

THE FABRIC OF MOROCCAN LIFE



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STATEMENT BY HIS MAJESTY MOHAMMED VI, KING OF MOROCCO

Today, those who wish to set us against one another, culture against culture, religion against religion, are the voices of darkness and regression. The Kingdom of Morocco has steadfastly refused to share this outlook of spiritual and philosophical divisiveness. Strengthened by the depth and richness of its history, for centuries Morocco has built its identity and distinctiveness on diversity and the dialogues of all its cultures.

It is this path that gives us strength and pride. It is this rich diversity that the Indianapolis Museum of Art has chosen to highlight through their exhibition. The Fabric of Moroccan Life skillfully reveals the complex and often highly contrasting facets of Moroccan culture.

With sensitivity and respect, this exhibition presents the daily life of all Moroccans—Arabs, Berbers, and Jews—through the colors, the materials, the objects, and the techniques that best reflect our rich social and cultural world. Thanks to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, many people will discover or learn more about our past and present, and about the traditions that, evolving over more than a thousand years, have shaped our art of living.

This exceptional exhibition occurs at a good time, and I would like to acknowledge Mr. Anthony Hirschel, director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, for the great interest he has demonstrated in Moroccan culture. I thank him for making it possible for such a rich and vibrant collection, which honors the heritage of my country, to be assembled and presented in America. I also wish to extend my gratitude to Ms. Niloo Imami Paydar, curator of textiles and costumes at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, who has served as a most remarkable and persuasive leader of this enormous project devoted to the arts of Morocco. I acknowledge as well the quality and value of the work of Mr. Ivo Grammet, who also contributed to the success of the Moroccan exhibition at the Royal Africa Museum in Belgium in 1999 and the Jewish Museum in New York in 2000. He has brought his expertise and generous enthusiasm to make this event, The Fabric of Moroccan Life, one of the great milestones of the Moroccan presence in America.

MOHAMMED VI

King of Morocco

MOROCCO: GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

Ahmed Skounti

The Moroccan name for the country, *al-Magrib*, means "setting" or "West." However, the name of the country in French usage (as well as in other languages: Morocco, Marruecos, Marokko, and so on) comes from the name of the city of Marrakesh,¹ which was, several times, a royal capital.

Although the country is profoundly North African, Morocco established a separate identity very early on, a uniqueness due to geographical, historical, and cultural factors. This introduction will review these factors in broad strokes, in order to re-place the Moroccan rugs and textiles in this book in their context.

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTRASTS

Morocco is in the northwestern-most corner of the African continent. Occupying, as it does, an extremely strategic position,² it was soon a link between three worlds: Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe. The singularity of the country, however, resides in the diversity of its natural landscapes, climates, and soil, all of which have shaped a unique relationship between human beings and their environment.

Morocco has North Africa's highest mountains, which reach elevations of more than 4,000 meters [13,000 feet]. The country's mountain chains comprise four main ranges: The Rif, which runs along the

Mediterranean coast in the north, and the Middle Atlas, High Atlas, and Anti Atlas, which follow one after the other from north to south, forming a natural belt between two great climatic areas, the one exposed to the Atlantic's influences, and the other besieged by hot desert air currents.

The various rivers that furrow the country arise in these mountains, which act as water towers; in winter, they are often blanketed with snow above 1,600 m [5,200 feet]. Rainfall in the western Rif can reach 1,500 mm [48 feet, 9 inches]. For hundreds, even thousands of years, these mountains have also supplied the plains and cities with most of their population. They are, above all, the domain of the Berber-speaking peoples, the country's oldest, who have lived there continuously for millennia, as evidenced by the rock carvings of the High Atlas. These people live by a combination of herding and subsistence farming. The cultivation of primarily Mediterranean grains and trees takes place most often on terraces wrenched from the mountainsides on the wet slopes, and in deep valleys, on the dry slopes.

Nevertheless, there are bioclimatic differences between the various areas of the mountains. There is less rain in the eastern Rif, for example, than in the central and western zones of the chain. The eastern slopes of the Middle Atlas, the eastern Anti Atlas, and the southern slopes and eastern part of the High Atlas, exposed to the influences of the Sahara, receive less precipitation than the areas facing the ocean. In many places, life is

Middle Atlas village

Photo: ©Berbain/Explorer, Hoa-Qui, Paris

harsh during much of the year, when the snow and cold constrain people for a period of time. And yet, the mountains have never hindered human traffic: several natural mountain passes, known and used forever, allow passage and, therefore, a myriad of exchanges and influences.

