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Embroidered Relations in Kutch: Women, Stitching and the Third Space

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Dhordo is a tiny village located in northern Kutch and the site of my ongoing investigation into the history of embroidery. It is the home to the Mutwa—whose intricate mirror-studded embroidery has been widely praised, is represented in international museum collections and has been featured in numerous exhibitions and publications.¹ But Mutwa embroidery is also simultaneously distinctive and backward, changing and degraded, exotic and quotidian. This paper examines these contradictions in light of Homi Bhabha's notions of third space in order to better understand the relationship between Mutwa women, embroidery and identity. While Bhabha's theories have been widely influential their usefulness for articulating the subtle politics of textiles and identity have not yet been fully explored. In light of this, I suggest a shift in focus, from viewing textiles as markers that distinguish different communities to considering them as tools of interconnectivity. This shift enhances understanding of the political landscapes textiles are part of, the choices embroiderers make, the changes they embrace or resist, and the creative innovations they make.

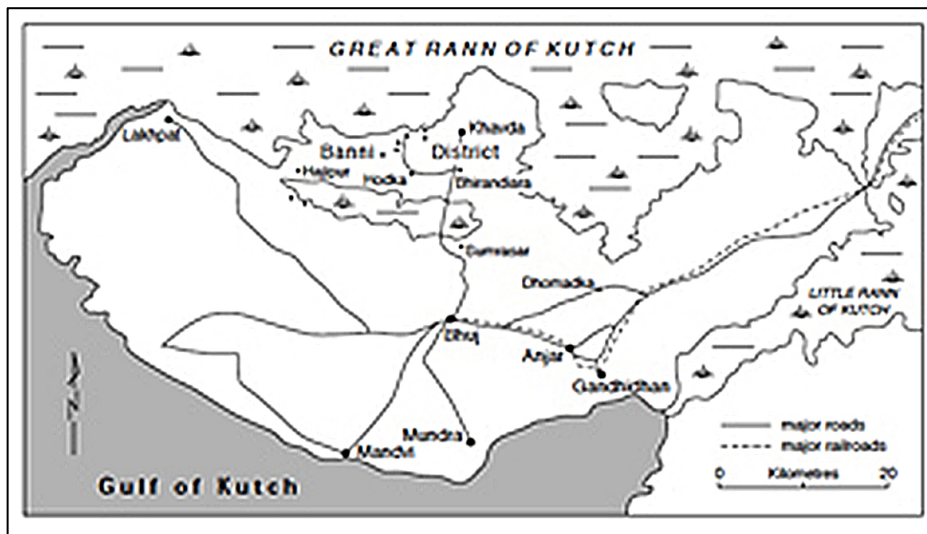


Figure 1, left. *The Mutwa villages are located along the far end of the road, adjacent to the Great Rann of Kutch.*

*Figure 2, right. The flooded Great Rann of Kutch, October, 2012.
Photograph by M.Hardy.*

¹ Descriptions of Mutwa embroidery are included in: Irwin & Hall, 1973; Elson, 1979; Jain, 1980; Nabholz-Kartaschoff, 1986. Mutwa embroidery is represented in the collections of The Calico Museum, Ahmedabad; the Victoria and Albert, London; The Shreyas Folk Museum, Ahmedabad; The Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto amongst others.

A Third Space

The Rann of Kutch is a vast, low lying salt flat that extends along the western edge of India—separating it from Pakistan. Summer rains raise the level of the adjacent sea enough to encourage the flooding of the Rann. As the waters recede, the area dries to slick mud, then hard, cracked, salt encrusted dirt. By winter the Rann mimics the snow-covered prairie—relentless, wind whipped, and cruelly brilliant. (Figures 1 & 2.)

