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Medha Bhatt
medhabhatt@yahoo.com

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Bead and Beadwork Traditions:  
A Study of Trade and Cultural Exchanges across the Coast of Gujarat, East Africa and the Red Sea  
Medha Bhatt, Textile Designer and Researcher  
medhabhatt@yahoo.com

Indian cotton textiles were the key commodity that powered the Indian Ocean trade exchanges. Gujarat played a significant role not only in the manufacture of cotton textiles but also carnelian beads that was used for commercial trade exchanges in the markets of East Africa, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. While these two commodities of trade have been studied separately in detail, less well examined is the interaction between the two and the emergence of glass beads in the commercial exchanges of the trading communities of Gujarat. The bonding of the beads to the fabric led to a sophisticated expression in the beadwork textiles of Saurashtra, Gujarat.

This essay asserts for an African influence in the flow of the glass trade beads to Gujarat with a focus on geographical location of ports and regional studies of traditional economies and consumption patterns in specific ethnic communities of Gujarat and Africa.

The oldest available artifact on beadwork of Saurashtra used the imported Venetian glass beads, manufactured in the foundries of Murano, Italy since the fourteenth century. The earliest examples of bead-work tend to be rare because the cloth on which the beads were sewn and the cotton threads used for knitting the beads have disintegrated over time. The study of ancient maritime routes highlights the active involvement of the Gujarati trading communities throughout Asia, Africa and Europe earlier than fourteenth century. Hence the present essay puts forth the alternate view that the origin of bead-work in Saurashtra was as early as the sixteenth century as against the common viewpoint of nineteenth century.

The ancient Maritme trade of Gujarat cotton textiles in the Indian Ocean.
One of the greatest strengths of the Indian textile industry was its capacity to serve different long distance trade routes. Indian cloth manufacturers were highly adaptable and had an ability to customize the product, which resulted in the creation of segmented, regional markets. Though Gujarat traded their cottons in most of the markets of Afghanistan, Eastern Persia, Central Asia, Muscat, Basra, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, the vast bulk of its export was sent to the Western Indian Ocean.

In East Africa, the Gujarati textiles derived a new social, cultural and political context from the twelfth century onwards with the spread of Islam. By the fifteenth century onwards Gujarati cotton textiles had become dominant in the Horn of Africa and along the Swahili coast. In East and Southern Africa, the weaving tradition was much less developed than in the rest of the African continent and was in many places wholly absent. Throughout these regions there was heavy reliance on animal skins, leather and bark cloth to fulfill the often minimal clothing requirements. Thus, there was always a large market for the Indian cotton cloth in East Africa.

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Decline of Stone Bead trade and the advent of Glass Beads

Cambay was an important port that linked the hinterland of Gujarat with places overseas. An important local industry consisted in the mining of agate in Ratanpur (Southern Gujarat) and craft of Stone bead making in Cambay itself. The greatest port in Gujarat in 1500 was Cambay. But it faced serious difficulties in the form of continuous silting on the upper reaches of the gulf and from the dreaded tidal bore that swept in from the sea. Thus, Gogha provided a harbor for the large ships from where goods were transported to Cambay in smaller coastal vessels and similarly the boats were loaded with goods coming from Cambay. This suggests that traded commodities like beads penetrated the remotest of villages during the transfer of goods from large ships to small boats as the accessibility of the traded goods increased.

Prior to the nineteenth century, beads emerged conspicuously as a possible indicator of coastal interior trade links in modern day Tanzania, Uganda and Congo. Venice, the chief source of glass trade beads in the Western world, supplied them strung on cotton threads, bunched according to number, or according to weight in the case of the small 'seed beads', alternatively called Conterie or 'Pound Beads'. These beads went by shiploads to Africa and the America to be traded for ivory, furs, cloth, slaves and other commodities. Conterie was the smallest kind of traditional glass beads made in Venice. In Venice, the word Conteria indicates a small round seed bead made of glass in different colors that was used to make necklaces, flowers, embroidery. The Conterie were used during the time of the Venice republic for trade, instead of cash, so they travelled all around the world, as evident in Native Americans embroideries, and on the coasts of Asia and Africa.
Patterns of consumption in African regional societies.
A vast trade arose, based on the classic triangular pattern of consumer goods going from Europe to West African coast, slaves to the America and rum and sugar back to Europe. As in East Africa, beadwork was extremely popular. Both areas had a long tradition of decorating belts, aprons and cloaks with little discs cut from materials such as Ostrich eggshells, so the use of imported beads to decorate the same garments seemed like a natural progression.

