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INDIA-WEST AFRICA TRADE TEXTILES (IWATT):
‘An Escapade in the Life’ of Gujarati Mirror-Work Embroidery

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In this paper I will analyze the development of design within the several-hundred-year-old tradition of producing textiles in India for export to specific cultural markets in West Africa, in particular the appearance of Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery within RMHK Fancy in the 1990s. I begin by describing the research process and defining RMHK Fancy.

The paper is based on ethnographic field research I completed in Madras, India on contemporary embroidery production for export to West Africa in 1997. The research addressed the question of how design and production occur in a transnational trade textile tradition¹ between India and West Africa, involving hand-embroidery,² in which cultural authentication³ marks the acceptance and use of the textiles in their destination markets.⁴

Formulation of my research plan began with the observation that though the Kalabari of West Africa require many kinds of textiles from India, including gold-embroidered velvets, for celebration of all of their life course and community rituals, the literature on Indian gold-embroidered velvets makes no mention whatsoever of the exports, either in text or pictures. A subplot of this paper, already mentioned, concerns the question of how Gujarati mirror-work embroidery appeared in one of those textiles, an RMHK Fancy, in the late 1990s. Note that Madras on the southeast coast of India is quite distant from the state of Gujarat on India’s northwest side, and both are very distant from West Africa. Not only geographical distance, but language, culture, religion, and political boundaries separate these three areas.

I call the group of textiles made in India for West African markets India-West Africa trade textiles or IWATT. Two of the earliest styles of IWATT, Real Madras Handkerchief, or RMHK (Evenson 1991, 1994), and RMHK Fancy (Sumberg 1994), both maintain a format of eight (8) yard-square ‘handkerchiefs’ per cloth.⁵ RMHK is a handloomed cotton cloth with checked or plaid designs occurring in 18” or 36”-wide repeats. RMHK Fancy consists in a cotton handloomed cloth with decorative borders jacquard-woven in rayon yarns defining the 36”-square handkerchiefs. Both styles of cloth occur in plain and embroidered versions. Gold-embroidered velvets have also

¹ Evenson (1994) has researched the earliest textile, RMHK, in this tradition.

² Eicher and Sumberg (1995) first discussed embroidered velvets made in India for export to West Africa.

³ Erekosima and Eicher (1981) defined cultural authentication in an analysis of an Indian textile reworked by the Kalabari of West Africa.

⁴ For *in passim* examples of the use of other Indian textiles by the Kalabari, see Daly (1984, 1986); Daly, Eicher, and Erekosima (1986); Eicher and Erekosima (1987, 1996); Erekosima and Eicher (1994); and Michelman (1992).

⁵ A line woven into the cloth separates each of the handkerchiefs in all RMHK and early RMHK Fancies. The ‘handkerchiefs’ are never cut apart for use as handkerchiefs.

formed part of the IWATT family of cloths for at least 100 years, (Eicher and Sumberg 1995) and perhaps considerably longer.⁶ In the 1980s design changes in the three styles of cloth began to occur with rapid frequency and additional styles of IWATT developed, due to the disruption and reorganization of the manufacturing and trade network resulting from the Nigerian ban on textile imports, established in 1976.

Research Methodology:

Conceptualization of textile tradition as having a pure, central core does not assist us in understanding the IWATT-Gujarati tradition cross-over, or the character of the transnational India-West Africa tradition, or even how strictly-for-export designs of gold-embroidered velvets emerged from within the Indian gold-embroidered velvet tradition. I responded to this difficulty by developing a research method that aims at discovering the outer, growing frontiers of a textile tradition rather than its pure, still center at which textile scholarship has so often aimed. To accomplish this I combined theoretical work of Baizerman (1987) on tourist art textiles and Appadurai (1986) on *The Social Life of Things* to form the concept of *textile tradition ecumene*.

In her dissertation, Baizerman (1987) developed an elaborate set of criteria for studying the production and trade of traditional textiles that cross cultural boundaries as tourist art. In addition to the usual concern with tools, techniques, and materials her criteria include such concerns as (a) where do the textile craft workers learn their skills and who select the students; (b) who market the textiles; and (c) what are the consumers tastes--- regardless of whether or not the teachers, marketers, or consumers belong to the culture from which the traditional textiles originated or whether the designs of the textiles produced remain the same.