Historically the Rann and its environs were outside the jurisdiction of either Kutch or Sindh. The British characterized it as lawless and claimed it was peopled with tribes of bandits, nomadic herdsman, "huntmen" and other outcasts. Living precariously along the Rann's fringes they were blamed for stealing or destroying British property and assisting invading armies in crossing the Rann.² Certainly before the Rann divided nation states it served as a sort of liminal byway—crossed by traders, shepherds, and migrants of various descriptions. Some landed in Banni—a region along the northern fringes of Kutch and surrounded on three sides by the Rann. During the summer monsoon Banni could be cut off from the surrounding area until the waters receded and the mud dried. The area offered rich grasslands as well relative seclusion. Encouraged by a Kutchi Rao (king) anxious to settle his troublesome frontier, Banni was gifted to various Muslim clans to practice herding in. Known as Maldhari (herders) they eventually settled and built the villages that continue to exist today. Other immigrants to Banni include the Meghawal—low caste Hindu leatherworkers who developed close productive ties to the Maldhari.³ More recent immigrants include the Sodhas, Hindus who fled Pakistan following the 1971 war as well as a variety of other migrants: security personnel, factory workers, tourists and tour guides, textile dealers, students, and designers who stay for varying periods.

Located at the end of a dusty road, at the far, northern edge of Banni, the Mutwa village of Dhordo is about an hour and a half from Bhuj—the largest town in Kutch. Most tourists arrive by taxi during the winter months attracted by the Mutwa's renowned fine embroidery and the reputation of Gulbeg Mutwa Morana and his family for hospitality. Visitors are inevitably ushered into a small, one roomed bungalow that contains a few old, battered pieces of locally made wooden furniture—a bed, a couple of chairs, a table and, most notably, a collection of photographs. This bungalow functions as a public space where visitors gathers, guests stay, and where the local men occasionally congregate. It marks the threshold between the village and the outside, male and female, the public face and domestic space of the village. Lining its walls are several fading photographs of Gulbeg who was the local *agiwan*⁴ (big man), his father (from whom he inherited the title) as well as several group portraits. The photographs and, indeed the bungalow offer visual, affective statements about the Mutwa-Morana's power and authority.

There are a few images of Gulbeg from the 1970's-80's that illustrate the Mutwa's shifting relationship with textiles.⁵ Mounted on wooden panels lining the upper walls, one group of images depicts Gulbeg and various Indian dignitaries. They are shown posing against a background of Mutwa quilts, some

² Williams, 1958/1981.

³ The Maldari, for example, provided hides to the Meghawal who produced leathergoods and provided certain services to the Maldari (see Jain, 1980).

⁴ The Mutwa speak Kutchi mixed with Sindhi words. The former is an unwritten language, hence the terms included have been transliterated from Gujarati. In the interests of simplicity, diacritical marks were avoided.

⁵ A more detailed analysis of these shifts can be found in Hardy, 2010.

hung vertically, others spread on the floor or on *charpoi* (cots). Another panel depicts a portrait of Gulbeg, sitting on a quilt with a second hung behind him. With his turban, his block-printed wrap and cigarette—he cuts a stylish, progressively modern, Mutwa figure. (Figure 3) Mutwa textiles during this period were shifting from being intimately associated with women’s bodies and domestic space to commodities produced for the market. Mutwa quilts have always been used to for the comfort and enjoyment of special guests and form an important focal point within Mutwa homes. These images, however, suggest that quilts were also being used as public symbols of Mutwa identity. Quilts are used in these images as strategic testaments—bridging the traditional and the modern and blurring domestic-public boundaries. Gulbeg’s image, his pose, his choice of garments and how he is framed by Mutwa quilts, are not accidental. While textiles are not displayed in the bungalow, these images speak to the strategic re-deployment of cloth and self-conscious efforts on the part of Gulbeg to author these.

