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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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The embroidery artisans of the Kashmir Valley: cultural imports and exports from historical and contemporary perspectives.

Deborah Emmett

On a visit to the Kashmir Valley in northern India during the winter months I was given a *pheran* to wear. This long woollen garment is the customary apparel worn by Kashmiri men and women in cold weather. While the men's are plain the women's *pherans* are embroidered on the front and sleeves. *Pherans* are for everyday wear but on special occasions Kashmiri women wrap themselves in beautiful pashmina shawls many with exquisite *sozni* embroidery designs. The décor of most Kashmiri homes and the renowned Kashmiri houseboats includes crewel embroidered curtains, embroidered *namda* or felt rugs and chain stitch cushions. It seems that these embroidered textiles are intrinsic to the local cultural heritage of Kashmir yet through my research I have learnt that the embroidery techniques were introduced through trade and foreign political rule to the Kashmir Valley throughout its history.

In the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir the, Kashmir Valley, situated amid the Himalayan Mountains, is geographically apart from the rest of India to the south while its population is mostly Muslim. The frequently reported ongoing political instability in Kashmir impacts on the lives of all Kashmiris including textile artisans. In fact, the Kashmir Valley has continuously been occupied by foreign rulers for centuries, while causing hardships the influence of these rulers on Kashmiri textile crafts is well recognized. Initially Zain-Ul-Abidin, the eighth sultan of Kashmir (1420-70) brought shawl and carpet weavers to Kashmir from Turkestan and Samarkand respectively.¹ As a young prince he brought with him many artisans from Central Asia and it is thought craftsmen introduced *zalakdozi* (crewel and chain stitch) hook work embroidery to the Kashmir Valley during his rule. While existing shawl fragments suggest that the pashmina shawl industry in Kashmir came into existence in the late sixteenth century developed under the rule of Mirza Haider Dughlat. A patron of the arts of Kashmir he is said to have introduced the concept of using *pashm* from Ladakh to be woven into shawls by the expert craftsmen of Kashmir who had previously used sheep's wool.²

Unlike artisan communities in other parts of India that have developed their crafts intrinsically from the use of natural resources readily available in their local environments Kashmiri textile artisans have been exposed to resources and ideas from afar that have been incorporated into their techniques, including embroidery skills of *sozni*, crewel, chain stitch or *zalakdozi* and *aari*. The Kashmir Valley's position along the trade routes of Central Asia resulted in brisk trade originally during the Mughals rule (1586-1753). Emperor Akbar, son of Mughal dynasty founder Babur, invaded Kashmir in the late 1500s. Akbar took a personal interest in Kashmiri crafts particularly the twill tapestry-woven or *kani* shawl weaving industry. Of course, the Kashmir shawl as an export commodity to Europe in the 18th and early 19th centuries is well documented.

It was the demands of the export market and local political pressures that resulted in the introduction of *sozni* needlework embroidery to Kashmir. While Kashmir *kani* shawls were initially only purchased by European nobility and social elite the high demand for the shawls

¹ J. Gillow and N. Barnard, *Indian Textiles*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 155.

² Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1997), 17.

resulted in sophisticated imitation shawl techniques being developed in France and Britain from 1800. The invention of the jacquard loom in Europe resulting in increased productivity of imitation Kashmir shawls causing fierce competition for the weavers in India.

Despite Kashmiri weavers modifying shawl designs to satisfy European tastes during the same period they could not compete with the jacquard loom. To make the Kashmir shawl industry more competitive a cost-cutting alternative of embroidered shawls was introduced. In 1803 Khwaja Yusuf, an Armenian shawl merchant sent to Kashmir while working for a firm in Constantinople, observed the weavers' shawl production. He realized that it would be less expensive to imitate the twill tapestry-woven patterns with embroidered ones.³ In addition, the embroidered shawls initially escaped the ruling Sikh government's tax applied to *kani* shawls of a quarter of the shawl's value. Mary Dusenbury writes in *Flowers, Dragons and Pine Trees* that 'Khwaja Yusuf found only a few needle-workers in Kashmir with the necessary skill to make an entirely needle-worked shawl but by 1823 there almost five thousand.'⁴ An Englishman, William Moorcroft who was in Kashmir at the time, ascertained that many of the new embroiderers were recruited from the old landholding families, expelled from their lands by the Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh. A rich tradition in *sozni* or needle-worked pashmina shawls began. The embroiderers continue to form a group of very specialized hereditary craftsmen creating exquisite *sozni* embroidery pashmina shawls.

