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FROM CHINTZ TO CHITA: A BRAZILIAN TEXTILE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Bilingualism has always been a constant in my life. My father’s side of the family migrated from Japan as my surname suggests, whereas my mother is of Polish descent. But while my father comprehends Japanese and my mother grasps some Polish, I was denied learning either languages. Since I was born and raised in Brazil, I have Portuguese as my first language, and acquired English as my second. The ability to use these two languages – sometimes mixed and other times switching – along with this multicultural background, has had some ripple effects. The first one was an inclination to experience life in a native English speaking country, which led me to move to Australia after I graduated from college, and more recently to Savannah. The second relates to how Portuguese and English are connected inside my mind, more specifically how lexical representations from my native language affect and are affected by my second language.\footnote{Kroll, JF, E Michael, N Tokowicz, and R Dufour. 2002. "The development of lexical fluency in a second language," Second Language Research Vol. 18, No. 2, 137-171. Communication Source, EBSCOhost (accessed August 20, 2016). When the authors try to work towards a model of the developing lexicon through empirical} A third consequence was me being an assistant translator, which resulted in a varied lexicon in both languages.
It is interesting to note that the present research only came to life as a result of those three aspects described above operating together. While taking a Textile History course with Professor Jessica Smith in the Savannah College of Art and Design back in the fall of 2014, I came across a lexical inconsistency (or mental word representation that did not match) regarding the word chintz and the Portuguese word chita. My curiosity to better understand these words in both languages was the tip of the iceberg of what followed. In this paper, I will first explain such inconsistency. I will then describe the historical route and evolution of chita as a textile. Finally, I will argue that, although many believe chita and chintz to be the same fabric, chita became a Brazilian textile due to its singular design and, most importantly, to its connection with national identity.

Flipping through a Textile book, my eyes were apparently and inexplicably drawn to the (then, unknown to me) word chintz. I quickly learned through images of floral textiles and brief explanations what that word meant: a glazed printed cotton fabric that was originally made in India for the English market. I suspected almost instantly that chintz could be related to the Portuguese word chita (pronounced /ʃiːtʌ/), which, from my language repertoire, was an authentic Brazilian light-cotton floral textile. (Fig.1) Looking up the terms in different online search sources, some had no translation of chita to English nor chintz to Portuguese, others would translate one but would not the other, and finally some would indicate chita was the direct translation of chintz. I resorted to Clive Edwards’s book How to Read Pattern, a text originally written in English which has been translated to Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Russian, Portuguese, and German (as of August 2016). Comparing its English version with the Brazilian Portuguese one, the latter realization was confirmed: chita and chintz were considered the same.2,3 Still, the design, bright colors and cultural aspects imbued in that Brazilian fabric referred to as chita seemed to differ significantly from this chintz I was meeting for the first time.

If chintz and chita are similar in their spelling but represent distinctly different florals, their history becomes entangled when we see the etymology of the word chintz and the origin of such textile. The well-documented history of chintz indicates that the word derived from the Hindi chitta or chint, which means variegated or spotted.4,5 Similarly, chita is also believed to have

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developed from the same Hindi terms.\textsuperscript{6} It is likely, though, that the word chita preceeded the word chintz, even amongst the British.\textsuperscript{7}

This theory might be explained through the understanding that chintz is one of the products of globalization, an international integration process of people and goods. The most common understanding is that globalization began in the year 1571 with the continuous exchange of products between the heavily populated continents and the lasting impacts such exchanges had in all trading partners.\textsuperscript{8} Two of the most important figures who helped connect East and West, which led to the beginning of globalization, were the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, who reached India through the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, and Christopher Columbus, who reached the Americas in 1492.\textsuperscript{9} But it was the Portuguese who first named the cotton textiles they found at that time in India, more precisely in Calicut: calicó was the chosen word.\textsuperscript{10} As this became the generic name for all Indian cotton fabrics in the following years, one can assume the brightly colored floral cotton textiles would receive a new name. Indianos, pintados and chita were some of the names the Portuguese traders would sometimes designate them at that time. It then becomes clear that, while the word chita preceeded the word chintz, they initially (and for centuries) meant the same. Similarly, indianos and indiennes are also very likely to be the exact same product.