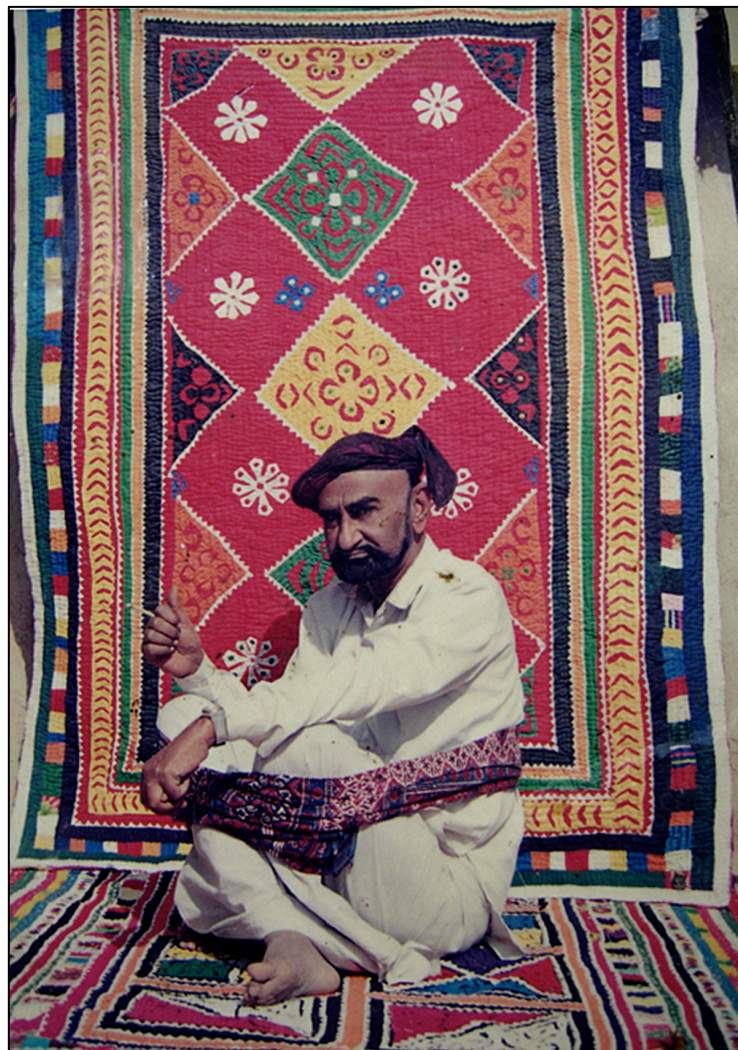


Figure 3. Gulbeg Mutwa Morana, circa 1975.
Gulbeg was known for being progressive and hospitable. Photographer unknown.

Immediately beyond the bungalow’s rear door, seemingly at the center of the village, lays the Mutwa-Morana’s courtyard and Gulbeg’s *bhungo* (traditional round mud hut of Banni). One of the oldest, most ‘traditional’ *bhungos* in Dhordo—with its hand crafted decorations and furnishings; it is also one of the

most frequently photographed buildings in Dhordo. The view from the door showcases a ‘traditional’ arrangement of furnishings and textiles and obscures the recent addition of an ensuite bathroom, refrigerator, and overhead fan. Visitors are shown a seat—either on one of the few rickety chairs or on a quilt spread on the floor. In his later years, Gulbeg often reclined on a massive wooden bed on one side while visitors were assembled. (Figure 4.) He would chat in Hindi, Gujarati or Kutchi, offer water and tea and typically ask the visitors to view and then sign his guest book. There are now several volumes of these, with signatures dating back to the early 80’s from visitors all over the world. The books, the fact that he keeps them and shows them off (though could not always read the entries) serves to demonstrate, again, the extent of his influence and authority.



Figure 4. Likely the most photographed bhungo in Banni. Gulbeg Mutwa Morana at home in Dhordo, with Michele Hardy, circa 1996. Photographer unknown.