Locked in between the ocean and the chains of the Atlas, the Atlantic plains and plateaus make up Morocco's breadbasket. In the west, all along the coast, these areas provide conditions favorable to farming without irrigation, especially in rainy years. Aside from a few long-settled urban centers, they tend to be sparsely inhabited, as a result of a life that once gave primacy to sheep-farming. These stretches were the first to be given over to modern, mechanized agriculture, with the intention of making the country self-sufficient in grains. The landscapes are somewhat monotonous, flat, and unvarying, compared to the majestic peaks of the High Atlas that dominate in the south. In that region itself, there are climatic differences between the areas directly affected by the Atlantic Ocean, such as Gharb, Chaouia, Doukkala, Abda, Chiadma, and the interior regions, such as Haouz and the central plateau, which are drier.

The pre-Saharan and Saharan regions extend south of the Atlas Mountains. The former receive the seasonal mountain waters that rush down the rivers, *wadis*. Along with springs and the ground water, these waters have given rise to the strings of palm groves that stretch from north to south. The rainfall—which does not exceed 100 mm [4 inches] per year—precludes any farming without irrigation, and irrigation is required along the waterways and around springs. Besides palm trees, which grow more densely as one goes farther south, crops are grown in small plots, which are furrowed by an ingenious irrigation system. Trees of Mediterranean type grow among the palms, mitigating the summer heat. The architecture, too, plays a part in the millennial effort to adapt. Earth has always been the region's principal building material, and the use of concrete in recent decades has proved a resounding architectural and environmental failure.

The green havens of the palm groves contrast with stark expanses, which are stony in the north, and increasingly inflected with dunes as one moves south. These vast territories would have been abandoned had people not developed a widespread and original way to exploit them: nomadism. In fact, nomadic pastoralism has always been a good complement to any agriculture that depends upon irrigation. Those policies that have misunderstood this originality and favored an irrigated agriculture that depends upon dams, at the expense of pastoral herding, have been unable to stem a continuous rural exodus.

Morocco's marked geographical contrasts, outlined here in broad strokes, have had profound effects not only upon the nation's history, but on its culture as well. This is not a simplistic determinism, and yet the country's destiny over time, as well as its cultural diversity, is due to geographical conditions that are both so varied and so specific.

THE DEPTH OF HISTORY

In an earlier introductory essay for a history of Morocco (Skounti 1998), I touched upon the major moments, the ebb and flow of a distant past that still surfaces in the present.

Morocco—an old Mediterranean and African land—has a long past. Prehistoric cultures evince an ancient human presence in Morocco, which was followed by the Neolithic revolution around 6000 B.C. and the evolution of the shapes and decorations of pottery and a new set of tools. Protohistory emerged as the Age of Metals; although a few bronze pieces manifest an interest in the material, it is the rock carvings that reveal a profusion of forms and images (Chenorkian 1988). These ancestors of the Berbers carved stone and raised cattle.

Whether herders or farmers, these Berbers, who constitute the original Moroccan population, absorbed immigrants and conquerors alike. They are called *imazighen*, or, in the singular, *amazigh*. Archeological remains tell us of their relationships with the Phoenicians and the

Carthaginians. Beginning in the fourth century B.C.—as the Gharb tumuli attest—political units took shape (Touré 1990, 5). These were the early years of the Mauretanian civilization that preceded the Roman occupation.

The kingdom of Mauretania extended over the northern part of the country, at least. Toward the end of the second and beginning of the first century B.C., when Rome was at war with Jugurtha, its ruler was King Bocchus I. The kingdom “was able to maintain its independence from the rival Mediterranean powers, Carthage and Rome” (Akerraz 1990, 23) until the late first century B.C.

Under the reigns of Juba II (reigned 25 B.C.–A.D. 23) and his son Ptolemy (reigned A.D. 23–40), urban life experienced unprecedented growth: cities such as Volubilis, Sala, Lixus, Banasa, Tamuda, and others, founded during the Mauretanian era, expanded and were embellished with new monuments and buildings. Across from Essaouira (Mogador), the Purple Islands were the site of active harvesting of a type of murex, a mollusk that yields a purple dye (Brignon 1967, 24) that was used, among other purposes, for dyeing woolen clothing.