The early trade in African ivory was entirely with India. Ivory was a very important commodity in the cultural context of Saurashtra as it was mainly used in making jewelry for the young brides in the traditional communities. India re-exported the ivory to the European markets. Gujarati financiers played a decisive role in raising capital and assembling goods that would be eventually exchanged for ivory. Traders would carry outward from Zanzibar, arms, thousands of yards of cloth, beads or wire depending on the fashion of the day in the interior of Africa and trade them for tusks. Far from being marginal players, African consumers negotiated the terms of trade and the goods that were to be produced and delivered. The merchants who traded in cloth from Gujarat to east-central and south-east Africa had to ensure that they had current information on the textiles demanded in every trading season. This exposure to the fashion trends in the African markets helped in identifying new products of material exchange flowing in the Indian Ocean trade, one of these being the Venetian glass beads. This knowledge capital was provided by agents known as Vashambadzi. They were important links in the chain that connected producers, intra-regional oceanic exchange and local consumers. Merchants maintained contact with these agents a regular basis. Thus after textiles, beads were another item that Africans demanded in exchange for ivory and copal. Italian beads of various colors were in great demand. Gujarati merchants made sure that the demand for beads was always met. To meet African preferences, four hundred different varieties of beads, each variety bearing it peculiar name were exported to
Zanzibar. It was necessary for the Gujarati merchants to check, measure, and prepare lengthy bead necklaces before barter. Bead of a wrong size or color would be rejected.

Prior to the arrival of Venetian glass beads, only carnelian beads manufactured in Cambay were imported into Africa. With the arrival and influx of cheaper and easier to manufacture glass beads, the more labor intensive Carnelian and Stone beads became objects of prestige and status. The transaction values of Carnelian beads to glass beads reflect to this. One carnelian bead was equivalent of two white, or three black or ten blue glass beads, while three carnelian beads were the price of the slave. Over a period of time these transaction values would have changed – with changing socioeconomic demands and supply from Gujarat. If beads were the currency of Africa, then Ujiji was its most important foreign exchange market. The conversion rates reflected the prevalent fashions in demand and the challenges. The problems dealing with the complex Zanzibar dominion was of overstocked goods and their disposal. Having lost in the first round of sale, the suppliers were left to dispose of their goods at a compromised rate or to change the venue of the sale from a specific to a general commercial center. For instance, the piled stocks of beads, perhaps rejected had their savior market at Ujiji, where bead changers converted hundreds of varieties. Ujiji was one of the East African trade markets where slaves were exchanged. Because of its rarity and price, only a few could afford the Venetian glass beads for important ritual functions. However as suppliers, that is the traders and the manufacturers responded to the demand, it may have led to a situation of surplus. This surplus of overstocked goods of beads could then have been diverted to the Gujarat coast through the informal barter systems in the Indian Ocean trade network which also unfortunately included human slaves. The abundance of bead availability can be attested by studying the nature of bead-work textiles of Saurashtra where large quantities of beads were employed in embelissment every inch of the fabric.

There is however, a major difference between African slavery in America and Europe and that in India. There was far greater social mobility for Africans in India where they rose along the social ladder to become nobles, rulers or merchants in their own capacities. In Europe and America, Africans were brought in as slaves for plantations and industrial labor while India they served as military power, valued for their physical strength. They came to be known as Siddis (derived from the North African term meaning 'respect'). They presently reside in the Gir Forest National Park in Saurashtra, from where the beadwork presently under study originates.

**Socio-cultural Implications of the African demands on the material culture of Gujarat.**
The intense network of the Gujarati trading community with the regions of East, Central and South east Africa over a period of seven centuries indicate deep rooted cultural influences that affected social fabric and material culture of traditional societies in Gujarat. In its journey from a weaver's loom in Gujarat to the hands of a local ruler, trader or a patron in Africa, a piece of cloth was transformed as it was inscribed with meanings that reflected local articulations of taste and fashion.³

Glass beads were valued in Africa because they were the products of a sophisticated technology. The use of beads by the African communities were interlaced with all aspects of society, including beautification, age, kinship, marital status, hunting, commerce, rank, rituals and religious beliefs. (See fig.6) In grasslands of Cameroon, the ceremonial chairs are entirely covered with beadwork. In Africa, beads played an important role in marking the stages in a woman's life. When a girl reached puberty, it was an occasion for celebration, as she was now ready to play the essential role of a wife and a mother. The maidens of the Iraqw of Tanzania, during their seclusion in the bush during menstruation, while learning a woman's duties, made back skirts of beaded leather which is one of the most spectacular examples of bead-work from Eastern Africa. The best known examples of Beadwork were found in the 'Zulu love tokens' where beads were used as a form of communication in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Province of Africa. Their symbolism lies in the use of colors and the sequencing of the colored beads. Certain colors are associated with meanings; and if the colors are assembled in a sequence, they can then be “read off and the message conveyed.”⁴