Currently in the Kashmir Valley it is regarded that the most skilled *sozni* embroiderers are to be found in the capital, Srinagar. Although predominantly done by men changing circumstances has resulted in some women now also doing the needle-work. In June, I visited the Srinagar home of two brothers, Ghulam Hassan and Ghulam Mohammed who learnt *sozni* embroidery by watching their father embroider. They have been doing this embroidery on shawls for 25 years working for around 12 hours per day for six days a week. Neither have received formal education and can only read and write a little however they are masters of their needle-work. Ghulam Hassan explained to me the process of his work. Like most handcrafted textiles in India the creation of an embroidered pashmina shawl involves a community of artisans, the *sozni* embroiderers are just one part of this community. The pashmina fibres used to hand weave the shawls are very fine so only the delicate needle-work of *sozni* embroidery is suitable for these shawls. After weaving, a *naqash* or draftsman uses block prints to make a stencil of the design on the shawl, the designs are mostly traditional Kashmiri designs. The design motifs have evolved from the Persian *buta* or paisley brought by the Mughals to floral patterns inspired by the flowers growing abundantly throughout the Kashmir Valley in the warmer months. Ghulam Hassan works out the colours to be used for the embroidery on each piece. Experience guides his choice of colours depending upon the base colour of the shawl but also he is influenced by fashion trends in colour. His son, Wasim learns about colour trends from customers, people who work in retail, and advises his father. Mostly cotton thread is used for embroidery, sometimes silk. The amount of embroidery on a shawl is described as *jali*, less heavy, *neem jama*, some areas of the base fabric are visible or *tuki jama*, full embroidery. A *tuki jama* shawl takes eight to twelve months to complete.

Ghulam Hassan and Ghulam Mohammed discussed with me the difficulties that they encounter in the contemporary market. There is problem of over-supply of varying qualities of embroidery that has resulted in less of a demand for their products. Much of the stock kept by sellers is of inferior quality and costs less. This problem is exacerbated by cheaper

³ Gillow and Barnard, *Indian Textiles*, 157.

⁴ Mary M. Dusenbury, *Flowers, Dragons and Pine Trees Asian Textiles in the Spencer Museum of Art*, (Hudson Hill Press New York and Manchester, 2004), 70.

machine embroidered shawls manufactured in the India Punjab area. Yet the two brothers love their craft and hope that their quality hand embroidery has a future. They concede that as they only earn about RS250 (AUD5.20) a day there is little incentive for their more educated children to learn the craft. The boys can earn more as labourers which has resulted in women and girls learning *sozni* embroidery.

*Ghulam Mohammed sozni embroiders a pashmina shawl
Photograph: Deborah Emmett*

However, Ghulam Hassan's son, Wasim has taken a role in his father's work using his education and communication skills to sustain the business. His role is to get embroidery work from both the local and export market. Wasim distributes stencilled shawls and threads to embroiderers who work in their homes after his father has selected the embroidery colours, and he does the accounts. By having direct contact with customers through social media Wasim can bypass the middle man. Generally, a middle man or facilitator buys the handloom pashminas from the weavers, selects the designs from the *naqash* which are then given to the embroiderers. Upon completion, the shawls are collected by the middleman, washed and sold. With Wasim organising all these steps this traditional embroidery family can cut out the middle man. Ghulam Hassan concluded that now they prefer commissioned pieces of high quality embroidery that they know will be appreciated and they will receive agreed remuneration.

Crewel originally referred to the wool thread used to make the embroidery stitch and has been implemented in many cultures around the world. The arrival in Kashmir of the crewel and chain stitch or *zalakdozi* craft is unsubstantiated but is thought to have originated in Asia

Minor and brought to Kashmir by Turkish tradesmen⁵ during sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's rule. Embroidered garments and furnishings were considered a status symbol in Muslim societies and often exchanged as gifts between dignitaries.⁶ Chain stitch was also to be found in the western side of India, notably the Mochi embroiderers of Gujarat.⁷ In the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection a hanging of fine chain stitch embroidery made by professional male embroiderers of the Mochi community dates from around 1700. It was worked with both a hook, called an ari, and a needle. Originally developed for embroidering on leather, for items such as belts, floor-coverings and shoes, the ari-work was adapted for use on cloth, and soon attracted the attention of western travellers to Gujarat. The East India Company exported these embroideries from the port of Cambay.⁸ Trade routes from Central and East Asia, as previously mentioned, crossed through the Kashmir Valley so it is possible the embroidery craft was also linked to the work done in Gujarat. Imported Asian influenced motifs visible in both crewel and chain stitch from Kashmir and Gujarat became popular in Britain on embroidered cloth that was exported by the East India Company in the 1700s. Likewise the felt rugs or *namdas* handcrafted in Kashmir are thought to have originated in Central Asia, the felt-making technique practised there by nomadic groups for centuries.⁹ Just as textiles were exported from Kashmir it seems influences from other cultures on the embroidery crafts came to Kashmir resulting from trade.