After tea, Gulbeg’s daughter Phoopli, or more recently, his granddaughter Sofiya would be called to show embroidery. Both women speak English as well as Hindi, Gujarati, and Kutchi. They would demonstrate embroidery if asked and show pieces that were available for sale. Their sales pitch was very understated but effective nonetheless. In a village where women’s seclusion was guarded,⁶ the fact that they were available to talk with foreigners was remarkable. As Işik has described for weavers in Turkey, opportunities to meet the artist (or in this case the artist’s ‘substitute’) enhances the perception of authenticity and is a shrewd marketing tool.⁷ Phoopli and Sofiya were part of a performance enacted with Gulbeg that both demonstrated their family’s power and modernity—to speak English, to challenge (in part) gender roles and purdah—even while it affirmed ‘traditional’ practices and the authenticity of the textiles shown.

⁶ The Mutwa are Sunni Muslims and practice *purdah* (seclusion of women).

⁷ Işik, 2007.

Hybridizing Embroidery

Since 1947, with the partition of India and Pakistan, there have been profound changes within Banni—politically, economically, environmentally, and culturally—changes which have effected traditional lifestyles and encouraged a re-evaluation of embroidery in the region. For the Maldhari, pastoralism was severely undermined in one generation.⁸ Because of the poverty wrought by these changes, by the mid-60's, jewelry, then older embroideries began to be sold off to collectors and dealers. Embroidery emerged at this point as an income generating activity for women. Aware that traditions were changing and that the economic situation in Banni was perilous, Chandraben Shroff contacted Gulbeg in the early 1970's and suggested stitching embroidery for sale. Eventually Gulbeg's daughter, Phoopli—one of the first generations of literate, educated Mutwa women, took on the management of this work for Shrujan, the NGO that Shroff founded in 1969. Phoopli arranged for the distribution of embroidery patterns and threads, collected finished works and arranged payment. For many families, the proceeds earned from embroidering for Shrujan was a critical source of income through the 80's—Phoopli supported her family at a time when there were still few work opportunities for men in the area.

The Mutwa developed a close relationship with Shrujan during the 70's and 80's and were often featured in their product advertisements. In a sense, the Mutwa were the “poster-child” of the fine craftsmanship and exoticism Shrujan marketed to upscale Indian and international consumers.⁹ Although the Mutwa were not the only community to work with Shrujan in Kutch, the intricate fineness of Mutwa embroidery was lauded and contributed to Shrujan's success.

Phoopli, was featured in a variety of publications during this period.¹⁰ In the book “Night of the New Moon” journalist Anees Jung,¹¹ for example, included a chapter on Phoopli describing her reformed faith. Period images often show Phoopli in ‘traditional’ Mutwa dress, bent over her stitching, often surrounded by her children. T.S. Randhawa, Collector of Kutch (government administrator) during the 90's, is also a photographer. In his published portrait of Phoopli and her husband Abdulkalam, they are depicted—seemingly casually—against the rich texture of a mud bhungo. Abdulkalam sits on his haunches, leaning against the bhungo, and looks directly at the photographer, smiling. Phoopli, to his left, sits on a quilt spread on a low platform connected to the side of the bhungo, to the right and slightly above her husband. She smiles at someone or something to the left of the photographer so that her face is in ¾ view. In spite of their relaxed demeanor, the image has been carefully orchestrated and suggests a very conscious use of textiles and jewelry. Abdulkalam wears three *ajrakh* cloths: one as a turban, another as a shoulder wrapper, a third is wrapped around his waist with a bright white *kameez* (long shirt). *Ajrakh* are expensive hand printed cloths produced in Kutch and Sindh, mainly for Muslim men. Phoopli is wearing an embroidered blouse over gathered trousers and a tinsel-edged veil. She wears considerable jewelry, including four sets of *chura*¹² on her arms, *varlo* and *candhan hare* necklaces, a *darni* across her forehead, and a *booli* in her nose. While the quantity and quality of her jewelry and his

⁸ These shifts are documented in Hardy, 2003.

⁹ The Mutwa's relationship with Shrujan has shifted over the years. Currently, “Shrujan works with 16 different styles of embroidery, done by 3,500 women across 100 villages.” (http://www.shrujan.org/about_shrujan.html, accessed December 1, 2012) The “Mutwa” are but one *style* of embroidery.

