The Role Of The Middleman In The Trade Of Real Madras Handkerchief (Madras Plaids)

Sandra Lee Evenson
University of Minnesota

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Sandra Lee Evenson
Design, Housing, and Apparel
240 McNeal Hall
1985 Buford Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108

The Kalabari people live and work in the Niger delta of southern Nigeria. There are some twenty-two Kalabari island settlements dispersed among the Santa Barbera, Santa Bartholomew, Sombreiro, and New Calabar Rivers (Jones: 1963, Daly: 1983) with Buguma, Abonnema, and Bakana their most recognized commercial and cultural centers; though, many Kalabari are employed in the more homogeneous city of Port Harcourt. (Daly: 1983)

Their location on the Niger delta favoured an economy based on fishing and trade. Originally, the Kalabari traded up-river for vegetables and grain in exchange for salt and fish. They also traded across the delta, most notably for textiles. Oral tradition suggests a five hundred year history of this trade in the Niger delta and beyond long before the Europeans arrived. (Eicher: 1988) When the Portuguese landed in the late fifteenth century, they found a well-developed trade network in place. (Alagoa: 1970) And with the arrival of the Europeans, the Kalabari had access to cloth not only from indigenous sources, but also from sources as far away as England and India. (Eicher:1988)

In terms of cloth manufacture, the Kalabari are unusual in the area because they do not produce their own cloth. They do transform an Indian madras by subtracting warp and weft threads, called *pelete bite* (Erekosima and Eicher: 1981); but, there is no evidence of spinning, weaving, or dyeing. (Eicher: 1984, Eicher, Erekosima, Thieme: 1982) However, they seem to have a history of being

charmed by cloth. Renne suggests that it is because the Kalabari do not produce their own cloth that they are so enamored of it. (1986) In any case, the combination of geographic location and love of cloth for both its extrinsic and intrinsic values accounts for the large quantities of textiles accumulated by the Kalabari.

From an economic perspective, it was the acquisition of the exotic, the unique and the hard-to-come-by -- and lots of it -- that was the most telling indication of the Kalabari trader's ability to negotiate a profitable deal. Of all the trade cloths that passed through Kalabari hands, it was the trade cloth from India that came to have the greatest material significance. Over time, these Indian trade cloths have been culturally authenticated (Erekosima: 1979, Erekosima and Eicher: 1981) into both ritual and daily life, demonstrating, in Schneider and Weiner's words, " the capacity of cloth to encode kinship and political histories . . . " (1986)

One of the most significant of the Indian trade cloths collected and curated by the Kalabari is *injiri*. It is recognized by the West as madras plaid: a yarn-dyed, hand-woven fabric featuring plaid, striped, or checked patterns in blue/black, off-white, and red/orange combinations; though other specific shades are employed. *Injiri* was imported by Portuguese, Dutch, and English traders through the East India Companies to West Africa, possibly even from the earliest days of trade in the 1400's due to the Portuguese trading post empire. (Curtin: 1984) Significantly, the Kalabari also call *injiri*, this madras plaid, Real India.

Eicher, Erekosima, Daly, Aronson, and Renne have described in detail what is known about how *injiri* is used in the Kalabari life cycle. But, to give a very brief description for our purposes today, *injiri* is and has been curated by revered women of Kalabari lineages for generations. It can be, as mentioned previously, transformed by a process of thread subtraction into *pelete bite*, a cloth Tonye Erekosima, a Kalabari man himself, defines as the flag of the Kalabari. (Erekosima: 1979) Both *injiri* and *pelete bite* are displayed and worn for occasions of family and ritual significance from the coming out celebration of a new mother to the funeral celebrations for an esteemed member of the community. So, a great deal is known about the use of madras plaids in the daily and ritual life of the Kalabari; but, little has been known about their Indian origins.

