” them—thinking that a Western sense of language is present from the symbols and patterns in the rug. As I progressed in my research and met the skilled women artisans, I realized that I needed to rethink how a story that doesn’t necessarily require a written format can be told to relate to these cultural totems of Morocco. Through in-person experience and online research, I discovered many designs and backgrounds unique to specific regions and areas. Rugs can tell stories through colors, through the entire composition, and some stories are only present in the space shared between a woman a loom. As I start the groundwork for this Independent Study Project, ISP, I think about all the directions this research can take and the important people I could meet: this alone is exciting. This beginning makes every bit of knowledge and quote I gain essential and worth noting. The developmental state of my ISP keeps me wide-eyed, looking all around, not being judgmental to what is worth a snapshot in my memory. In these moments of growing research, I have witnessed the intersection of Moroccan culture and identity woven into a rug, how different people participate in the whole process of creating and selling these iconic carpets. I am gaining a newer perspective and seeing beyond what was once just a decorative textile in my eyes. These rugs are a medium to many stories and a visual representation of Moroccan identity. I attempt to have this paper explore the ever-evolving stories the carpets possess and the everlasting pieces of their past lives tightly woven in. The narrative of each rug begins with the quiet empowerment and agency rural women hold while sitting with the loom. I hope this paper and my future research on this topic help bring continued awareness to these origins and the impact of the other’s interactions with the original stories of carpets.
Introduction

I remember going into a carpet shop in Chefchaouen and wanting to unpack and unroll the towering stacks of rugs. The piles of textiles drew me in; no one rug was the same as the one above or below. The shop was a riot of color and texture, and I was encouraged to meet the carpet through touch to help me discover which one would be departing with me. Some rugs looked new while other carried age. Some were small, while others would cover the whole floor. When pulling through the skyscrapers of the carpets, one has to think about where they all came from. Some of these rugs had to be travelers like myself, and this shop is just a waypoint on their long journey. I found myself asking about the origins of the rugs and wanting to know more about the makers. As I could infer, the men selling the carpets were not responsible for weaving the entirety of the shop’s extensive inventory. When unearthing the diverse rugs in the shop, I envisioned a weaver who spent hours with their hands to create what was now being held in my hands. I picked out a carpet, one that I would later stuff in my suitcase, because I saw something of a reflection of myself in the textile, and with that, I saw the reflection of the weaver. As I now own a Moroccan rug, I feel the maker, and I have become intertwined as a part of their life has now become part of mine.

Theory

I utilized a post-structural lens in unraveling the textualization of carpets as cultural pages and the women as the writer, redefining what is considered words and where they originate. I used Jacques Derrida’s work and theory on deconstruction as a framework to express the “connection between language and being” (Dinan, 2021, paras. 4). Deconstructing language leads to conceiving differing ways human expression can be translated, such as through weaving. Derrida discussed repeatability and the possibility of repetition; he postulates, “Repeatability
contains what has passed away and is no longer present and what is about to come and is not yet present” (Lawlor, 2021, paras. 5). This idea of repeatability is one I interpret as the teaching of rug making and weaving skills/techniques from mother to daughter. The knowledge and cultural heritage passes down and creates a collective memory and identity visualized through carpets.

Laghssais & Comins-Mingol, (2021, p. 8) describe the female experience as sociological invisibility, one in which females become a “passive object” instead of an “active agent”. It is not just rethinking text and language one needs to look at when deconstructing language, but to review the common labels pressed upon the women artisans and the impact that communities may have on them—using words of “marginalization” or “victim” as primary descriptors take away room to acknowledge the women’s true strength and deny them other identities. In “Beyond Vulnerability and Adversities: Amazigh Women’s Agency and Empowerment in Morocco”( Laghssais & Comins-Mingol, 2021), the authors discuss Peace Research and a triad of interaction involving violence, peace, and gender. Violence is any adverse treatment towards women, and this may manifest as below market value exchange for goods because their gender is the opposing gender in a male-dominated society. These two genders are in a state of negotiating and creating spaces of power for themselves. This triad is an essential concept for understanding their language because of the intersectionality women have with their art, culture, and modern economy. The idea of peace comes in as the historical context of women being facilitators of cultural nurturing and peace-making in communities (Laghssais & Comins-Mingol, 2021), showing that women can be more than victims or gender. These theories adjust prior conceptions of what constitutes language and the mediums used to express the metaphors which dwell in language. These intersections help highlight the ways women form spaces of empowerment and use the status of weaving as their medium to exert their agency.
Method