The hook work embroidery style has become well established in Kashmir and is worked on a great variety of textiles including wool patterns on felt rugs (*namdas*) and furnishing fabrics and in silk or cotton known as *aari* work on merino wool shawls, *pherans* and dress materials. The size of the hook determines the thread used for the embroidery and whether the stitches are very fine or coarse. Although it must be noted that even fine *aari* hook work is too coarse for pashmina and will make holes in the fabric. The hook work embroidery stitch is done from one point and rotates around to create an embossed effect on the fabric. Motifs used are drawn from nature – birds, animals, flowers, creepers, chinar leaves (a tree in the Kashmir Valley) and lotus are commonly included in designs. Designs are printed onto the base fabric with a mixture of charcoal dust and kerosene through the perforated tracing paper by a *naqash*.

⁵ Rachael G Mossman, *Design Techniques of Kashmir Handloom Textiles*, (Worcestershire UK: Read Books Ltd, 2008), 27-36.

⁶ "History of Embroidery Fabrics," *Indian Mirror*, <http://www.indianmirror.com/culture/indian-specialties/Embroideryfabrics.html> accessed 15 April 2018.

⁷ R. Barnes, S. Cohen and R. Crill, *Trade, Temple and Court - Indian Textiles from the Tapi Collection*, (Mumbai: India Book House Pvt Ltd, 2002), 100.

⁸ "V&A Collections," <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O61099/hanging-unknown/> accessed 20 June 2018.

⁹ Rachael G Mossman, *Design Techniques of Kashmir Handloom Textiles*, (Worcestershire UK: Read Books Ltd, 2008), 13.

*Aari hook work embroidery using the stencilled design on a wool shawl
Photograph: Deborah Emmett*

Two types of crochet hooks are used for this embroidery. A smaller and narrower hook is used for chain stitch and fine quality crewel work. The same embroidery stitch is used for both crewel and chain stitch but in crewel work the fabric shows around the embroidered design while in chain stitch the fabric is completely covered with embroidery. The main feature of chain stitch is its application in concentric rings to fill a pattern. For fine crewel work two ply good quality wool is used and the threads are pulled tight. On the back of the fabric the stitches look neat, almost machine made. The other crochet hook is larger and thicker. Crewel work done with this hook has bigger stitches and looks loose. On the back of the fabric the stitches look messy. This work is done more quickly and is cheaper to produce.

For over a decade I have travelled to the Kashmir Valley to collaborate with artisans in the crewel embroidery community on fabric designs made into curtains for my textile business. During that time, I have developed a close working relationship with Rehman Sofi who owns Sofi Handicrafts in Srinagar where crewel and chain stitch fabrics are produced and sold. His business developed through a family connection, as his father-in-law, wife, daughter and other members of her family are crewel embroiderers. Recently when I was in Srinagar I visited Rehman's small, upstairs workshop near Nageen Lake to discuss with him the current techniques and state of the crewel and chain stitch industry in Kashmir.

Hanging from the workshop's wooden rafters are multiple bundles of two-ply wool dyed in numerous colours. Rehman indicated that all materials used for crewel embroidery in Kashmir are imported into the state including handloom cotton, linen, cotton velvet and wool thread. The wool is of differing qualities, one or two ply, the finest quality is imported from New Zealand. The better-quality wool has more elasticity so can be pulled tighter without breaking to make a tighter crochet stitch.

The crewel embroidery is done predominantly in the southern part of Kashmir around Islamabad, India. This area is particularly effected by the political unrest in Kashmir which impacts upon the crewel industry. Strikes, protests, curfews and militancy situations can

delay work. Although originally chain stitch and crewel was mostly done by men in Kashmir currently most of the embroidery is now done by women in their homes as men are preferring to get other jobs for higher pay. Very few embroiderers are now prepared to do the very fine hook work. It takes a long time to complete limited meterage.

