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The Cultural Politics of Textile Craft Revivals

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To all the fine-spirited and creative women, who were mentors and guides in the most profound sense and have since died.

Our joint paper critiques and appraises the cultural politics of textile revitalization projects. The format follows a conversational style as we exchange thoughts about our very different experiences as a folklorist doing fieldwork in Colorado's San Luis Valley and as a weaver and participant observer involved in a weaving workshop located in the Bargarh district of Orissa, India. One of our chief mutual interests, conditioned by the assumption that "all tradition is change," analyzes the political bases for craft-inspired workshops that attempt to revive traditional arts as economic redevelopment projects.

"People who are currently poor and oppressed, will progressively transform their environment by their own praxis. In this process, others may play a catalytic role and supportive role that will not dominate" (Fals-Borda, Orlando, Rahman, 1991:13).

JG: This United Nations Industrial Development Organization cluster program was centered out of Bhubaneswar, the capital of the state of Orissa and implemented in the villages surrounding Barpali.

- People at all levels of involvement that worked on the project were from Orissa with an awareness of the culture, languages and interrelations of the people. In this way it was a local project initiated by an international agency.
- In Barpali, the town that served as the central location for the cluster project, which spanned three central villages. A woman named Sangeeta was employed by UNIDO who was from Bargarh, the closest city (20 KM) to be in direct contact with the participants in the cluster program. A partnership with a local organization was created from the beginning with the plan that after the two-year program was completed this organization would continue the work. Thus, future continuity was embedded in the promise of the present.
- In Kusanpuri, a village outside of Barpali, the participants I worked with are categorized as producers by UNIDO. Plans for implementing this program also include contractors, buyers (in this case a local market), local community agencies, and larger supportive institutions including government and international support.

There are twenty-four Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the cluster of the surrounding villages of Barpali. Eighteen of these are all female. Once groups begin to sell, they are eligible to receive loans from a participating bank to purchase raw materials. They then sell their goods at the local market. This demonstrates their entrepreneurial desire and capacity. Banks, which have shown support of the cluster, provide extremely low comparative interest rates prior to the development of the cluster.

SM: The revitalization of the economy and essentially, the spirit of San Luis, Colorado, were primarily catalyzed by the Catholic priest, Father Pat Valdez. Wary of acting on faith alone, he believed that the town's spiritual resurrection had to be accompanied by "an economic miracle" as well. The small town of San Luis is located on Colorado's altiplano, the south central area of the state and county seat of its poorest county.

- Colcha embroidery is a textile in dispute. In any analysis of this genre key concepts like authenticity, tradition, creativity, aesthetics, and memory are actively questioned, possibly transformed, and constantly realigned by embroiderers, entrepreneurs, art consultants, and cultural interpreters.



Figure 1, left. Dasies. Figure 2, right. Colcha.

- As part of Father Pat's economic revival in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Ladies Sewing Circle began as a stitching group ostensibly to learn to create "ethnically identifiable" colcha embroideries for sale. (Colcha embroidery is derived from Spanish colonial stitching techniques based on a series of couching stitches completely covering the ground fabric). Whereas, historic colcha designs were abstract patterns of floral or geometric motifs, the Ladies Sewing Circle produced pictorial narratives – scenes of memories, landscapes, old buildings, birds and flowers. 1930s colonial style *colcha* embroidery. Jim Gallagher Collection. Photo by Bill O'Connor. Daisy Ortega embroidering her signature "daisies," Ladies Sewing Circle, 1990. Photo by Suzanne MacAulay. (Figures 1 & 2.)
- Several iterations of colcha revival workshops waxed and waned before the Ladies Sewing Circle was founded. The last workshop in 1988 was the antecedent to the Ladies Sewing Circle. Paula Duggan from the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, who had been involved in an earlier revival and Carmen Orrego-Salas, a Chilean needlework artist, who had instructed embroidery workshops in the Valley and in Northern New Mexico in the 1970s, returned to the San Luis Valley with the hope (echoed by Father Pat) that this most recent in a series of colcha craft implants would endure and flourish as a viable cottage industry in San Luis.

Gender & Genre Politics: Marginalization and Integration of Women

JG: With the textiles being produced for a local market, this bypasses pressure from an international agency vis-à-vis labor rights or equality for the makers of the product. On the one hand, keeping the product local preserves the culture in terms of choice of motif, color and form (not compromising cultural integrity by creating inappropriate tourist objects). On the other hand without these international rights, women can be marginalized and discriminated against. Programs like these push those boundaries of restraint by greater financial security for women with some autonomy as well as more input into community affairs. They are able to borrow money from the SHG in order to pay for education, a new roof or medical bills. Thus, improving the quality of life for the family while larger issues continue the cycle of oppression.