I used a mixed-method of participant observation, informal interviews, and primary/secondary sources to compose the research aspect for this paper. To ensure the ethical codes of conduct, all parties I spent time among and talked with are anonymous in this paper. Some of my notes came from when I just observed my surroundings. When walking through the medina and the shops that housed carpets, I looked at a variety of rugs and the symbols I could identify. Observational consideration was given to what persons were performing what task; selling, buying, and making. These observations provided a basic idea of the people I could encounter in further field research and my experience of social dynamics regarding these rugs.

I also acknowledged the various places where carpets were visible outside the shops and the households weaving them. Some of the rugs I saw were drying on rooftops, small prayer rugs that were folded neatly and waiting for use, and the rugs that were encompassing covers to the floor of household salons. Outside of personal usage, rugs were highly present in the Mosques; in my glances beyond the doors, I could see floors filled with flourishing designs. Carpets created boundaries or interiors; desert tents were propped up and floored with carpets, making a break between the sand and the space for desert relaxation.

I was a participant-observer most of the time, moving closely with my interlocutors and taking in what was shared with me. At times I might ask questions or be told something of personal interest. On a rare occasion, I physically engaged in weaving. I sat in front of a loom-learning the technique and tools. I flipped through a private collection of books, touched antqued textiles, and drank tea with my new colleagues. I was taking part in the daily life of all those involved in Moroccan rugs.
The participant observation took a fair amount of energy to conduct appropriately. It means being both present and engaged while also taking in and noting variables that surround me. Being so hyper-aware of one’s surroundings could potentially pull one out of an engaging experience. Proper observation meant I had to balance subjectivity and objectivity. Walking a tightrope of truthful settings while blending in personal perceptions and ensuring that my work benefits the people I spend time with. The abrupt departure of my stay meant I had to complete a portion of my research outside of Morocco in a virtual environment. I turned to the internet and took away many quotes and many bookmarked sites. While surfing the web, I began to observe the global market of carpet sales. I would click a link expecting to learn historical properties or catalogs of designs. What I got was a quick summary of the carpets, a picture, and a substantial price tag to have the rug in my “western-style home.” It took lots of time to find readings that gave me more than a sales pitch, but also interesting to see how narratives are used as selling points. There was a degree of flexibility and letting go of the control I felt I needed to conduct any research. I had to use what was available. However, being okay with not having complete control of where the investigation would lead me led me to things I never thought would be possible in the short three (indeed two) weeks of physical fieldwork. Through this new exploration I found myself in, I have become more passionate and curious about my ISP.

**Historical Background**

Textiles’ historical significance and context would be a timeline of all human civilization. Cloth and fiber arts are present in all global backgrounds, their use being a canvas for current times to view enduring culture. The word textile comes from the Latin root *textere*, meaning to weave, taken further as “weaving written words into form, into composition, into text” (Giorcelli, 2010, paras. 2). Worth nothing from the expansive time capsule of weaving is the
commonality among diverse cultural groups that weaving is traditionally a women’s area of craftsmanship (Christ, 1997). More often than not, women were key figures in the composition of tapestries, carpets, and clothing. The creation of textile is multifaceted; it is a beautiful object to be employed in specific uses, a vision of collective identity, and a way to preserve and tell stories. The explanation used by Cristina Giorcelli in her collaboration in the *Cather Studies*, (2010, paras. 2), provides a beautiful summary of the intermingling of text and textile, “World of yarn and world of words produce a texture, a web of interrelation, interactions, and elements that acquire complexity by being woven together into design”. Aspects of life can’t always be written or spoken of; sometimes, it takes the artist’s approach to express the emotions one faces.