Appadurai (1986, 36) coined the phrase “commodity ecumene” in *The Social Life of Things* to draw attention to the way, during the period of their ‘life,’ material culture objects cross cultural, social, political, and geographical boundaries to connect people in social structures that are not recognized by the social and cultural pigeon holes customarily used to identify material culture objects or groups of people.

Applied to the concept of ecumene, Baizerman’s theory narrows its focus to the beginning of a textile’s ‘life’ when it is produced, and introduced to the market. Her criteria also shift the focus from Appadurai’s underlying concern with social structure to make material culture objects the central concern. Applied to Baizerman’s criteria, Appadurai’s theory expands the study to encompass transnational textile traditions. Out of this theoretical combination the concept of textile tradition ecumene emerges and a material culture methodology for studying design development in the production and trade of a long-standing transnational trade textile tradition.

A textile tradition ecumene is the cultural, social, political, and territorial geography that the material culture objects of a tradition travel during their ‘lives.’ This includes

⁶ Vogt (1975) provides evidence that gold-embroidered velvets could have reached West Africa during the period of Portuguese dominance of the West Africa trade.

everything from their conception and 'birth' in production, their movement in trade, use by consumers, 'retirement,' any resale and reuse, and final 'death.'

My method of research consisted in following the trail of gold-embroidered velvets produced in India for the Kalabari cultural market. I initially approached individuals in Madras engaged in the manufacture and export of RMHK. I asked if they knew anything of the gold-embroidered velvets exported to the Kalabari and found they had been manufacturing them since the early 1980s. Their West African Wholesale Buyers had shown them historic Indian velvets they brought from their ancestral cloth boxes asking if they could manufacture the same. Madras Manufacturers gave an enthusiastic "Yes!"

I followed the trail of these embroidered velvets, mapping the cultural, social, political, and territorial geography of the production and trade portion of the trade textile ecumene. Map points included the work sites and individuals engaged in the production and trade of the textiles. I also documented the design of the embroideries. In addition I asked workers about their sources of design. Lastly, I documented all other textiles being produced or traded by the same workers or in the same work sites where these IWATT embroideries begin their 'life.' The sites included the cottage industry homes, embroidery factories, and manufacturers' warehouses.

Analysis:

Because I began by looking for gold-embroidered velvets destined for the Kalabari, and maintained a focus on embroideries bound for West Africa, the bulk of the textiles I encountered were produced for West African cultural markets. However, not all the textiles were embroidered and not all embroideries were velvets. The early velvets were embroidered in the straight needle technique used for the *zardozi* embroidery (bullion work) traditional to Indian gold-embroidered velvets. Within just a few years, the Manufacturer-Exporters had shifted velvet embroidery work to those individuals they employed to embroider their RMHK and RMHK Fancy textiles. These latter embroiderers used the *nakshi* (tambour hook). It always makes a chain stitch, but in skilled hands can produce reasonable replicas of Gujarati mirror-work embroidery and many other embroidery and embellishment techniques such as beading. It is usually much quicker than the techniques it replicates.

For example, to do beading an embroiderer first loads beads onto the *nakshi*, and then applies them to the cloth with chain stitches produced by pulling loops from the thread held beneath the cloth up through the cloth, through the previous chain loop, and then through the dropped bead. The production of the next chain stitch, with or without a bead, secures the previous bead in place and hides the chain stitch which passes through the bead.

Mirror-work embroidery motifs are accomplished with the *nakshi* in several different manners. In the most simple way, the mirror is first applied to the cloth with a dab of glue to hold it in place while with the *nakshi* a few chain stitches, three or so, are executed crossing over the top of the mirror at its edges to hold it more securely in place. The motif is finished with at least one more course of chain stitches, running around the

mirror's edge to form a circle that loosely holds the mirror down and replicates the appearance of the most simple Gujarati mirror-work embroidery motifs. These latter use a row of chain stitch executed with a straight sewing needle to surround the mirror. There are many variations in Gujarati straight-needle techniques and in the design of the embroidery immediately surrounding the mirror in Gujarati mirror-work embroidery (Frater 1999; Morrell 1995, 75-95).

