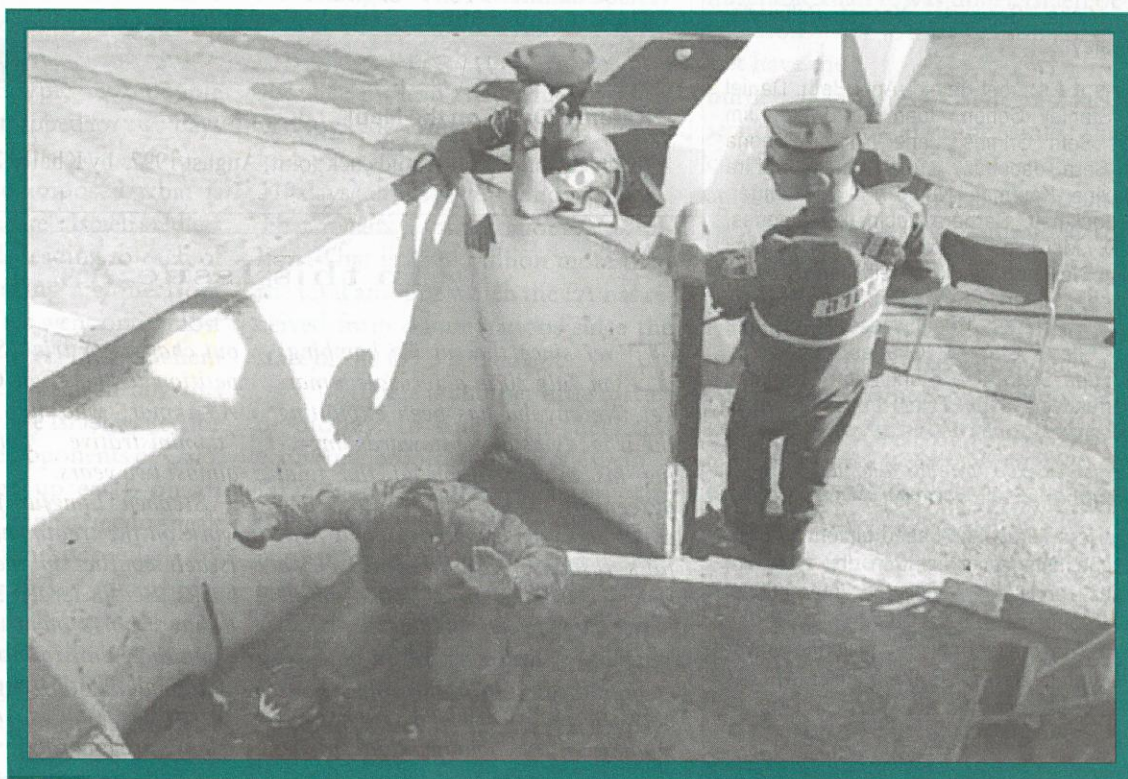


CHALLENGE

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The Couching Stitch

by *Sumana Ramanan*

During the Intifada various self-help groups sprang up to provide alternative sources of income to women whose husbands had lost their jobs. Handicrafts in particular received an unexpected boost. This was work that the women could do at home. (With an average of seven children per household, Palestinian women are tied to the house.) According to Carol Morton, who runs a crafts outlet in Jerusalem, the work provides not only money, but also a measure of liberation.

Morton's outlet is called 'Sunbula,' Arabic for a grain of wheat. The shop occupies a small room in St. Andrews Church across from the Old City. It is full to the brim with colorful cushions, tapestries, and gowns. Their beauty hints nothing of the work that has gone into them. It is not merely the toil of the making, but also the toil of the bringing. For these are crafts in a time of closure.

Ein Areek, a village north of Ramallah, is one of many whose works find their way to Sunbula. The village sits on a couple of limestone hills terraced with olives. The main street runs along the valley, with houses scattered upwards on either side. Half the village is a refugee camp. As such it remains under full Israeli occupation, in what the Oslo accords label "Area C." The other half is in "Area B": here the Palestinian Authority is responsible for civil matters, but Israel controls security.