Figure 3. Women in the SHG's workspace. Photo by Jillian Gryzlak, 2007.

Lack of education is a factor in marginalizing women. In each cluster, a select number of women go through a series of trainings addressing issues of influences of society and family, caste and market force, violence against women, exploitation of women, the need for understanding gender equity, globalization, organizational skills, how to preplan for meetings, how to write minutes and reflect on the experience. This type of comprehensive training initially targeting a few women is then passed to the majority.

- Changes in self-perception and self-reliance vis-à-vis community:
 - The literacy project helped women learn to write their names and read and write numbers for their bank deposits.
 - They held “very important meetings” where the business of the self- help group was discussed. They found a lot of pride in their skill and ability to write their names. Their self-confidence was reinforced by these experiences that reached every aspect of their lives.
- Cultural shifts in the role of the women:
 - The women were then regarded as more involved in household decisions due to their financial earnings.
 - Also, as their skills developed and they became more creative and innovative relative to design and complexity, the opportunity to continue to increase earnings is possible. This could be one of the initial reasons the women invest so much time in learning and perfecting their craft. It is an investment of time to become lucrative and therefore gain agency.
 - During my experience in Kusanpuri the only master weavers were male. These weavers designed motifs and color schemes to be produced in the village. In an entrepreneurial capacity, they also were responsible for buying and supplying raw material to the craftspeople. Literacy and the social ability to perform business transactions underscored these responsibilities. Therefore, I believe these are some of the reasons there were no nationally awarded weavers or local master weavers that were female from this region (as far as I am aware). I suspect this will begin to change. Women were being trained in business skills, organization and marketing of their goods. These skills along with business knowledge could mean that there will be a female master weaver at some point as long as the overall societal structure allows it.

SM: Marginalization in San Luis is not limited to economic dependency alone but includes factors such as the genre of colcha embroidery being overlooked in favor of weaving and wood carving traditions within the hierarchy of the arts. Embroidery was judged to be too individualistic and idiosyncratic. In this region stitching was only associated with women’s work and, therefore, not a serious enterprise.

- When a collection of these colchas created by the Ladies Sewing Circle was exhibited during the San Luis Shrine Dedication Weekend (there were thousands of visitors), the Denver art consultant/marketing agent hired by the local Economic Development Council displayed them in an area away from the general flow of tourist traffic without advertising their location, and neglected to label the colchas with the artists’ names or list the prices.
- The majority of stitchers was active in the Sangre de Cristo Catholic parish and worked closely with Father Pat, who encouraged women to participate in services by reading scripture and assisting the altar girls and boys. The strong Catholic membership was selective in their religious discrimination – accepting an Anglo Protestant embroiderer into their circle while rejecting another stitcher, a Jehovah’s Witness, who was a very prolific embroiderer and actually sold quite a number of her embroideries. There was some class discrimination in this case as well.
- External art consultants, entrepreneurs and marketing agents advocated a form of “ethnic expressiveness,” which emphasized originality and individual artistic expression grounded in the picturesque. This kind of promotion of individuality contrasts with the very essence of the corporate, interdependent nature of the socioeconomic system of San Luis. To encourage

individual action through unique artistic self-expression in a situation historically determined by social conformity could simply intensify stitchers' insecurity and trigger the low-self-esteem they may feel as citizens of one of the most economically deprived counties in Colorado. In addition it might create tension among women who tend toward self-consciousness and are rather apprehensive about exposing personal artistic talent or creativity to the scrutiny of others.

Economic Politics

Economic survival and self-sufficiency ultimately depend on deepening the workshop connections with the community and minimizing outsiders' voices. For the Indian weavers by developing and strengthening strong ties to local markets, they gained greater self-assurance and burgeoning financial independence. The Hispano tradition of craftsmanship and gift-giving ultimately undermined the economic development initiatives in San Luis.

JG: The cluster program was a locally-led teaching opportunity, which developed clusters that consisted of self help groups, the majority of the programs existing entirely of women, learning, working and investing together. In Kusanpuri there were two self-help groups of women tying ikat. This was not a micro-grant project. The women did not owe UNIDO anything after the 2-year length of the training. They were supplied the materials needed to start the project. They then deposited returns from the sales of their sarees along with their individual required deposit into the joint savings account. If they wanted to borrow money from the joint account, they would propose their loan request to the cluster in a meeting and the members would vote to lend the entire amount or a portion of the request.