The embroidered RMHKs, Fancies, and velvet textiles were not produced and traded in isolation. I found many other textiles and apparel within the production and trade portion of the IWATT ecumene. The full range of workers from Cottage Industry and Factory Embroiderers through Manufacturer-Exporters and West African Wholesale Buyers, in total, are engaged in the production or trade of textiles and apparel destined to or coming from many different ethnic and fashion markets inside and outside Africa. These latter include ethnic and national fashion markets inside India; national fashion markets in the US and Europe; and ethnic fashion markets in the Middle East, in addition to the IWATT.

I found that outside design elements are freely being incorporated into the IWATT tradition to develop design variations and entirely new styles of textiles for self-defined cultural markets in West Africa. The entrance of new design elements into the IWATT tradition is facilitated by the overlapping of the IWATT ecumene with the ecumenes of the other tradition-based and fashion industry textiles which I encountered as I traveled and mapped IWATT production and trade.

In the tour of the IWATT ecumene on which I now take you, I use Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery as a centering focus and case in point in this very lively tradition. The appearance of Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery in an IWATT textile provides concrete evidence of the overlapping of ecumenes of textiles from very separate traditions.

In Madras, a Wholesale Buyer from Nigeria expressed how important Indian textiles are to the cultural markets she serves, telling me, "We must have Indian textiles!" However, distinctions between the different designs manufactured in Madras were never made in terms of identification of the many Indian ethnic traditions from which the hand-woven cloths, embellishment techniques, and design motifs originated. Rather identification was made in terms of trade names shared by Wholesale Buyers and Manufacturer-Exporters--names such as RMHK---or specific to the relationship between Wholesale Buyer and West African consumer---names like the global poetry of Jet Age Velvet and African women's sentiments like Don't Come Near Me If You're Not Rich. Moreover Wholesale Buyers sometimes bring to the Indian Manufacturers textiles from other world markets, such as Japan, for inexpensive reproduction in India. Apparently copying them in India makes them Indian to West African consumers. As the Wholesale Buyers regularly travel to Taiwan, and to Italy,⁷ to buy coral, and many live outside West Africa, e.g. in the UK, they have a lot of opportunity to encounter outside design and introduce new elements and techniques into the IWATT tradition.

⁷ Personal communication from Susan Torntore (2000)..

I first found the Gujarati mirror-work embroidery on some RMHK Fancies piled up in multiples in each of several color ways in the warehouse of one of the leading IWATT Manufacturer-Exporters. Later I found out that some of his competitors also produce and export them. Fancies of many other embroidered, appliquéd, and beaded designs sat in his warehouse, including newer designs of RMHK Fancies with embroidery-appliquéd velvet patches, an innovation that arose after the Madras Manufacturer-Exporters of RMHK and RMHK Fancy started producing and exporting gold-embroidered velvets. This Manufacturer, respected by his peers in the ecumene for his ability to innovate styles that become successful in West African markets, proudly showed me his latest success---Sari George. *George* is one of the generic terms used by West Africans for textiles from India. Sari George consists in a Benaras brocade sari, complete with blouse piece popular in the Indian domestic sari market, but woven of inexpensive rayon and Lurex®-type yarns for the export market. It is sold as is, or with embroidery-applied beading along the lines of the woven brocade design. Other products handled by the IWATT Manufacturer-Exporters include madras plaid men's casual shirts for European and US markets, Indian imitations of African textiles such as *akwete*,⁸ hats for Kalabari women, and a range of other embroidered and unembroidered IWATT styles that take me beyond the focus of this paper.

At an embroidery factory in Pillaipakkam village outside Madras, I found the owner and his employees consulting an Indian fashion catalogue with a magnifying glass to discover how fashionable salwar kamiz suits had been embroidered. They cited these catalogues, which are filled with Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidered garments, as a major source of their embroidery design inspiration. Manufacturer-Exporters also look to these catalogues, but they additionally access publications on textile traditions from other parts of the world through Madras book stores. On one visit I found a Manufacturer considering pictures of Japanese family crests woven into kimono fabric as inspiration for embroidery on IWATT.