There is no public transportation to Ein Areek. For many the only way to get anywhere is on foot or by donkey. The sole source of water is a

tap on the main street. One July morning when I visited, several old women were slowly making their way down the slopes with canisters tied to their donkeys. Two boys were already at the tap, filling plastic Coke bottles. A rustic scene. When one of us raised a

--, and insisted I try it on. "Look at the colors!" she exclaimed with pride.

From Ein Areek the crafts go to the Greek Catholic Pastoral Crafts Center in Ramallah, which gives work to women from nearby villages. When the Intifada began petering out in 1990, and there were signs of a settlement with Israel, Aida Zyedeh, the Center's director, thought it would soon outlive its purpose. "Nothing could have been further from the truth," she said. "The need is now much greater than during the Intifada.

Women come looking for work ev-



Cushion covers embroidered with the couching stitch: On the wane.

camera, they snapped, "Don't take our picture. People are always coming here taking our picture, and our lives don't change. Make them give us running water instead!"

Na'ame Ablu, 18, lives in a house high up on one of the slopes. It is a fifteen-minute climb from the road. She and her sister have been doing cross-stitch embroidery for the past five years. Their earnings contribute to the family income. "They buy their own clothes," said their brother, Muhammad. Their mother then brought out a sample of Na'ame's work -- a traditional Palestinian gown

every day, but we often have to turn them away."

Yet Ramallah is cut off by closure, and tourists do not come anywhere near it. Sunbula in Jerusalem is therefore crucial to Aida Zyedeh's center. There are about forty such self-help organizations, gathering the work of craftswomen like Na'ame and shipping them on to Sunbula.

Another, this time in the West Bank's southern canton, is the Tsurif Women's Cooperative. Almost all the women from Tsurif and its surroundings, some 400 in all, receive monthly payments for their needlework and

embroidery.

In March this year a Hamas activist from Tsurif blew himself up in a Tel Aviv restaurant, killing three Israeli women. Israel immediately put the village under curfew. The Tsurif women were grounded for weeks. The village ran out of rice and vegetables. "We weren't able to get a check across to them," said Sunbula's Carol Morton. "The Israelis were changing the rules everyday. Finally, one of the women managed to get to Bethlehem, and I handed the check over there."

The lack of infrastructure in the villages causes numerous logistical problems. Tsurif has no banks, so Cooperative members must go to Hebron to cash their checks. This is no mean feat, given the closures and the lack of public transportation. After an attack like that in Tel Aviv, Israel places troops at the entrance to each West Bank village, closing it off from all others ("internal closure"), a practice that can go on for weeks. In addition Tsurif has no telephone lines. "The Cooperative finally bought a cellular phone for \$2,000," said Morton. "But relaying orders verbally is extremely expensive and time-consuming. What we need is a fax. Israel did not do anything for these villages."

As the Palestinian economy becomes increasingly hostage to Israel's dictates, the need for alternative sources of income grows. Palestinians have no control over their borders. They still depend on Israel for all basic commodities, like cement, steel, flour, and meat. As a result, their cost of living is tied to Israel's. On the other hand, because of the closure, the work isn't there. Crafts might have become a thriving small-scale industry, but the closure chokes that off too.

"When I started this shop during the uprising, the various groups could come into Jerusalem to collect their supplies," said Morton. "Now we have

to meet at some third place, like Bethlehem. Some of the cloth used in the handicrafts is woven in the Old City. But the NGOs (non-governmental organizations) cannot come in to buy it, and the merchants have absolutely no incentive to go to the various towns and villages. It is so difficult to get past all the checkpoints."

Sunbula belongs to the International Federation of Alternative Trade, which aims to improve the livelihood of disadvantaged people in developing countries by offering just alternatives to unfair trade structures and practices.

"In practical terms this means that we do not maximize profits at the expense of those producing the crafts," said Morton. "We encourage cooperation between different groups, not competition. We also strive to preserve and develop the cultural identity of those we buy from."

The cross-stitch, for instance, is the most popular needlework technique among Palestinians, and continues to be in vogue. But the more complicated couching-stitch, said Morton, is on the wane. "There is little institutional support for these crafts. People need some incentive to keep their skills alive." ■



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