Caligula had Ptolemy assassinated in A.D. 40 because, historians say, Ptolemy had the effrontery to wear, in the emperor's presence, a fine garment dyed purple. Although Rome annexed Mauretania, "Roman" Morocco was limited to a triangle formed by Volubilis, Sala, and Tangier. The limitation was more than spatial: Roman influence on Morocco was superficial. Around A.D. 285, under Diocletian, Rome evacuated the cities and lands of the interior.

In the fourth century, the persecutions of the Church having ceased, a segment of the population became Christian (Brignon 1967, 41). Berber kingdoms arose during the fifth and sixth centuries, and one of these had its capital at Volubilis. In 533, despite a temporary restoration of Byzantine domination, a "slow and irreversible re-berberization" was at work (Fantar and Decret 1981, 342).

The earliest traces of the Arab conquest and Islamization date from the late seventh century. The Berber resistance lasted more than half a century. By the same token, Islamization was slow and far from uniform. Christianity would survive at least until the Almohad era (twelfth and thirteenth centuries), paganism, at least until the eleventh century, while Judaism still exists today.

Independent states began forming in the eighth century. Idris I (reigned 788–91) founded the Idrisid dynasty in Volubilis. The capital moved to Fez, recently founded by his son Idris II (reigned 803–28/9). Other principalities arose elsewhere: one in Nakour, in the Rif; another in Sijilmassa in the southeast; and one in Tamesna, in the central Atlantic plains, by the Berghouata, who promulgated a berberized Islam.

Before long, the caravan routes between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa were controlled by the Almoravids, Berbers belonging to the Sanhaja³ branch in the Sahara, who, beginning in the mid-eleventh century, declared themselves religious reformers. The founding of Marrakesh (in 1070) marked the establishment of Almoravid power. They were the prime movers of the syncretism that arose between the Berber and Andalusian cultures.

In the early twelfth century, a new political movement shook the Almoravids. The Almohads, founded by the Mahdi Ibn Toumert, emerged in Tinnel in the High Atlas. His successor, Abdelmoumen (reigned 1130–63), conquered and unified the Maghreb and Andalusia.

The various conquests seem not to have entailed significant population shifts. The most notable appears to have been the deportation of the Beni Hilal Arabs to the Tadla and the Atlantic plains of the Gharb.

Unity and peace under the Almohads promoted the development of a brilliant civilization. Rabat's Hassan mosque and Seville's Giralda, masterpieces of Islamic architecture, were built under Yaqub El Mansour (reigned 1184–99).

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the weakness of the last rulers, the breaking up of the Maghreb, and the defeat at Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) in Spain combined to bring about the downfall of the Almohads. The Marinids, nomadic Berbers originally from the plateaus of eastern Morocco, conquered the Maghreb and Andalusia. They began by making the city of Fez their tributary and their capital. This was in the late thirteenth century, and sociopolitical and economic conditions had changed. The Marinids shared the Almohad territorial legacy with the Abdelouadides of Tlemcen and the Hafsids of Tunis; they only held Spain intermittently. "Power relations were about to lean in the Peninsula's favor, more precisely, to the Christians' advantage" (Kably 1986, 84).

The Marinids' decline was foreshadowed by political anarchy, an economic crisis, and a fragmented empire. Their successors, the Wattassids, were unable to meet the multiple difficulties of their time: the reorientation of Saharan trade toward the east, the establishment of independent fiefs (Sijilmassa, Marrakesh, Rif, among others), foreign penetration (the taking of Ceuta by the Portuguese in 1415), and, later, the Ottoman threat out of Algeria.

With the arrival of the Saadians, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Morocco's "ethnic" composition was complete. The vast Berber majority had absorbed Arab tribes who had themselves intermarried with autochthonous peoples of the Atlantic plain, Saïs, and the edges of the Sahara. The various dialects of the Berber language were spoken virtually throughout the countryside, as well as in the cities, where they coexisted with Moroccan Arabic, which became more securely entrenched subsequent to the fall of Granada (1492). Most of the black Berber-speaking peoples still lived along the edge of the Sahara and south of the Atlas Mountains, as they had for several millennia. The Jews, other long-established inhabitants, lived in both the country and the cities (Zafrani 1983); some arrived following the Reconquista.⁴

The Saadians conquered the country, liberated the coastal cities from Iberian occupation, controlled the Saharan routes, and established their capital in Marrakesh, near their original base in the Draa Valley. Under Ahmed El Mansour (reigned 1578–1603), the country enjoyed a largely peaceful period. The economy prospered: the sugar mills were now state-owned, and Morocco's fine sugar was much prized in England (Jacques-Meunié

1982, 782). However, the great plague that raged through the country between 1596 and 1608 decimated the population, including, in 1603, the sultan himself.

