

MEMORIES OF THE WOOL: “THE SIEVE OF THE DOM” CARPET PROJECT

THIS PROJECT WAS PROPOSED AS PART OF A COLLATED SURVEY FOR THE EXHIBITION “BARVALO” AT THE MUSÉE DES CIVILISATIONS DE L’EUROPE ET DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE (MUCEM)¹. IT INVOLVED MAKING A CARPET WITH THE WET FELTING TECHNIQUE AND WAS CONDUCTED IN SAINT-DENIS BETWEEN OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER 2019. THIS ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT, WHICH WAS REALIZED WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF SEVERAL ACTORS (SCIENTIFIC, ARTISTIC AND ASSOCIATIVE), ADDRESSES THE ISSUES OF TRANSMISSION AND MEMORY OF THE LEVANTINE DOM COMMUNITY’S MIGRATIONS.

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1st picture : “The felted sieve on the center of the carpet” (credit: Yahya Al-Abdullah)

The project aimed to make a felted wool carpet in a collaboration between five artists from the collective of La Briche Foraine² and ten Levantine Dom women living in St-Denis. The Levantine Dom is a marginalized ethnic minority that is often called pejoratively, *Qurbat*, *Nawar* or *Jangal*, three words in Arabic that refer to a person who is “uncivilized”, “uneducated” and “ill-mannered”. They had a semi-nomadic life style and circulated between Syria and Lebanon till the year 2011 when the Syrian uprising pushed many of them to join their families in Lebanon (Al-Abdullah, 2018). Dom is a cognate with Rom and Lom. Some historians and linguists argue that there is an ethnic connection between these ethnic groups although they are distributed in the Middle East and Europe (Herin, 2016).

¹ Barvalo is an exhibition dedicated to the history and diversity of the Romani populations of Europe. It was a long project that started in 2018 and was presented in Mucem, Marseille between May, 10, 2023-September, 4, 2023. See the link: <https://www.mucem.org/en/barvalo>

² La Briche Foraine is an engaged artistic collective in the city of Saint-Denis that has existed since 2011. See website: <https://labriche.fr/>

³ The Association Chapiteau Rajganawak is a hybrid socio-cultural and artistic place that hosts several workshops and events that are aimed to work with local communities in the city of Saint-Denis. See the website: <http://rajganawak.com/>

The argument is based on the similarities in structural features between Domari and Romani languages. However, these linguistic similarities could be due to the fact that both Central Indic languages shared a historical characteristic of being languages of commercial nomads with parallel migratory patterns (Matras, 2012), so the evidence of having an ethnic connection between the two groups is still a subject of speculations.

The Dom has a “double anchoring” (Sayad, 1999) in Syria and Lebanon throughout the 20th century. This anchoring was notably observed when a significant number of the community members moved to Lebanon after the Syrian uprising in March, 2011 and they then continued to France and Belgium through the North African migration route starting from 2014 (Al-Abdullah, 2023). This community was also economically dependent on the dental prosthesis work and sieve making they had learned from their ancestors (Al-Jibawi, 2006).

The project was realized by five main prolonged workshops and several small sessions in the Association Chapiteau Rajganawak³. I actively participated in the first and last workshops. In the first workshop, I tried to elicit the information from the Dom women about significant drawing, stories and symbols and to mediate between the actors in the project. My participation in the last workshop was to conduct interviews with the participants and facilitate the recap of the project.

The choice of the material and the object was for both practical and symbolic reasons. The first practical aspect was the presence of an artist from la Briche collective who is used to making felted wool carpets. The second aspect is that the Syrian Dom women are very familiar with the material as well. As for the symbolic part, it was linked to the positive memories that the wool could bring to an exiled community as a material they fabricated objects with and used in their own homes back in Syria and Lebanon. Another symbolic aspect is linked to the famous saying that each carpet has its own story and that this is what makes it special. So, this project was trying to create the unique story of inclusion in which this carpet could help the participants to get to know each other and create something significant all together, as a recently arrived group and a host community.



2nd picture : “Water and Soap: Women Washing the carpet” (credit: Camille Brisson’s footage for the short documentary “Souf”)

The Dom women chose the symbolic central figure: a sieve, known to be manufactured by the Dom community in the Levant. In the middle of this sieve, there is a small object that is usually used to push the seeds or the liquid down through the net of the sieve. The sieve maker is a source of pride for the whole family as he guards the cultural heritage of the community (Al-Jibawi, 2006). The four arrows that are linked to the sieve are spikes of wheat. This is a reference to the seasonal work in agriculture as well as an emphasis of the role of the sieve. While some women recalled the tattoos of wheat spikes that their grandmothers used to have to symbolize fertility, others said that it was used as a beautifying element. To honor the hybrid team and the place where the carpet was made, the team decided to embroider their names in Arabic and the place and the year in French.

⁴Les Marchandes de Tapis continue their artisanal work in France and in other countries. Their work can be followed in their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/lesmarchandesdetapis> and their Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/lesmarchandesdetapis/>

There were three important highlights in this project. The first was transformation of the savoir-faire between two different groups regarding the same material. As most of the Dom women explained that they used to use the wool to make many bedding objects for marrying couples in the family, they managed to learn a completely new set of skills with the same material, and shared their expertise with the artists in the project. The second was the discussion about what is considered by the society to be a profession and what is not. For the Dom women, the artisanal work they did in bedding was not considered as a profession, because it lacked the presence of a proper workshop and the possibility to present it to the public and eventually sell it. It was just what they learned to do and kept doing at home for personal use. The third, the carpet was acquired by the Mucem and is a part of the national collection. That is to say, the Dom, as a migrant community in France, managed to have a trace of their cultural heritage in the host country.

To conclude, this project is an attempt to shed the light and give value to the artisanal work women are deprived of. The project managed to create a human connection between all the members of the team and also managed to create a beautiful carpet that tells the story of the arrival of this displaced community in the city of Saint-Denis in France and part of their cultural heritage. The project has had a very interesting continuation as well. The carpet stays as a part of the national collection of Mucem. In addition to that, the artists created a women's collective to make carpets now called "Les Marchandes de Tapis & Co"⁴ that continues making similar projects in France and abroad.

L'auteur

Yahya Al-Abdullah is an anthropologist and a PhD researcher (EHESS, IC Migrations). His current research focuses mainly on migration studies, forced displacement, education for migrants and integration. Living and working in five different countries (sending and receiving migrants) so far, he has always been driven by subjects of research that are directly linked to social justice and social equity. At the moment he is writing his PhD dissertation on the question of urban integration of the Levantine Dom community in the northern Parisian suburbs.

Pour aller plus loin

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