These physical metaphors are what draw me to look into the Moroccan carpet. Rural weaving practices were integral to the local market and households. Many rugs stayed homebound to the women who wove the piece. Yet when the rugs became a fad in European homes and commodities of profit on the global market, they made their way out of the village setting. The French Government had a civil servant, Richard Prosper, create vocational training schools for “revitalizing the Indigenous arts” (Pommerau, 2015, p. 219). The goal was to develop a solid cultural unity in the medinas, a focal community point, and facilitate a marketplace that European entities would access (Pommerau, 2015). With more expansive global relations and transmission of cultures, Morocco acculturated the weaving techniques that resemble the Turkish style carpets (Pommerau, 2015). These evolved to become the standard Rabat-style rug and were highly valued in palaces and households for adornment as a symbol of prestige (Pommerau, 2015). I was told a fun anecdote of how Rabat carpets came to be while in the field, which is more fantastical than being a Turkish import. The story goes that a stork came and brought a piece of carpet to Rabat and taught the people how to weave, and thus a common motif in some
Rabat rugs is a stork foot or bird. Both types of rugs, be it the grand Rabat rugs or indigenous rural rugs, hold a place of identity in Moroccan culture and represent the country’s diverse background.

**Findings**

It was through my advisors’ guidance and contact that I had my first encounter learning more of the rugs I have been eyeing since arriving. My advisor had a friend, an antique seller in the shops that neighbored fellow carpet sellers. The antique dealer has a treasure trove of a store, passed down through his grandfather. It houses exquisite pieces of art made of high-quality materials that have stood the test of time. He is personally partial to wood craftmanship and fine embroidery. I was in awe of the embroidery, fine silks full of intricate, delicate designs. Most embroidered pieces were wedding belts; I was told the bride-to-be traditionally wore them. He shared that the children slice the belt in half at wife’s death, with one half buried with her. This practice is similar to rugs’ symbolic life span on the loom and its relationship with the creator (Naji, 2009). The rug is born on the loom and grows in size and design through the nurturing of the weaver. Then once at completion, it is cut away, ending its existence on the loom. Yet death is just a “preliminary to all life cycles”; the rugs will go on to live many lifetimes over away from its humble beginnings upon the loom (Naji, 2009, p. 50). The antique seller then introduced me to a man who sells these “reincarnated” rugs. He owned a well-established rug store across the way from the antique shop we visited. There was already a steady flow of human traffic when I entered, mostly tourists, if I had to guess. I promptly began my first lesson- learning the different rug styles in the shop.

The method was me pointing and asking about the large rugs hung against the walls; usually, they were some iteration of Rabat-style rugs or Persian-style. The seller stated that he
prefers the “old” Rabat style, which features abundant colors and patterns. His participation in the rug industry was also passed down in the family line, similar to the antique shop owner. He expressed he inherited the business from his father and that his brother is also part of it. I learned from both men that their shops and inventory find their way overseas. They participate in online business and auctions in America and Europe. This e-commerce and more accessible shipping means were probably crucial during Covid to keep the store viable. Both for the men to support sales and to continue buying from the artisans, allowing everyone to keep making a profit.