Just as the Gujarat cotton fabric influenced the pattern of supply - demand - consumption in the ethnic societies of Africa, the flow of glass beads in numerous quantities along with ivory brought in newer styles symbolic of material exchange in the Indian Ocean trade and redefined the deep-rooted dowry tradition of the ethnic communities of Saurashtra. Consequently, the beads may have transformed from economic capital to a symbolic capital where they now carried specific color symbolism reflecting the social-cultural fabric of the tribe. Beads in the hand of the Gujarati women changed from objects of trade to objects of value and social significance. The most commonly used method in bead-work of Saurashtra is the tri-bead system. In Mediaeval period beadwork⁵ was a textile technique practiced along with the traditional

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⁵ The beads studied in this paper can be commonly denoted as the seed beads considering their sizes under 2mm and the drawn glass method. Though a bead is commonly known as moti and beadwork as moti-bharat in Gujarati, the
embroidery traditions of Saurashtra in the making of the dowry textiles by the Kathi, Mahajan and Kanbi communities.

As these communities were mostly settled along the coastal regions of Saurashtra, they were foremost in being exposed to new trends and styles filtering through the trading ports. Maritime word moti commonly occurring in the medieval Gujarati literature stands for pearls which were collected along the western coast of Jamnagar in Saurashtra. Jaymal Parmar refers to the beads used in the Saurashtra bead-work as 'Chidiya & Kidiya Moti', they were also known as Patthariya moti since the colored glass beads looked like being created from stones.
communities were junctions where different cultures came into contact and acted as filters through which these cultures permeated into the hinterlands. They were “littoral societies”, linking both land and sea, and were meeting points for a variety of peoples, cultures and ideas.\(^6\)

Bead-work was practiced by women of high status of all the three communities who could not only afford the purchase of beads but also had enough time at disposal to illustrate events that marked a woman’s life. While embroidery was a technique which was limited to 2-dimensional surfaces, bead-work created not only surface patterns and coarser textures to the textiles but was used on 3-dimensional objects like coconut shells, gourds, betel nuts, sticks, metal vessels and toys.

The communities of higher social status in Saurashtra shared a common dowry tradition where in addition to the jewelry and household items, the young bride brought with her a \textit{Pataro} (a wooden chest) full of richly embroidered and embellished textiles. The dowry consists of embroidered costumes for the bride and the bridegroom, furnishings and accessories in embroidery and beadwork for her new home and animal trappings for the carts carrying the wedding procession. The young girls engaged in the art of bead-work had no access to education hence most of the motifs in the narratives were drawn from \textit{Puranas} and religious scriptures. Drawing parallels with the Zulu beadwork, colors played a significant role in communication in the beadwork of Saurashtra. White beads were created a canvas within which the colored motifs were illustrated. The white beads were held synonymous with the white sari the girls wear at the time of their wedding signifying purity and chastity of the bride. While a silk cloth in red is offered to the bride at the time of wedding signifying her married status, green cloth symbolizing fertility is offered during the pregnancy rituals. The color yellow is associated with the worship

of the fertility Goddess Randal Ma. Krishna can be easily identified through the blue beads. Interestingly black which symbolizes inauspiciousness has never been used in the beadwork of Saurashtra.

As daughters, they were responsible for maintaining the cultural identity of her community through not only following the social norms but also expressing the unique cultural features of her tribe through her skill of embroidery and beadwork. Folk songs and personal interviews of women during fieldwork reiterated the fact that while they spent their childhood creating these exquisite collections of textiles with the help of their mothers and aunts culminating into their marriages, the rest of their lives were spent in deprivation and oppression and a life of self-sacrifice. The dowries created with love and care during their childhood were the only cherishing links that these women treasured for the rest of their lives after crossing the threshold of marriage.
To conclude, 'the voyage of the bead' can be better understood only in the light of the Gujarati cotton textiles that steered the Indian Ocean trade network. These textiles along with the entrepreneurial spirit of the Gujarati traders created an intricate system of supply and demand all over East and central Africa which was readily receptive to the inundating flow of glass beads from the Mediterranean region. The deep understanding by the Gujarati traders of the social and cultural fabric of African regional societies not only strengthened their commercial trade exchanges in cotton textiles but also influenced and altered the socio-cultural traditions in Saurashtra with the advent of glass beads. Thus beads, formally regarded as commodity of...
economic exchange and currency in the initial trade networks with East Africa, became repositories of community prestige, wealth and gender identity in the societies of the East Africa and Saurashtra in the Mediaeval Period.

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