As one can conclude from the above, the Portuguese had a crucial role in helping create the fad for Indian cottons which would arise in the 17th century in Europe. Vasco da Gama, credited for the onset of the trade of Indian textiles with Europe, was just the first to arrive in India. Other Portuguese traders would help make chita known in different countries in the beginning of globalization. The English were already well-aware of Indian prints as early as 1592, when they pillaged chitas from the Portuguese vessel Madre de Deus.\textsuperscript{11} In the case of France, the trade seems to have begun a little later and in a more friendly manner. Some sources believe the Portuguese were, in reality, the ones who made the French aware of the indiennes between 1630 and 1640.\textsuperscript{12,13}

Shortly, the demand for Indian cotton textiles grew all over Europe, and the import of such textiles increased after the creation of the British East India Company, which briefly had the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{11} Nina J. Birjukov, Zapadnoeuropejskie nabívnye tkani 16-18 veka: sobranie Gos. Ermitaża = West European printed textiles 16th-18th century : State Hermitage collection (Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1973), 35.
\bibitem{12} Ibid, 29.
\end{thebibliography}
monopoly of the trade with India, and most importantly the French East India Company in the mid-17th century.\textsuperscript{14} The growing demand, along with the prices of those imported goods, would lead to the creation of printing workshops in Europe that competed with the Indian textiles by imitating their designs. It also prompted an attempt to ban the trading, manufacturing and use of printed textiles in France, Germany, Switzerland and England at the end of the same century.\textsuperscript{15,16}

It is important to note here that, although the Portuguese were the ones to first bring into Europe these Indian printed cottons, they did not show an instant interest in making use or manufacturing versions of them in their land. As a matter of fact, the printing of cotton textiles in Portugal would only take place in a more fruitful manner in 1775, roughly a century later than other European nations such as England, France, and the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{17} One of the reasons for such may lie in the fact that the Portuguese rejected handcrafts and showed bias against weavers, dyers and printers.\textsuperscript{18} Another reason may be credited to the early 18th century trade agreements between Portugal and England, which eliminated the customs barriers for manufactured wool fabrics and greatly benefited the English textile industry.\textsuperscript{19}

When it comes to Brazil, it is documented that cotton was grown, spun and woven by the indigenous peoples even before the first Portuguese arrived in 1500.\textsuperscript{20} A few decades after the “discovery”, looms were transported from Europe. But chita would became part of the life in the Brazilian settlement around the time cotton printing workshops flourished in Portugal, more than two hundred years after the Portuguese arrival. Brazil was in reality responsible for consuming most of the chitas produced in Portugal at that time.\textsuperscript{21,22} Pezzolo takes this point in history as the introduction of chitas in Brazil. Alternatively, Neira suggests that the first printed cotton textiles might have arrived from England before that, as a result of the trade agreements described earlier between the English and the Portuguese.\textsuperscript{23} Either way most of these chitas and chintzes, forcibly shipped from Europe and India under the Colonial Pact, which made Portugal the exclusive supplier of manufactured goods to Brazil, and the Methuen Treaty, which extended such rights to English textiles, served as currency in the slave trade between Brazil and Africa in the 18th century.\textsuperscript{24} The surplus was likely consumed internally, although it is unclear how they fared price-wise.

Even though the weaving of cotton was familiar to the indigenous peoples before the European arrived, it is accepted that small cotton mills emerged in Brazil only around the year 1705 in the state of Minas Gerais.\textsuperscript{25} The mining industry there, the miners and their families were likely the

\textsuperscript{14} Birjukova, 29.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 31-32.
\textsuperscript{17} Pedreira, 540.
\textsuperscript{18} Maria Emilia Kubrusly et al., Que Chita Bacana. (São Paulo: A Casa, 2005), 42.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 42-46.
\textsuperscript{20} Pezzolo, 47.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 544.
\textsuperscript{24} Kubrusly et al., 52.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 67.
responsible for the ensuing demand for light cotton fabrics which supported the timid textile manufacturing. These cotton textiles were probably already printed imitating English chintzes; and by the end of the 18th century they were seen as a threat to the chitas imported from Portugal and England, which led to a complete ban on all textile activities in the colony by Queen Maria I of Portugal from 1785 to 1808. As Kubrusly et al. explain, the production of cottons did not come to a halt during that time. However, during and after the prohibition there was a shift in use: while the wealthy landowners would only wear imported textiles arriving from Europe - regardless of how heavy they were for a tropical climate - the rural workers and slaves would wear the plain cottons and chitas made in the colony. This is how the association between chita and the common people came to life in Brazil.26