My research focused on the manufacture and export of madras plaids, called RMHK in India - RMHK standing for Real Madras Handkerchief. Real Madras Handkerchief is the Indian term for, specifically, handloomed fabric woven in South India for export to West Africa, among other countries. (Handbook of Handloom Export Statistics: 1983) The name, Real Madras Handkerchief, speaks to its history: "real" because it was once dyed with indigo, unlike past imitations manufactured in Japan; "Madras" due to its believed site of manufacture (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989); and "handkerchief" because each 36 by 36 inch square repeat fulfilled legal trade requirements: In some countries, lengths of cloth can not be imported, but handkerchiefs can. (Eicher: fieldnotes, 1990) Now the name, Real Madras Handkerchief, is something of a joke. Indigo is not used as a dye in RMHK anymore so it isn't "real". RMHK is not woven in Madras, but in surrounding villages. And a 36 by 36 inch square makes for a comically large handkerchief. (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989)

There are two general types of RMHK manufactured. One is called RMHK Fancy, a handloomed dobby-woven fabric characterized by floral motifs, bright colors, and frequently the use of rayon and metallic yarns. (Incidentally, RMHK is quite outside the Indian aesthetic (one of my sources referred to it as "surrealistic") and the textile scholars I interviewed were amused I was studying it. With all the sumptuous Indian textiles all around me - Why was I studying THAT?) The other type of RMHK is RMHK Plain and is what we would call madras plaids in colors suggesting a palette of natural dyes. Again, this RMHK Plain is called both *injiri* and Real India by the Kalabari.

My research was conducted in India, primarily in Madras. I interviewed a wide range of people including exporters, Government of India officials, and textile scholars. Also, I visited the village of Chirala, in Andra Pradesh, to observe the manufacture of RMHK.

In the course of exploring RMHK, the role of the Indian middleman emerged as pivotal in the manufacture and export of RMHK. Historically and in the literature, a middleman can be recognized by the terms 'merchant', 'broker', and 'exporter'. In my research, the exporter is the middleman.

In her study, TEXTILES AND WEAVERS IN MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA (1985), Vijaya Ramaswamy details the history of South Indian handloom weavers. Up until the seventeenth century, handloom

weavers were prospering and independent. They manufactured and sold their own goods locally and at county fairs. The weavers could also participate, to their benefit, in a merchant guild system which controlled internal and external trade. By the time the European traders set up companies, " the most common practice was that while in slack seasons the weaver produced at his own risk and sold in the weekly fairs, the same weaver also wove for the export market: for this his goods were commissioned by merchants. The commissioning of cloth by merchants' middlemen was in fact the usual practice." (ibid.,141) As Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English companies were replaced by one company - the East India Company, a monopoly - the weaver to middleman relationship took on its present form. Weavers produce goods on commission within a very fragile market structure. I will discuss both the weaver to exporter pipeline and the fragility of this structure.

Data on the manufacture and distribution of RMHK revealed the weaver to exporter pipeline. Generally, an exporter is a local Indian businessman, rather than a non-native, using his own or borrowed capital to finance his trade. This was not always true. Until 1978, A. Brunschweiller, Co., a Swiss textile firm, was trading RMHK to England for export to West Africa. (Eicher: fieldnotes, 1990) The exporter has a number of "captive looms." He may own the looms himself, but most probably he will contract with one or more master weavers. A master weaver is a weaver himself who has prospered enough to purchase more than the one or two looms of his household. Some master weavers own twenty or thirty looms, some own as many as 200 to 250 looms. A master weaver may also sub-contract with several smaller master weavers so he has access himself to many more looms. At this point, the master weaver may choose to break into exporting himself. If a weaver owns his own loom he may choose to contract with a master weaver. Whether he owns his own loom or not, a weaver can change master weavers, as we might change employers. Furthermore, a weaver may not be a weaver full-time. Weaving may simply supplement the income from his or her "day job." (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989)