It was an exciting first day and made me feel in some sense what anthropological work is. How the bare-bones form and the steps one must take to begin conducting ethnographic research. One of my favorite parts of this initial meeting was when I got to see the restoration of a rug that a man in France had brought as a vintage rug, and it had gone through some wear and tear. Mending old rugs was an aspect I had never previously thought about in how rugs circulate in the marketplace, how rugs migrate overseas to possibly end up back to where they began. And through their journey, the various interactions the rugs have add to the narrative and build off the initial story told.
From one second to the next, you are a stranger to a part of the household, as I have come to learn living in Morocco. I am constant in a state of awe when it comes to the hospitality shown here. There is little time made to feel like an awkward guest. This radical kindness has let me easily love and be fearless in my encounters here. With the help from the Antique dealer, I visited Khemisset and met his friend who sells rugs in the area. This gesture of going out of his way to travel with me and give me further insights I might not have known how to seek out for myself was just spectacular.
I began that day having a lovely breakfast at the Antique dealers family’s house. Then, what I thought was our trip outside Rabat was actually a quick grocery run in the vegetable market. This little field trip was enjoyable, too; I quietly followed his sister and carried the vegetables she bought. After the errand, we reshuffled parties, trading the sister for his nephew, and then we hit the road. The first stop was to a Co-Op of carpet sellers, a circular-like building with multiple tiny rooms with the stacks of rugs housed in each. I wonder what the ratio of rugs to people in Morocco is. I half believe that there are enough rugs from all the stores across the country for every person who lives in this country to have one. The particular carpet emporium we visited houses more Berber rural-style rugs. I didn’t see many, if any, of the Persian style.
Also, it was men who ran the stores in this building, very much like shops in Rabat. The few women there were customers, myself, the mother who traveled with, and a woman who seemed to be pulling apart a rug on the floor.

I spent a moment to take in what she might be doing to the carpet in front of her, and it was when I took a seat beside her I drew in her appearance. She had a tattoo on her face, one that had aged and faded out. Before finding my interest piqued in Morocco’s rugs’ culture, I dedicated a fair amount of time exploring the traditional tattooing of women in the Amazigh society. Many symbols once tattooed on the women’s faces have been translated into the carpets. Facial tattoos have now been marked as taboo from the Arabization of Morocco (McCabe, 2019), yet, some women still bear the facial symbols. The symbols express tribal identity, ceremonial meanings, and marriage status (McCabe, 2019). Just as in the rugs, the signs hold meaning: protection, fertility, and religious significance (McCabe, 2019). There is an evolution of these symbols, from physically being worn on women to being woven by these women. It signifies the resistance of the cultural heritage from being repressed by outside forces.

In Khemisset, we drove to the rural area and came to a more village setting. There sat a room at the top of a building we entered, where two of the liveliest ladies lived. I was greeted as if I was their child returning home from a long-time away. I felt immediately comfortable in this space. The ladies were working on a carpet made from doum palm, similar to a straw, which would be a Harissa rug, like a straw mat, once done.
I got to sit and watch the women work their diligent fingers, quickly slipping the plant material over and around the warp, the vertical yarn of the loom. It is quite extraordinary to know such durable rugs are made in such basic means and material. The loom is nothing of fancy construction; it is not mechanical or made of metal. The mat the ladies were creating featured no symbols. It was just the doum wrapped tightly and slowly clawing its way up the loom. The carpet they were crafting was a physical representation of their efforts of patience and corporation. Their carpet was simple in composition but full of strength, a rug that one could stand and walk on. Because they cared for the piece, it would withstand the weight of life, very much like how these women have withstood life that has possibly had hardships and still welcomed a stranger to come in and share the space of their home. I had such a fun time with the
ladies, and I appreciated the lack of needing words to convey our mutual enjoyment of each other. We just sat together and talked with our hands. They let me weave and guided my hands to help me understand how to wrap the doum, add a new piece, and use the hammer comb, which is referred to as Mensage, and I have read it being referred to as Taska.

I have a long-standing love for handicrafts, as many people in my family are skilled in different forms of textiles. In particular, I share a bond with my grandmother for sewing and spent summers learning from her. From my mother, I picked up the hobby of knitting. Knitting forces me to be still and take in my thoughts. There is also the peace of mind that you can always pull out the yarn when a mistake is made and begin again. I found some of these similarities when I was weaving with the ladies. The fear of a mistake was not hanging over, as the simple solution was to take out the weave and go again. There is also the stillness of bodies as you morph into a part of the loom. After a while of repeated movements, it is less thinking of the next step, but the body understands how to perform the skill itself. It frees up the mind to think and imagine. Maybe these moments allow the women’s creativity to seamlessly transition to the hands as they weave. Perhaps from this flow of head, hands, the loom is where the storytelling spins.