The Brazilian textile industry in general faced some adversities during the 19th century. The short life span and the lack of official information support this thesis.27 England, the biggest competitor in the textile field at that time, had its factories mechanized, whereas Brazil was still using woodblocks to make its chitas in the beginning of the 19th century.28 As a result of the financial difficulties, the first major chita factory in the colony would only be born in 1872, followed by several others in the subsequent decades. The designs of those chitas, however, were inclined to resonate the Portuguese chitas and the English chintzes. Even when industry became more solid and developed in the beginning of the 20th century, the prints were copied directly from English sources.29 Things would only begin to change as a consequence of a bigger nationalistic ideal which affected several areas. Starting from the 1922 Modern Art Week of São Paulo, Brazil went through a second independence from Europe, this time political and cultural. Such emancipation required the creation of an authentic Brazilian tradition, which would serve as the basis for an autonomic Brazilian art. It was the beginning of a pursuit of brasiliade (or Brazilianness) in conjunction with modernity.30

The search for a so called brasiliade gained more strength in the 1930’s, after president Getúlio Vargas changed paradigms, distancing itself from the old ways. Besides looking for solutions to economic problems, Vargas made the quest for brasiliade an official state issue, linking nation with culture-building. The elements defended by some of the pioneers of Brazilian Modernism in 1922 were now accepted as authentic components of brasiliade. The anthropophagy, or cannibalistic approach, was the solution, as Philippou explains. “The African, the oriental and the Amerindian; the Baroque, associated with the colonial and the Portuguese or Lusitanian; and, last but not least, tropical nature (…) The development of Lusotropical civilisation offered an elaborate formula that served to explain the successful mixing of these elements, expected to function as levers of cultural emancipation.”31

As one can see from the above, chita had all the elements to be groomed to become one of the symbols of national identity in this culturally emancipated modern Brazil: it had oriental roots;

26 Kubrusly et al, 74-79.
27 Neira, 111.
28 Kubrusly et al., 80.
29 Ibid., 102.
31 Ibid., 254.
was associated with the Africans as it was worn by slaves and served as currency in the slave trade; although not Baroque, it was part of the colonial narrative and the rural environment; and the floral motifs were tropical and exotic. Still, in the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s, when the national textile industry tried to emphasize a certain Brazilian aesthetic through prints, chita was not included as one of the representatives of modern Brazil. Differently from the fine fabrics, it was extremely connected to the lower ranks in society and its quality was still too low to demonstrate technological advancement (it had open plain weaves, less number of colors than imported chintzes, and a hard hand). Interestingly enough, it was exactly during those decades that chita was transformed to emerge as the bright-colored fabric Brazilians understand as the chitão - which, for instructive purposes, can be translated as big chita - that illustrate the beginning of this paper. Kubrusly et al. provide a careful account of that. In the 50’s, the width of chitas was 60cm and 90cm. One of the chita mills developed a way to create 120cm wide fabrics, which were called chitão. Along with the new width, brighter colors and bigger florals were printed onto this cloth. The name though only adhered when other mills followed suit in the 60’s. While there is no consensus as wether this fabric was named after its width or the bolder florals, most believe if it was in fact because of the first, as larger florals were already printed on the narrower chitas. What comes to define chitão then, besides the wider width, are the combination of bright primary and secondary colors, a distinctive outline around the motifs, a sense of depthlessness and the predominance of one color. On the other hand, chitinha - or the small chita - is named exactly because of its smaller printed flowers, a pattern that may have been copied from the English liberty. Both fabrics, chitão and chitinha, are commonly referred to as chita by consumers and retailers these days.

Technological developments helped create this new textile. Not only was the width important, but also the increased number of colors that was only possible in the 70’s and 80’s when new rotary printing machines became available in the country. These two facts make way for a connection between the popular chita and those ideals of a national aesthetic used in fine textiles and supported by modernization seen between the 50’s and the 70’s. On top of that, the designs that emerged can be seen as a consequence of the mindset of brasiliade which had been paved from the 30’s. But even presenting higher quality and acceptance by the public, the consumption of chitas decreased in the following decades (due to a combination of factors that include the lower price of synthetic fibers and the will to keep distance from all the things cheap and popular) and many chita manufacturers decided to cease all production.