Figure 4. The Friday morning Bailjhuri handloom market, Orissa. Photo by Epari Kiran Mohan, 2012.

As mentioned previously, the market for these goods was local. On Friday mornings, the handloom market is where all weavers sell their goods. The sellers at the market are the actual weavers, which are all male. This illustrates the point that the women in the training are just one step in the already functioning production process. The village already had multiple households, usually related to one another, which would all work continuously on their designated step. The only portion that was changed was the skill-set of the women and some training for the male weavers in Kusanpuri to learn the required skills of weaving the ikat if they were unfamiliar. The majority of weavers already knowledgeable about weaving ikat had been weaving for a master weaver and not for their own production.

- Ashwini Saxena, the director of the cluster program, expressed the importance of empowering women through education and skill development. It was his thought that when the women of a community develop new skills to increase income they will invest in their community and their children's educations.
- I heard stories from the women about the experience of taking the bus for the first time to Barpali as a pair or group of women to visit the bank to make their first deposits. A huge barrier of gender relations was being broken down by the women of the Self Help Group developing a professional relationship to the male banker, which is vital in future applications personal loans.

SM: Most of the women in the Sewing Circle, which initially arose from an economic development project, were middle class and participated more for the company and true joy of creating rather than economic solvency. However, there were a few women who could use these revenues. The two leaders of the sewing group stressed the importance of sales as evidence of the aesthetic value of these embroideries in addition to their economic value. The leaders also insisted that when the grants were exhausted the women purchased their own yarn and muslin. They believed stitchers would value their work more when they also invested money into this enterprise as well as time and creativity.

As the San Luis women increased their embroidery skills, their pride in their work also increased. Instead of wanting to sell these embroideries, the stitchers gave them away as cherished gifts, which subverted the expectations of the economic recovery program in the arts. At the core of this almost territorial polemic between insiders and outsiders are the issues of ownership and power, or control over creativity and its artistic product. Among Hispanos gift-giving is a culturally expressive action that represents the pride of artisanship, generosity towards friends and relatives, and the perpetuation of ethnic practice. It implies reciprocity in relationships, binds the giver and the receiver, and stands as a continually visible symbol of emotional attachment. Personal involvement in the creation of a gift enhances these values even more.

Politics of Aesthetics

JG: Sambulpuri Sarees are known throughout India for their intricate ikat patterning. Oftentimes depicting a checkerboard pattern and images of waves, conch, waterfowl, wheels and lotus traditionally in colors of red, black, yellow and white. Though these traditions are always shifting and changing based on the artistic input of the producer, they still remain as a base of learning and design.

The women of Kusanpuri starting to weave ikat pieces were limited by their familiar cultural aesthetic, and confined to their skill level as they were just learning the technique. After the introductory program, then women had the opportunity to continue to work together developing their skills within the community as well as beginning to tie for the master weaver in their village or in Barpali.

- As their skills developed and they became more creative and innovative relative to design and complexity, the opportunity to continue to increase earnings is possible. This could be one of the initial reasons the women invest so much time in learning and perfecting their craft. It is an investment of time to become lucrative and therefore gain agency.



Figure 5, left. Weft threads being bound in lotus motif. Photo by Jillian Gryzlak, 2007.



Figure 6, right. Same weft threads being untied after the dying process. Photo by Jillian Gryzlak, 2007.

SM: The first round in the San Luis tug-of-war over aesthetic dominance and cultural and artistic autonomy manifests itself in disagreements over subject matter and iconography. External art consultants and entrepreneurs working with the stitchers, urged them to create pictorial narratives about rural lifestyles, local legends, historical events, memories, etc. Pictorial narratives are based on stories but expressed nonverbally, through visual imagery. Most stitchers in the Ladies Sewing Circle favored themes and designs inspired by commercial pattern books. They avoided heavily personalized subject matter that might reveal aspects of their individual or communal histories they would rather not revive – periods of prejudice, discrimination and poverty. Father Pat sympathetically stated that many embroiderers are not interested in depicting historical themes that evoke bitter memories, “Old is what they grew up with. Some of the ladies say, “Well it’s old and I don’t like *old*. I grew up with old all my life.”

Contemporary San Luis stitchers learned or refined their embroidery skills in compliance with Anglo-dominated workshops. Despite encouragement to create charming picturesque scenes of life in the San Luis Valley, local women gravitated to craft magazines for inspiration and to learn how to achieve the polished “look” of embroideries featured there.