With both women’s choreographed dance of weaving beside each other, the Harissa of 3 meters would take around one month for completion. At that time, the women would live around the rug. The carpet on the loom breaths in the same air; it breaths and absorbs the household atmosphere. Looking at the loom and the harissa as we left, I saw no longer a straw mat but the women. I could feel the laughter and private conversations between the weft and the warp. The personal and confidential nature the rug expresses then is carried to the public sphere when its identity mixes with those that pass and touch the fibers.
We drove back towards the city interior and stopped at another building that required us to take the stairs to the rooftop. In a small room, where laundry was taken care of, was another loom, similar in build to the prior ladies but with extra pieces that fit horizontally. The woman who greeted us at this home was in the process of making a Beni Ourain, sometimes spelled as Warayen, style rug. This iconically traditional style is a feature of most carpet shops in some iteration. Beni Ourain rugs in their standard form are natural white “live” wool-sheared off sheep that are alive- with a fluffy texture diced into a diamond pattern using a black-dyed thread; it is a classy simplistic-designed rug. The woman who wove at this loom was quiet and more reserved. As we sat with her, I learned that she never received a formal education and learned weaving from her mother. On top of crafting the rugs, she maintained the household duties of cleaning, cooking, taking care of her children, and creating an income by selling her rugs to merchants.
Her loom used the horizontal reed in the middle to divide the warp, allowing her to run the wool through the opening and be interwoven without going between every individual vertical yarn. To finish it off, it just needed a good hammering from the mensage, and then a row of the weft was done.

Like the ladies who weaved with doum, making the rural rug was not a precise and delicate endeavor in nature. There were pieces of wool that were too short to cover the entire horizontal length and continued with a separate piece. The yarn was cut without concern or precision. Textiles are a flexible piece of tangible culture, both physically and metaphorically. They stretch and fold, and because of their ability to be easily manipulated, they are perfect objects to travel and store. Rugs are both pieces of art that can be marveled at by the eyes and meet the rough ground and interact with the daily comings and goings of a person’s life—almost a parallel to the women who make them. Women who wear beauty and cultural memory also possess a subtle strength. Women who weave are diligent, patient, and disciplined in all sorts of aspects in creating a rug. Just the sitting position of the body and movement of the arms is a physically taxing activity (Naji, 2009, p. 56). This particular woman’s piece would be around two meters and take about three weeks to complete.

Unlike the Harissa rug, which was constructed from one technique, the Beni Ouarain used two. The bottom section uses a simple interwoven method like that of the Harissa. However, the rug required a piling technique to create a fluffy texture. It was at this step the woman had me help her. She first demonstrated how to wrap the wool around the warp. In all honesty, it took me a few attempts to correctly warp these short pieces of yarn around the threads. It took her holding my hand to guide my movements, and even then, I would get lost on how to fasten the wool correctly. Once I got the hang of the technique, it was another simple
maneuver. It took two pieces of the warp and a wrapping movement using an independent short piece of wool to bind the front and back, leaving the short amount of wool to create the shaggy face of the carpet.

*Picture 4: A Beni Ourain rug drying on the roof of the second home we visited.*
While learning and observing with my weaving mentor, I was introduced to her sweet daughter, who blew me away with the English skills she taught herself. She told me that the daughter seemed less interested in learning to weave and would occasionally help at the loom. The daughter was more interested in my presence and practicing her English. We took a liking to one another, exchanging quick smiles and quiet laughter. While conversation and questions passed from the onlookers in the room, the women, the mother,-the artisan continued to weave. She had an understanding of it. She knew how to maneuver the loom when cords needed more tension and how hard to drum the weft down. It was as if a secret language passed between them that allowed this understanding of each other. I ran across multiple readings that spoke of the “living” nature looms have in my search for background information. The weaver gives birth to the rug, helps it grow and age. The weaver gives it love and shapes its personality. Then, at the end of the creation, it is given a symbolic death and respect for its life. A life that will help the woman and her family create income. I feel privileged to have been able to step into a sacred space where women are the dominant figure. There is ease and peace in the room. A collective memory being complied upon the loom and a woman who weaves with the fingers of her grandmothers.