The succession was open, and the sultan's three sons killed one another attempting to accede to the throne (Brignon 1967, 217). After a long period of struggles among various movements, the Alids prevailed. It was the beginning of Muslim Morocco's most enduring dynasty.

The country was unified under Moulay Ismail (reigned 1672–1727), who founded a new capital, Meknes, and established a professional dynastic army. Following his death in 1727, the problem of his succession was fanned for thirty years by the very army he had attached to himself. Moulay Abdallah (reigned 1745–57) succeeded in restoring calm. Under the reign of Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah (1757–90), Morocco recognized the United States of America, the year after the Declaration of Independence in 1776.⁵

The nineteenth century was the era of European covetousness, inaugurated in North Africa by the capture of Algiers (1830). After the death of Moulay Hassan (reigned 1873–94) and with its financial difficulties, Morocco began to attract the colonial powers. On March 30, 1912, Moulay Abdelhafid (reigned 1908–12) signed the Protectorate Treaty. The country was then divided into a French zone, bracketed by two Spanish zones—the Rif and the Western Sahara—with Tangier granted the status of international city.

Despite the superior weaponry of the French and Spanish, the country would not be pacified until 1934, after twenty-two years of resistance and heroic episodes. The administration of the Protectorate took control of the Makhzen. Moroccan society was profoundly changed, at first in its material structures, then more slowly in its intangible culture.

The cities provided the forces that challenged the colonial power. This challenge began in the 1930s with a reform movement that would later demand independence. This was proclaimed on November 18, 1955, following the return from exile of the sultan Mohammed V (reigned 1927–1961), who installed the first government of independent Morocco. King Hassan II succeeded him in 1961, and, in 1975, called for the Green March, which made possible the restoration of sovereignty over the Sahara.

The country has undergone profound changes on the demographic, socioeconomic, political, and cultural fronts. In 1994, for the first time, the rural population was, with 48.6 percent of the country's 26 million inhabitants, smaller than the urban population. The 1990s, a decade of globalization, heralded changes, one example being political "alternance,"⁶ in place since

1998. Following the death of Hassan II (reigned 1961–1999), a new era began with the accession of Mohammed VI to the throne, an event that has inspired a genuine optimism that change and development will happen (Tozy 1999, 283).

THE DEPTH OF THE CULTURE

Moroccan culture⁷ is deeply marked by the following characteristics: 1) It is the expression of an agricultural and pastoral society that is nourished by the primordial relationship with the land and the herd, and with the exchange and circulation of goods (with the sea, too, to a lesser degree). 2) The herders, peasants, merchants, and artisans all exhibit a love for work well done. But they are able to savor well-earned rest: among the herders, sheep-shearing days are occasions for great joy and happiness; among the peasants, certain days are set aside for resting and purifying themselves; among artisans and merchants in the cities, it is still the custom today to close on Friday. 3) Work is a value, and honesty a virtue. Of course, this is a generally shared morality, one that is more defined in the breach, that is, by the stigmatization of those who fail in this duty. 4) A widespread and deeply rooted religiosity, acquired by turns from pagan practices, the "Africanized" Roman pantheon, and the three monotheisms. Islam is the most recent, but the most enduring, even becoming the

official state religion. A relationship with the sacred joins and strengthens intense social relationships, especially on the days of religious and other celebrations, of mourning, and of distresses that mark a work-filled life.

Agricultural, pastoral, and artisanal products are intended to satisfy the needs of the family and community, but also to stimulate exchange and the circulation of goods, so that one is always someone's farmer, herder, or artisan. Human ingenuity compensates for nature's deficiencies. Here, the sense of family, relations, blood ties reaches its greatest breadth, eating together and hospitality, its deepest meaning.

The primordial relationship with these resources also finds expression in the readiness with which they are defended. Moroccans are fierce warriors, and since earliest antiquity the land they passionately desire has taught them to sacrifice themselves. Weapons scratched in stone or etched in metal, the mastery of the fantasia and other equestrian games, and the war dances are a few distinctive cultural signs of this. This does not preclude very human behaviors expressing fear of death, fear for oneself. Nevertheless, when it comes time to do battle, the women will mark the warrior who holds back with henna, not to make him the butt of everyone's laughter but to point the finger at cowardice.