Rehman delivers the fabric to be embroidered and collects it when completed from the villages in southern Kashmir. Rehman's group of embroiderers is one of eight who do embroidery for a large export company, Woodson Impex, based in Delhi. There used to be twenty groups but now there is less demand for crewel in Europe. Designs and colours given by Woodson's customers are then developed in Kashmir. Samples completed by Rehman's embroiderers are returned to Woodson for their customers to approve. Originally most of the exported crewel was of the finer quality but Rehman conceded that for the past 10 to 15 years more one ply large hook work has been in demand as the price is lower. When there is no work for the export market he supplies the embroiderers with cheaper work done for the local market. With this crewel work the outline of the design is only embroidered often in wool that is left over so a mixture of colours. Rehman keeps this work as stock that he sells to vendors in local shops in Kashmir and other parts of India. He needs to keep the embroiderers supplied with work so that they remain with him and don't start embroidering for someone else.

Rehman Sofi's wife, Fatima, her sister and two daughters are all crewel embroiderers. Fatima and her sister learnt to do crewel embroidery from their father, he wanted them to learn to have an income. They did not go to school. They embroider for six to seven hours per day in their homes as well as do home duties. Fatima's daughters went to school but also wanted to learn crewel embroidery and did so from their mother. They have small children so only embroider for about three hours per day. The younger women were emphatic that their children would not continue with this craft. They want them to be educated and have other jobs. However, they were all sad that there is a lack of interest by the younger generation in the craft.

*Fatima Sofi and her sister demonstrate crewel hook work embroidery
Photograph: Deborah Emmett*

In an article in the *Kashmir Reader* published in June last year titled 'Decline in exports: the fading glory of Kashmiri handicrafts' exporters of Kashmiri handicrafts discussed the loss of

demand for their once sought after products. Figures released by the Industries and Commerce Ministry show that exports of handicraft items have decreased by 37 percent in the last two financial years.¹⁰ One exporter Mushtaq Ahmad blames the artisans, 'Our artisans are still continuing with age-old designs and don't experiment.' He continued, 'In order to stay relevant in the market, one has to stay updated with current market trends.'¹¹ Other influencing factors discussed that have resulted in decreased demand include the increasing competition from machine-made products providing more options for customers. While culture critic Zareef Ahmad Zareef believes the rise in the use of sub-standard material to gain maximum profits has caused a consumer distrust of Kashmiri handicrafts.¹²

Certainly, problems exist for the embroidery artisans in the Kashmir Valley but there are signs that younger Kashmiris are developing a new interest in their cultural heritage. Now, with various modern designs of *pherans* available in the market, youth take pride in wearing this traditional local dress. As Dr Farrukh Faheem of Kashmir University's Institute of Kashmir Studies observes, "we see a lot of people wearing the *pheran* with pride now. They have learned how to strike a balance between necessity, traditions and new trends. A network of boutiques, where young men and women prepare trendy *pherans*, and the internet has made it much easier for them,"¹³ Young fashion entrepreneurs like Iqra Ahmad design *pherans* for young women with *aari* and *tilla* (metal thread) embroidery. She began her business, Tul Palav by promoting the embroidered clothes on Instagram and has opened an online shop. But as a sad indictment of life in the politically restive Kashmir Valley Iqra Ahmad deliberates why she hasn't opened a shop in Srinagar, "I could not sustain the rent because most of the time the shops remain closed due to the situation (in Kashmir)."¹⁴

¹⁰ N. Gillo, "Decline in exports: the fading glory of Kashmiri handicrafts?" *Kashmir Reader* 17/06/2017, <http://kashmirreader.com/2017/06/08/decline-exports-fading-glory-kashmiri-handicrafts/> accessed 1 August 2017.

¹¹ N. Gillo, "Decline in exports: the fading glory of Kashmiri handicrafts?" *Kashmir Reader* 17/06/2017, <http://kashmirreader.com/2017/06/08/decline-exports-fading-glory-kashmiri-handicrafts/> accessed 1 August 2017.

¹² N. Gillo, "Decline in exports: the fading glory of Kashmiri handicrafts?" *Kashmir Reader* 17/06/2017, <http://kashmirreader.com/2017/06/08/decline-exports-fading-glory-kashmiri-handicrafts/> accessed 1 August 2017.

¹³ Athar Parvaiz "How its political promise is helping the Pheran stage a comeback" *Rediff News* 6/02/2018, <http://www.rediff.com/news/special/kashmirs-traditional-pheran-makes-a-comeback-as-local-style-statement/20180206.htm> accessed 7 July 2018.

¹⁴ "Kashmir's first online "palav" store Iqra Ahmad" *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vE27vyToig> accessed 7 July 2018.

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