My last meeting in Khemisset was with an artist and scholar who offered to help me learn more about the background history of the Moroccan and Berber rugs. I found this meeting to be most challenging on the pure biases that the language barrier created lots of information to be possibly lost in translation. Also, my brain underwent the most extensive workout of attempting to understand French. Looking back, it was all quite comical, as here I was with three men, of which two spoke English to an extent, and my artist-scholar who spoke just French and Darija. Then there was me, who had just nailed the greeting in Arabic and learned the alphabet. I feel
that I took away lots of knowledge he departed on me in French, and I found how one can learn and communicate without a mutual language. We were welcomed into his home, which doubled as an archive of his artwork, collected pieces, and lots of rugs held in great condition. It reminded me of the antique shop, and I think the Antique shop owner was having fun scouring his collection on what pieces he might try to bargain for. My carpet scholar began to pull out his rugs, giving me time to take in the craftsmanship and identify the symbols I had become familiar with. After the laying down of carpet five or so on to his floor, he let us know that many of the pieces were collaborations between himself and the women he commissioned to weave them, making the carpets indeed be one of a kind. The rugs reflect the artist in front of me and the one who sits at the loom.

Picture 5: One of the commissioned rugs, heavy in design and used natural dyes
I appreciated his sense of value for the carpet and his admiration for the work. Carpets are a piece of craftsmanship in Morocco that seems to cross hands and travel frequently, and in the passing of hands, the judgment of value changes as well. In the exchange, the touch that ones’ hand leaves upon the textile impacts the piece. It becomes a broader story, with more characters and settings. I look at his unique rugs and think of the design ideas he presented, how the woman translated it to her loom, and her narrative wrapped inside the material. When I touch the rug, I add my own story to it. My story of questions and flourishing vision of Morocco’s carpets are beyond decorative textiles that hang from roofs and fill the medinas.

After marveling at his collection and photographing some pieces, we sat in his salon and began a maze of conversation. The artist-scholar explained the difference in the Citadel carpet vs. the Rural carpet, sketching a picture in my journal of the two to make the clear contrasts they have to one another.

![Picture 6: Collaboration of drawings and writings in my journal on the different styles of rugs.](image)
To visualize the City or workshop carpet, there is a distinct border, usually of floral design, that encloses a space of solid color or other patterns. In the middle is the medallion. To me, it tends to look like a giant flower or a star shape. City rugs are tightly woven kilim (flatweave) and have symmetrical dimensions and patterns. The kilim rugs are weaved historically, with a master weaver involved to ensure the specificity of the carpets (Pommerau, 2015). These city rugs are used primarily for decoration and ordainment. It creates an interior space and a signifier of urban luxury (Pommerau, 2015). The scholar-artist walked me through the symbolism of common designs components in the rugs and how one could interpret them. Beginning with the border on the rugs, he expressed this floral boundary can be seen as the boundary to “paradise”, a garden that encloses a land of harmony and symmetry. The medallion positioned as the focal point could be interpreted as a divine entity or the Power of the State.

Beside the picture he drew of the workshop rug are several rural rugs sketches. Rural rugs tend to be smaller than city rugs, possibly from the traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Rural communities’ rugs were kept in sizes that made them easy to travel with. He described how rural rugs lack borders and that the patterns continue even outside the rug’s physical dimensions. I was told that the openness of the designs in rural rugs is a metaphor for the land and semi-nomadic lifestyle the tribes had. Rural rugs are a visual of the mingling people had with their lands.

Rugs are composed of the materials found in the environment where the weaver lives and are made at times for the necessity to live in the environment. Many of the high pile rugs come from Middle Atlas regions, as the thick wool composition helps hold warmth in the colder months, while the regions with more warm temperate weather flatweaves are more common.
(Blazek, 2005). The colors found in traditional rugs result from the dyes available in the regions; it is a product of the landscape design.