Wealth is sought after, but ostentation is disapproved of. Architecture reflects this tendency toward a primordial egalitarianism, whether in the double-slope villages of the Mediterranean North that hang onto the mountainsides; the *ksour*⁸ of the Saharan South, surrounded by protective enclosures; or houses clustered behind their walls in the historic cities. Everywhere there are the same sober façades, the same modest shapes, the same humility, since this home is but a temporary shelter for the passage of human beings whose days are dwindling in a land that lastingly belongs only to their creator. Thus, ostentation is only permitted to a few people, who, on the other hand, are obligated to behave generously toward the multitude. Economic, social, political, and ethical systems permit the community to control individuals; to make possible cycles of redistribution; and sometimes even to allow the use of violence. And when the accumulation of wealth is joined to a corner on power, and dispute becomes a dangerous act, then a messianic belief provides comfort during the wait for better days.

Although Moroccan culture may be described in these few, summary brush strokes, it is nevertheless as rich and diverse as the country's highly contrasting geography and multi-millennial history. This diversity appears to be cultivated, sought after, and

defended. And that is why foreign visitors are first struck by the contrasts of tones, colors, scents, temperaments, and traditions, be they vestimentary, culinary, linguistic, or something else.

This is also a dynamic culture, ready to adopt features from elsewhere, without denying its roots, this profoundly Berber foundation, which has been enriched by thousands of years of African, Mediterranean, Arab-Muslim, Western, and other influences.⁹ Change within continuity might be a very good characterization of Moroccan culture. Unity within diversity would be another way to put it. Each time in its history that the temptation toward uniformity arose, subterranean forces swung into action to defend a millennial right to difference.

The twentieth century brought many changes, which have been gradual, but are unprecedented in Morocco's history. The colonial period brought about the first significant turnings, even though two parallel logics coexisted for several decades—that of traditional Moroccan society and a modern one brought in by transformations in the world. We are witnessing the erosion, little by little, of the ancient social and cultural frameworks: a dwindling of the traditional structures, the disappearance of certain cultural features, the adoption of a new relationship to time and space, an adaptation to new ways of being, and so on.

One of the principal consequences of this transformation is the emergence of the individual, a corollary of the gradual waning of the preeminence of the community. On a strictly cultural plane, new forms are being adopted, sometimes poured into preexisting molds, sometimes introduced in a less nuanced manner. One example of this is the French language, which made possible the emergence of a Francophone Moroccan literature. The same is true of painting, theater, cinema, and many other modes of cultural expression.

At times, the traditional culture finds a way to continue within these new media. This is the case with music, song, religious preaching, and others. Or else these media are used to establish modernity as a value, to inscribe oneself once and for all in the modern world. The cultural effervescence that Morocco is experiencing today is an accurate translation of its ambivalence among several perceptions of what it is to be the Moroccan society of the new century.

Notes

¹ According to the historian Ahmed Toufiq (1989), the name Marrakesh, of Berber origin, is composed of *amur*, which means "protection," and *akouch*, which is the name of God, thus, "the site placed under God's protection." The location was intended to harbor commercial and/or religious activities that would require peace to be made among tribes.

² In this geographical survey, I refer in part to the work of Mohamed Aneur (1998).

³ According to the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun, the Berbers were divided into three main branches: the Sanhaja, ancestors of the people of the Tamazight linguistic area of central Morocco; the Masmouda, forebears of the Chleuh, in the southwest; and the Zenata, progenitors of the Riffians, on the Mediterranean coast.

⁴ Historians use this term for the Christian reconquest of Andalusia, after eight centuries of Muslim presence.

⁵ A decade later, in 1787, the two nations signed a treaty of Peace and Friendship, the earliest of its kind in the diplomatic history of the United States (Lugan 2000, 195).

⁶ In Moroccan political vocabulary, the word "alternance" means the access to power, for the first time since independence, of a government led by the socialist party (USFP).

⁷ The idea of culture is considered here, from the anthropological perspective, as including all the Moroccans' production, both intangible and tangible. This definition breaks with the sense usually attributed to the idea of culture, notably its Arabic synonym *thaqafa*, which is limited to book learning.

⁸ *Ksour*, the plural of *ksar*, are the villages of southern Morocco.

⁹ Art is the domain that best illustrates this synthesis: the original Berber geometry absorbed the Islamic arabesque; they both followed a parallel evolution and came together again in myriad artistic expressions (architecture, rugs, embroidery, jewelry, painting, and so on).