The exporter purchases cotton greige yarn and dyes which he gives to the master weaver, along with patterns of the fabrics requested. Several of my sources told me they make up some of their own patterns, but I believe, based on the trade structure and Kalabari madras use, that most patterns are custom orders sent by Nigerian customers and agents. In other words, most patterns woven for

West Africa are to specifications and frequently repeat patterns popular for decades. For example, when I showed a photograph of an *injiri* -draped Kalabari funeral bed, two of my sources, who had been affiliated with A. Brunschweiller for more than twenty years, recognized the *injiri* patterns as long-term best-sellers. (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989)

From my visit to Chirala, the center of RMHK weaving in south India, it appears that the exporter arranges for the supplies to be sent right to the master weaver. It is also possible that, particularly in Madras, the exporter may purchase his supplies along with the master weaver in brokerage houses. The master weaver, in turn, distributes the supplies and patterns to the weavers. (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989) In the past, the weavers were given cash advances with which they purchased their own supplies. But, this led to such a long chain of debt from exporter to master weaver to weaver, with any number of sub-contractors in-between, that the system was even more fragile than it is today, which I will discuss shortly. (Eicher: fieldnotes, 1990) In addition, the exporter maintains more quality control, and can be assured of more sales, if he supplies all the yarns and dyes himself.

All the processes involved in manufacturing RMHK, except dyeing, take place in individual family homes. Dyeing is done just on the edge of town. Each house has from one to three pit looms. The whole family is involved in the weaving. There did not appear to be any gender specificity of tasks and this was confirmed by my guide in Chirala. I saw both men and women winding spindles, both dressing the warp, both weaving. I did see only men dyeing. I was told that it is only in recent years that the children are being sent to school. But, if a child does not do well in school, the father will opt for training the child up in handloom weaving. Since schooling is paid for by individual families rather than the state, this is understandable.

A master weaver of means will keep an office in Madras as well as at the weaving site. He most likely weaves for more than one exporter and will need to coordinate both his exporter business and the work of the weavers. One master weaver I interviewed kept his office in Madras and his elder son coordinated weaver activities in Chirala. On a weekly basis, the master weaver collects all the fabric and takes it by train to Madras where it is inspected by customs and is now shipped by sea directly to West Africa. (Formerly shipments went to

England before they went off to West Africa.) The exporter in turn pays the master weaver and he pays his weavers and sub-contractors. In fact, first thing in the morning, after our arrival in Chirala, the elder son paid the sub-contractors -- the cash apparently having been transported in a well-worn gym bag.

As of last fall, the going rate for RMHK Plains (plaids) was Rs. 80 for one set of three eight yard pieces or $4.85 per 24 yard length; up to Rs. 500 for special orders or RMHK Fancy, or $30.00 per 24 yard piece. A weaver can produce from one to three 24 yard lengths in a week, depending upon its complexity and whether weaving is a full- or part-time occupation.

This weaver/exporter relationship is very fragile. In both 1976 and 1983, Nigeria experienced political turmoil, with the civil government replaced by a military regime. In a spirit of nationalism, a ban was placed on all imported goods. Then, the ban was rescinded and replaced by import duties of between 200% and 300%. An import duty on RMHK is between 210% and 230%, depending upon variety. (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989) In concert with the devaluation of Nigerian currency, the naira, this heavy duty operates as effectively as a ban -- or did until "alternative" trade was tapped and organized. Today, most of the RMHK entering Nigeria is landed in Cotonou, Republic of Benin, and smuggled over the border. In 1975, India exported to Nigeria 17,658,000 rupees or roughly one and a half million dollars worth of RMHK. By 1977, exports to Nigeria had dropped to 1,299,000 rupees or one hundred and eighteen thousand dollars. On the other hand, in those same years, the Republic of Benin's imports of RMHK increased from 97,158,000 rupees to 329,217,000 rupees -- more than tripling in two years. (HEPC: 1983)