One of the rugs the artisan-scholar drew for me was vertically long and had stripes filled with various lozenge (rhombus shapes associated with female gender) and laced with silver sequins referred to as Mouzon. It was a similar rug to the one the lady I met in the rug shop I started my day at was pulling apart. He expressed that rugs of this design were important in wedding ceremonies. I spent some time after our meeting searching to find out more about the rug’s background. It is referred to as a wedding blanket and/or a Handira. These blankets are woven and decorated by the mother and a close female circle for the bride-to-be; sometimes, the project begins when the daughter is still very young in anticipation of her marriage (Safa, 2021). The silver sequins are added to give ‘baraka’ or good fortune, to the textile and ensure that the newlywed’s home will be protected from the evil eye (Safa, 2021). The artist-scholar stated that the significance of the Handira continues even into death, as they might be buried with the wife. It is pretty remarkable that a woman could have possibly begun her life with this blanket and will be able to go onto the afterlife with it as well. These textiles seem to co-exist with the ones who make them. These rural rugs are the people, the event, the life, and the death. I was left with an important message from the artist-scholar that helped me look at rugs differently. My initial idea going into the research was how I could learn to read a rug, learn the symbols, and then translate the rugs. My original idea had me interpreting carpets as literal text, and I approached it as such. However, I was told that the symbols are sometimes no more than a pattern or design, but the significance lies in what the women are drawn to. I was looking too closely; I was missing the composition as a whole. The women weave in their mind’s eye, and they utilize colors patterns, and symbols that can relate to their emotions. The symbols can be the same in various rugs but
vary in importance or use. The carpet’s text was not words from symbols but a feeling and a story between the weave that expresses itself through the design.

Re-thinking what a text is and where knowledge can sit creates more open participation and understanding among people of all backgrounds. These women weavers are pole bearers of cultural past and the present and will do the same for the future. Credit is due to them, and there needs to be a reworking of how we think of these women and marginalized communities in general. Help facilitate discussion of the agency and their power in the home and community. Women in the carpet industry can be taken advantage of by the middlemen and shop owners, buying their rugs for low prices and keeping them from earning a fair wage for their work (Davis, 2018). However, the tides are changing as more of these women have begun to participate in online sales and building their own Co-Ops so they can dictate prices. As put by Myriem Naji (2009, p. 56), the spaces women weave “becomes like a ‘café of women’…behavior expected of women can be relaxed.” Carpets are a means for female expression that can cross boundaries. Which can symbolically mean the women themselves are not entirely bound by their society and have found ways long ago to collide their lives with the outside world.

Conclusions

The rugs are a way to meet the woman without physically shaking her hand; there is evidence of them in the carpet and their feelings that cling to the material. As I have consumed my time with the topic, I have found the importance of secret messages crafts have and come to understand that I will not always be able to know this secret message. At times it is not my place to try and unravel the secret. I concluded my field research with a feeling of being privileged to have been given these peoples time and energy. During these moments, I felt a genuine drive and
passion for continuing to explore this research. I gained confidence that I can create meaningful connections and have a sense of purpose on what my anthropology degree could indeed go towards. My research goals and questions evolved lots in the short time I began to explore the topic. In three weeks, I feel the surface could only be scratched, and scratched I did. This paper’s current form is a blending of ethnographic and autoethnographic writing, as my time with the weavers was limited. I had to work with the observation and brief conversations while expanding with my personal experience. I know I struggled with the language barrier at times and things I am sure were lost to me. There is also the obstacle that I have not built enough repertoire or contacts to reach out in ways I might have liked. However, this is the beautiful struggle of starting the research, especially on a timeline of three weeks. Though, I feel that I charged ahead nonetheless. The things I did experience mean more to me than acquiring lots of data. I was given such generous guidance and help from all I approached, and I wouldn’t have these moments of pure passion and excitement if not for them.
References