Despite the decreasing consumption and the fact that chita was not supposed to become a true Brazilian textile, it ultimately became a national symbol. As early as the 60’s, continuing through the end of the 20th century and until now, chita has been receiving new meanings and connections, mostly because of its link with the common people. One of the first examples is Hélio Oiticica’s installation Tropicália, from 1967, which would later lend its name to an important cultural movement in Brazil. He built a sensorial labyrinth, which consisted of elements such as sand, brick and a TV set, with one of its walls covered in chita. This revision of a Brazilian image, still connected to its past, according to the artist recreated the myth of

32 Neira, 218.
33 Kubrusly et al., 118.
34 Ibid.
miscegenation, a true Brazilian culture that cannibalistically absorbed the European heritage in favor of the indigenous and African ones.\textsuperscript{35} It was a second wave of anthropophagy seen in the Brazilian arts. Also investigating brasilidade, artist Beatriz Milhazes has made use of collage, painting and elements from the popular culture in her pieces since the 80’s. The artist herself admits to be influenced by the richness of the junction between the popular and fine art, the decorative, the carnaval culture, and by chita.\textsuperscript{36} The explosion of colors then becomes inherent to the popular culture in what can be seen as a third wave of anthropophagy.

If there is a forth wave currently happening, I like to think of street artists Os Gemeos and Rimon Guimarães as ideal candidates. Although chita is not central in their work, it is possible to see how it appears every now and then, either in the multiplicity of colors as a whole, the printed clothes depicted, or the emanating brasilidade so characteristic in Brazilian graffiti. Similar to them, I have never worked with chita as subject or medium. In fact, I always wanted to get away from a certain predetermined brasilidade through colors. But in my most current work I did the opposite, as I embraced carnaval-like sequins and color combinations that now speak to me of accepting my tropical heritage.

In the fashion field, several Brazilian designers have intermittently used chita and chita prints in their creations. In the 60’s, the first designer to elevate chita from its lower position to a higher and desirable one was Zuzu Angel. Her floral dresses can be seen as a reflection of the hippie and \textit{tropicália} zeitgeist, which ultimately helped emphasize an image of tropical exuberance for Rio de Janeiro. Decades later, for his summer/spring 2017 collection, designer Ronaldo Fraga, who is an avid chita admirer, has just brought to the runway flowers that seem to have been cut out from chita fabrics and sewn onto light summery dresses, invoking both Brazilian and African heritages. In a less literal way, Rio-based womenswear brand Farm seems to continue Zuzu Angel’s tropical work through the creation of collections that transpire brasilidade. The multicolored floral prints allude to an idea of the Brazilian flora being what defines our brasilidade.

When investigating Brazilian culture and folklore, we can see chita present in Midsummer celebrations, which in Brazil takes place during midwinter. It is understood that catholics commemorate St. John’s day on June 24th, but in Brazil it has become the norm to hold celebrations throughout the month of June, therefore its name \textit{Festa Junina}. Although further research is due on why and when chita was originally adopted as a traditional textile for this specific important festivity, my interest lies in the current usage of chita as the preferred fabric for decoration and clothes. Price is certainly one of the factors, but the link chita has with both the rural and the past can provide a better understanding.

The last example I would like to point out comes from the handicraft as a tangible means to an intangible heritage. In our case, what comes as the intangible culture is pretty real: the chita fabric is widely used by Brazilian artisans as a material for their creations. Although there is no official data available with regard to its usage, it is clear that chita is a versatile textile easily

\textsuperscript{35} Hélio Oiticica, interview by Walmir Ayala, \textit{A criação plástica em questão} (Petrópolis: Editôra Vozes, 1970), 108.
employed in all sorts of crafts: from decorated hangers to throw pillows, from handbags to drawer covering. Chita ends up being used to reinforce a certain brasilidade in those creations that come from popular culture, which in turn reiterates chita as a truly Brazilian textile. The ancestry of chintz, its domestication in England, and material and idiomatic contribution to the creation of Englishness have already been reconsidered. It is about time we understood the ancestry of chita, its anthropophagy in Brazil, and material and idiomatic contribution to the creation of Brazilianness so we can differentiate chintz from chita.

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