Figure 7. Pacifica La Combe, “Raccoon” colcha embroidery, 1990. Photo by Suzanne MacAulay.

For as long as they can remember, these women aspired to imitate that taste and what they believed were the goals of Anglo culture. Now they discover the rules have changed. Affluent and educated outsiders want ethnic art with all its awkwardness and “charming” imperfections, which are deemed examples of *pure* cultural expressiveness. To stitchers this dictum is a form of silence about their work – a silence that ignores current lifestyles and discounts their personal opinions about themselves. In their view, this amounts to just another form of erasure and consignment to “difference” enacted all over again.

Cultural Politics

JG: The success of this program is playing out in the way that the women have gained a skill the local community is celebrated for and the ability to further their abilities is a lucrative process from the start. Though the women are no longer meeting to work together, they still maintain the shared savings account. Having the craft stay true to the roots of the goods produces is another element that will maintain the support of the community. This skill is not being placed onto new types of objects for a

different audience of consumers. In this way, they are entering an already culturally relevant and well functioning business that, once your skill rises to a high level, there is a lot of creative and artistic possibility.

Having been lead and facilitated by community members had great impact on the longevity of the influences and life of the project. This highlighted the already existent social service organizations in Barpali, as well as offer leadership to people that had not previously had the opportunity, such as Sangeeta, the organizer mentioned earlier. The women in the group become artistic leaders and household leaders due to increasing the income of the house and this trickles into education and community sustainability.

SM: In Southern Colorado there appears to be a certain periodicity associated with arts revivals – waves that come and go. Compared to New Mexico where generations of craftspeople have been creating rugs and carvings and are perceived to have an organic connection to their role as culture bearers and transmitters of an artistic legacy, Colorado artisans seem unable to sustain these revivals beyond a few years. In a way these arts revitalizations are like implants or grafts that do not take, particularly since they are often instigated by outside agencies.

In New Mexico there are particular family dynasties, which perpetuate traditions of art making and, over time, eventually become closely identified with their craft. In the case of the San Luis Ladies Sewing Circle no one handed on the art of colcha embroidery to another generation. Josephine Lobato, who lived in San Luis and attended the 1988 workshop as an observer for one of the sponsors, the Colorado Historical Society, subsequently started stitching and has created over thirty pictorial narrative colcha embroideries during the past twenty-two years. Josie's enthusiasm inspired her adult daughter, Rita Crespin, to learn from her. Along with Josie, Rita is also carrying on the colcha tradition as interpreted by her mother, and adding her own individual touches. In this isolated case familial transmission provides the continuity for colcha embroidery through the passion passed from mother to daughter for invention and creativity couched in tradition. In her embroidery workshops, Carmen Orrego-Salas emphasized originality and invention. It was mentioned earlier that this attitude of individualistic artistry runs counter to the communal aesthetic practices favored by the Ladies Sewing Circle yet these are the very ingredients, which continue to inspire Josephine and her daughter Rita.

In terms of group dynamics and artistic creativity, it appears that the appreciation and endorsement of the community is vital for the perseverance of these craft revivals. In San Luis there was a disjunction between embroiderers' creative activities and the understanding of the uniqueness (and significance) of their efforts by the rest of the community. In this instance the novelty of learning the embroidery craft vitalized the sewing group over a certain time period but never became imbedded in the community culture as a recognized and valued cultural expression.

Conclusion

Our experiences initially converge when we discuss how ethnoaesthetic criteria operate in these workshop situations, and the relative degrees of local women's autonomy (socially and economically). We diverge when it comes to the successes and longevity of projects, the subversive tactics of women participants, plus the aesthetic and economic viability of these textile craft revitalizations in light of political authority, power and social structure. The longevity and the economic effectiveness of the project require flexibility and leadership by the participants to gain self-directed agency through education and artistic choices.

In Kusanpuri, the locally led project of UNIDO producing sarees for a busy local market allowed the shifting of the role of women in the household to be within the context of the complexity of history, tradition and cultural identity. The literacy, leadership and artistic training the women received placed the women as creative agents in their community. Contrasting with the strong economically motivated Indian weaving enterprises, camaraderie and fellowship are vital to the existence of San Luis stitching groups. In that spirit, Carmen Orrego-Salas believes that “future stitching groups should be built around people meeting because they enjoy stitching together. Any other reason is doomed to failure” (MacAulay 2000: 124).

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