¹⁰ Although unconfirmed, an image of Phoopli is said to have been included in the promotional materials associated with the Indian pavilion at the 1977 World Exposition in Osaka, Japan.

¹¹ Jung, 1993.

¹² Made of white plastic today, these graded sets of twelve bangles would have once been made of ivory and imported into Kutch from East Africa.

ajrakh, suggests a special occasion, the ‘traditionalism’ of some of these pieces suggests a conscious attempt to appear beautiful, wealthy, and ‘authentic’.

The Randhawa portrait, taken in the mid-90’s, may be one of the last (legitimately) published images of a Mutwa woman. When I began fieldwork with the Mutwa in 1996, they requested that out of respect for women’s modesty, I not photograph women of certain ages (older women and children were fine). This was just the latest strategy designed to affect their increasingly public image. With much of the recent work dealing with tourists falling to her niece Sofiya, Phoopli has ‘retired’ to read her Qur’an. Sofiya is a fine embroiderer and, although I have yet to find images of her online, is frequently mentioned in the evolving world of textile blogs and websites.

Homi on the Rann

The Rann of Kutch has functioned both as a byway and border, as a liminal space betwixt and between, uninhabitable but associated with marginal characters. Banni too, surrounded by this indeterminate space, is other—at one time barely inhabited then home to cultural others (Muslim herders invited by the Hindu, Kutchi ruler). The area remains marginal and isolated, while its inhabitants remain ‘backward’ in the eyes of other Indians.

At first glance Banni might not figure prominently in discourses about colonialism, indeed it was seldom mentioned in period literature. Consideration of Banni as a third space confronts narrow, two-dimensional representations of the area, its inhabitants and their embroidery. It draws attention to the complexity of the negotiations between different cultural groups—between the different communities who live in the region, who migrate or visit or otherwise write about and administer it. They are, as Bhabha would suggest, interdependent.¹³ Cultures in this sense cannot be pure, cannot be originary, or authentic. Rather, culture is always hybrid, and more importantly, always hybridizing.¹⁴ This suggests that Mutwa culture is less a fixed pole so much as something that “may be grasped as porous, constantly changing and borrowing.”¹⁵ Mutwa embroidery, while distinguishing is simultaneously a part of a whole. While the literature on embroidery in Western India has tended to focus on classifications of style and stitches, an expanded consideration of connectivity highlights embroiderers as agents negotiating identity and tradition.

Bhabha’s third space is a shared, shifting, and politically charged. The Mutwa are one of a number of Muslim clans living side by side in Banni—their embroidery shares many features however it is Mutwa embroidery and several named Mutwa embroiderers who have gained national and international attention. They have strategically distinguished themselves in Banni—as reformed Muslims,¹⁶ as progressive and modern even while they exploit stereotypes of themselves as backward, exotic, traditional etc.

That Mutwa embroidery has undergone dramatic changes is a point lost on most visitors who see it as timeless. The history I have reconstructed suggests that embroidery has constantly hybridized.

¹³ Van Dommelen, 2006.

¹⁴ Hubbart, 2006

¹⁵ Werbner, 2001, p. 134.

¹⁶ Since the 1940’s the Mutwa have been influenced by the Ahl-al-Hadīth an Islamic reform movement characterized by it focus on the *hadith* (the word of the Prophet).

Embroidered garments have shape-shifted in response to a variety of social, economic and political stimuli. Mutwa women have created and re-created ‘traditional’ Mutwa dress—incorporating new materials, new ideas, and ideals. The most recent shift has seen the adoption of un-embroidered garments which the Mutwa feel are more modest, more modern, and more in keeping with their ‘back to the basics’ Islam. Similarly, how embroidery has been deployed, how it is made, how it is interpreted has shifted. Mutwa embroidery has, for example, been purged of motifs deemed syncretic or otherwise betraying the problematic influences of Hinduism or Sufism. The Mutwa have nevertheless experimented with new motifs and borrowed from different sources. Some of these experiments are later purged, others incorporated within an evolving sense of Mutwa design and aesthetics.