Between the imposition of the ban and the setting-up of the smuggling structure, the weaver/exporter pipeline came to a standstill. Nigerian agents could not afford to place orders, the exporters had no work for the weavers to do. Most of the weavers could not afford to purchase their own supplies and try to sell their goods independently -- even IF they owned their own looms. Many exporters went out of business; others decreased the size of their businesses, filling the few orders that came in while exploring other markets. But, it was the weavers who suffered. Without work and without capital, families starved, some committing suicide. Even as recently as last fall, THE DECCAN CHRONICLE reported deaths and suicides due to the handloom crisis in the Hyderabad area. While

this article was politically pitched and appeared one month before national elections, it highlights the fact that many handloom weavers, particularly those commissioned by exporters, have little recourse if the exporter loses his market. (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989)

In an effort to preserve the traditional handloom work of India in general, the Government of India has initiated several support programs in the last twenty years. The most significant of these are the Weaver's Service Centers and Handloom Houses. There are 23 Weaver's Service Centers across India whose purpose is to assist the handloom weavers through training programs, technical assistance, and employment. A weaver can select to contract with the state and his goods sold through Handloom Houses across the country. The Weaver's Service Center may also indirectly support the exporter. One innovation the Weaver's Service Center has introduced is a method to expand a loom from 36" to 45", thus making it possible for the weaver to produce lunghies for markets both locally and in Southeast Asia. A lunghie is standard dress for males in South India and South East Asia. It is a two yard length of 45" wide plaid or light-colored plain fabric stitched into a tube and wrapped about the waist. It is my understanding at this point in my research that the madras plaids once woven for West Africa are now also woven for lunghies.

Specifically in response to the situation in Nigeria, the Government of India has negotiated a trade agreement with Nigeria. If a Nigerian customer places a special order with an Indian exporter, the Nigerian customer can import his fabric duty free if it is sold to him at cost. In turn, the Government of India rebates the exporter a percentage of the total cost of the fabric order. One of the exporters I interviewed based his business on this cash incentive. This exporter had been with A. Brunschweiller, Co. for thirty years. When A. Brunschweiller, Co. left the RMHK export business, the exporter entered it, working with customers already well-known to him. He exports only four kinds of RMHK at cost to specific customers in Nigeria. He receives a 20% rebate from the Indian government. Some of this rebate he passes along to his weavers. For example, if a piece of RMHK Fancy costs Rs. 250 per piece, he pays his weavers Rs. 285. My source said to me, "Always support the poor weavers." At the time of our interview, he was going to investigate securing an agent in Cotonou, making it easier for more of his old customers to place orders, still working within the trade agreement. (Evenson: fieldnotes, 1989)

On the other end of the pipeline, because the exporter is attempting to maximize profits within a system bounded by specific pattern requests and small incentive to innovate, West Africans who buy and use the fabric have a bounded set of pattern choices. Agents will for the most part simply reorder best sellers. Only through individual purchasers who initiate their own patterns as a special order does significant innovation in pattern occur.

We can see that the exporter of RMHK is truly in the middle. On the one hand, his capital and business hinges upon demand for a fabric supplied outside of the law by, not to put too fine a point on it, black marketeers. Or, it is subject to the whims of good will between governments. One might argue that the smuggling is a more stable arrangement than government trade agreements. Indeed, one of Joanne Eicher's sources in Manchester, England pointed out the irony of the smuggling arrangement: Had the Nigerian government chosen less stringent import restrictions, it would be collecting a tidy sum in duty -- profits now in smugglers' pockets. (Eicher: personal communication, 1990)

On the other hand, as owner or contractor of the means of production, the middleman/exporter is beholden to the weavers, whether he chooses to take responsibility or not. How well he negotiates the vicissitudes of the marketplace has a direct and intimate result on the family of the Indian handloom weaver.

This research and interpretation demonstrate the complexity of world trade as exemplified by the choices, chances, and circumstances of the Indian middleman/exporter. Further study of the history of trade of RMHK will enhance understanding of this complexity, particularly useful in an expanding and rapidly changing marketplace.

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