Factory owners, themselves risen from the ranks of embroiderers, and the embroiderers they employ, were trained in embroidery factories stretching anywhere from the next village, to Madras city, or far away Bombay. During their early training and employment they embroidered products for many regional, national, and international markets. The longer they have worked, the more styles of design and embroidery techniques they have learned. However, a great expansion of the work volume in the last two decades has been for the Indian Ethnic Chic fashion trend, beginning in the 1980s, of which Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery forms an important staple.

Cottage industry embroiderers, alone, seem to have limited exposure to a broad array of products for the world market. They tend to be newer in this occupation. Their sometimes limited skills garner them contracts for the thicker thread metallic embroidery that is done on the West Africa-bound velvets and the new style Washwash, also embroidered in thick metallic thread, but on an industrially produced polyester twill ground cloth in the eight-handkerchief format of RMHK. Yet about half of cottage industry embroiderers are also initially trained in local factories where they minimally encounter products for the Indian

⁸ Personal communication from Lisa Aronson (2000).

ethnic and national fashion markets. The paper patterns I examined of 15 plus years of embroidery contracts of one cottage industry embroider included logos of West African societies and the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Moreover every cottage industry embroiderer I interviewed, even those producing fans for Saudi Arabia, could at least display samples of fashionable saris they had embroidered.

In this seemingly topsy-turvy cross-tradition textile production network, cross-over of design elements and techniques from outside traditions and fashions into IWATT is a potential norm rather than the perplexing oddity. Is it any wonder that Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery is being exported to some cultural community in West Africa? I think not.

Conclusions:

I offer three conclusions. In the first place, the India-West Africa trade textile tradition currently exhibits a lively development of new styles of textiles while maintaining elements of materials, techniques, and design which have a long history within the IWATT tradition. Use of handloomed cottons and velvet cloth, nakshi embroidery, and the eight-handkerchief design format remain in use both in the textile styles from the past and as incorporated into new styles like Sari George and Washwash. Those new styles incorporate new materials, such as the industrially loomed polyester twill cloth, and draw from outside traditions such as Gujarati mirror-work embroidery and Benarsi brocade saris.

My research, secondly, demonstrates the lack of separation of tradition-based textiles from fashion industry textiles, as well as the lack of separation of one textile tradition from another, in the contemporary production and trade of IWATT. Gujarati mirror-work embroidery, Indian ethnic and national fashions, American and European men's shirts, Middle Eastern dress accessories, Japanese kimono and fashion fabrics, and West African textiles all intersect at some one or several places in the IWATT ecumene. IWATT design and production occur in intimate proximity to other textile traditions and fashions. West Africans' cultural identity, as communicated in the textiles with which they dress themselves and their homes, is directly dependent upon input from textile traditions of culturally defined social groups from many other parts of the world, not least of all India. This makes the very distinctively dressed West Africans truly members of global society, a society in which textile tradition has a character quite distinct from any of our previous conceptualizations. I question whether we can continue to rely on our familiar categorization of textile traditions in any research on contemporary textiles now that globalization is knocking on most everyone's door.

Thirdly, use of the concept of textile tradition ecumene, with its focus on the expanding, outer frontiers of a tradition, rather than on its pure, early core, changes our understanding of what a textile tradition is. My research method for the study of a tradition in material culture production and trade exposes the potential for design change inherent in every material culture tradition. This method seems particularly suited to the study of textile traditions produced in the global factory (Blim, 1992), including even our own apparel. Yet I suggest we not stop there. Consider how our powers of sight might

change if we apply the concept of textile tradition ecumene to the study of pre-global commercial and non-commercial textile traditions as well.

In closing I would like to report that Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery's social life has not stopped at West Africa. The US is currently experiencing the second wave, in my lifetime, of Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery. Recently viewed sandals, scarf and purse, retailed as matching accessories by Chicos, a national US chain, are similar to items currently available in many clothing stores in the US. The significant point is that not all are made in Gujarat or even in India. I've seen mirror-work embroidered sandals made in Spain. The Chicos pair is made in China, though the matching scarf and purse are Indian made. Pre-fabricated mirror-work embroidery motifs made in China are now also being retailed in craft stores in the US for use by American home sewers. Gujarati-style mirror-work embroidery has entered the Chinese and Spanish work place, American women's dress and hobby pursuits, and might arguably be included in a description of turn-of-the-century fashion in world dress.

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