Visitors are drawn by Banni’s reputation for fine crafts and apparent timelessness, for being a place apart—isolated and traditional. The Mutwa-Morana family has played the most active role in marketing Mutwa embroidery. As the self-proclaimed ‘first’ family of Kutch, they have exercised and consolidated much political power in order to liaise with outsiders and broker embroidery sales. Gulbeg made a reputation for himself as a progressive modernist—Phoopli manages or perhaps mitigates her reputation for fine embroidery and interactions with outsiders with her devotion to Islam. Sofiya, too, strives to balance her conflicting responsibilities to tourists and her family.

Conclusion

Bhabha’s third space is filled with sometimes conflicting enunciations about culture and identity. As I understand it, these enunciations include the shared statements, practices, impressions, and images, by and about the Mutwa that shape their sense of self and connect them with others. Banni may have been largely overlooked in colonial discourses, but the effects of colonialism and nationalism nevertheless continue to impact the peoples who live there. The Mutwa, for example, were named and assigned land when it became necessary to know them as a discrete body in the 19th century. Their embroidery was furthermore distinguished, named, and categorized at a time when the newly expanded Gujarat state government was attempting to salvage the ‘folk’ for its own devices. Shrujan, among others, exploited the fineness and exoticism of Mutwa embroidery.

Recently, the Rann and Banni have been promoted as unique tourist destinations by the state-run Gujarat Tourism. A television advertisement has Indian superstar actor Amitabh Bachchan (dressed as a Rabari shepherd) praising the Rann and admiring local handicrafts.¹⁷ Marketed as an area of quaint villagers who make charming folk crafts evokes loyalty, nostalgia and desire among urban Indians. Outside of India, tours are organized with names like “Indian Romance” and “Timeless Treasures of Kutch” that sell visions of desert pastorals, simpler lives, and the integrity of the handmade pitted against the encroachment of modernity, change, and synthetic fibres.

Mutwa embroidery continues to change, continues to hybridize—absorbing influences from other communities, purging them, exploring them, mimicking them, and challenging them. These changes are negotiated in response to a variety of stimuli—ideas about their own history and status as Muslims, visitors, migrant workers and tourists, whose desire for the authentic and unadulterated is often palpable.

¹⁷ The ‘handicrafts’ advertisement is one of a variety produced for Gujarat Tourism featuring Amitabh Bachchan. They correspond to a new interest in ‘developing’ the area for tourism that has so far resulted in the construction of several resorts in the Rann and the organization of large festivals including Rann Utsav. It is too early to speculate on the impact these initiatives will have on either local culture or the environment.

These changes have been authored in part, as I have suggested, by Gulbeg and Phoopli. Mutwa embroiderers are not unaware of the contradictions surrounding embroidery and exploit them in various ways. The fact, for example, that many tourists come demanding ‘authentic’ textiles that fit with Western ideas of the home has encouraged the production of elaborate flat textiles—wall hangings and quilts—textiles that only partially correspond with Mutwa ideals. (Figure 5.)



Figure 5. Stitched in the early 90's, this Mutwa blouse front is traditional in form but, like a sampler, showcases different embroidery stitches and techniques. It was often shown to visiting design students and tourists. Photograph by M.Hardy.

The Mutwa have a long history of producing beautiful, finely stitched embroideries. Their reputation is not in question so much as the context in which it has developed. This paper has attempted to reconsider their embroider in the light of Bhabha's notions of third space. It challenges, therefore, notions of embroidery as emblematic in favor of embroidery as an enunciation—made and given meaning in response to a political landscape that includes local rivals, global competitors, Islamic ideals and pastoral-seeking tourists, amongst others. I have tried to sketch how the Mutwa, through a collusion of efforts, opportunities, and personalities, not to mention threaded needles and skill, make and re-make “Mutwa” embroidery in a third space that is Banni.

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