

An Ethnographic Case Study of Textile Tradition of Rajasthan: An Untold Story of Muslim Women at Trans-boundary Areas

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Abstract

Jaisalmer is an interesting concoction of almost 75 semi nomadic tribes and folk artisans community, and the region has a confluence of the two major religions of the sub-continent, Islam and Hinduism. The impact of the confluence of two cultures is clearly visible in the *Golden City* Jaisalmer. The city is famous for textile and dances and significant traces of cultural confluence can be easily visible on these two. Religion has a significant impact on textile tradition. The conclusion made in this research paper is the outcome of my ethnographic research *Picassos of the Thar Desert: a textile tradition of Jaisalmer*, Focused on semi nomadic tribes of Thar. It was very interesting for me to investigate how did religion affect the textile traditions and interactions of nationals of both India and Pakistan in this remote, trans-boundary area?

Key Words: Textile, Mukke, Textile, Nomadic, Women.



Photograph 1: Patchwork hanging made from *mukke* embroidery pieces.

Phase I - The proposal

The project began after the purchase of two textile hangings in the market of Jaisalmer in the heart of the Thar desert in Western Rajasthan. We had never seen these before and was fascinated and puzzled. These magnificent hangings were made from silver and gold rectangular patches, skilfully put together to form a geometric abstract. Where did these textiles come from? Who made the embroideries and who made the patchworks?

According to Vimal Gopa, a collector of antique textiles these hangings were produced 'by Muslim women in the desert'. Were they designed by women who travelled between the Tharparkar desert of Pakistan and the adjoining dunes of the Indian Thar. Because of its permeable borders this was an area of syncretic cultures and religious traditions of which little was known. Jaisalmer is an interesting mixture of tribes and nomadic groups, and at the confluence of the two major religions of the sub-continent, Islam and Hinduism. The Thar desert is also one of the world's most populated deserts.¹ It spans India and Pakistan, extending from the Indus plains to the West, from the Aravalli hills of Rajasthan to the Rann of Kutch in the South East, and from the Punjab plains to the North into the North-East. Jaisalmer in Western Rajasthan is the town closest to the border with Pakistan and the main emporium for trade and commerce. It is also the site of the fabled *Sonar Kela*, 'The Golden Fort', a World Heritage Site erected in the twelfth century.

When partition took place in 1947, many Muslim groups living in Sindh, and now India, remained in their villages in the deserts near Jaisalmer and Barmer. Until the erection of a barbed wire fence between Pakistan and India, it had been possible to traverse the desert by camel. In 2009, such trans-boundary crossings were only possible by bus. In the last few months of 2012, however, inter-regional trade between the two countries has been encouraged and more visas are being issued to boost commerce and goods exchange between Pakistan and India. How did religion affect the textile traditions and interactions of nationals of both India and Pakistan in this remote, trans-boundary area?

Phase II - Library Research

In the beginning review publications which might feature some background information on these patchwork textiles or even the gold and silver embroideries. I with the help of my team members perused books on textiles from the most prominent museums in the UK and the USA, famous for their collections of Indian textile art, but none featured any examples of this technique.² One art book on the textile

¹ According to the epic known as the Ramayana (elements of which have become integrated into the story of the Epic of Pabuji, performed often in Jaisalmer), this vast desert is believed to have mythological origins: the sea god believed to have inhabited the straits between India and the island of 'Lanka' opposed Rama's request to cross the straits. He then apologised but when he did this, in revenge, the god Rama, the hero, fired his arrow at him, rendering the region a desolated wasteland. Inhabitants of this desert manage to survive on cultivation of a sole rain-fed crop of pearl millet and a livelihood based on animal husbandry. In droughts, families migrate with their herds hundreds of miles away, in search of fodder.

² *Embroidered Textiles: A World Guide to Traditional Patterns* (Thames and Hudson, 2008) and *Embroidery from India and Pakistan* (British Museum Press, 2001) both by Sheila Paine and *Indian Textiles* by John Gillow and Nicholas Barnard Thames and Hudson, 2008.

traditions of nomads in India: '*Nomadic Embroideries: India's Tribal Textile Art*' by Tina Skinner (2008) presented lavishly illustrated samples of similar patchwork textiles but as images without text and so no information as to their origin or ethnographic context. We scanned the collections of textiles of major museums online, but there was no documentation of this particular type of embroidered textile production there or in Western libraries, as far as we could determine. We also looked in Pakistani publications but again could find no images or descriptions of this type of work. We concluded that the ethnographic context of these textiles was relatively unstudied, possibly because of the concentration on Indian Hindu textiles and the fact that most field workers in India are men. Women anthropologists or field workers working alone are constrained by protocol. In addition, few funds are available in India for field research, and because of the high cost of four wheel drive cars, the distant desert villages in which the textiles are produced are difficult of access. I with the discussion with Italian team member Dr. Elizabeth, applied to the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research for a grant. and then expressed the research question as a quest to find out the answers to several questions: the origins of the metallic embroidery tradition and whether these patchwork textiles were being produced as a traditional art form. We would record my findings on high-definition video and submit transcripts to the Foundation on completion of the project. The proposal was accepted and with this grant, I set out to discover the answers.

Phase III - The Field Project: filming

After getting the grant our team set off on the sixteen hour journey to Jaisalmer on the midnight train. Our initial strategy was to inquire as to the name of the textile when we saw examples of the hangings. In the first shop, prominently situated on the main forecourt of the fort, we were told that the embroidery was known as '*mukke*' and was made by Muslim women living in the Thar desert around Jaisalmer. Luna Charan claimed to have lived in the desert and therefore, had 'expert' qualifications. He told us that Muslim women traditionally work at home to produce silver and gold embroidered *kanchli* ('yokes' or 'bodices') as dowry pieces. These are then integrated into the dresses which form part of their daughters' (or granddaughters') bridal dowry. They also produce cushion covers and other decorative dowry pieces such as bags, using the same intricate technique.

The thread is cotton, coated in metal, though in times past, the Mughals and subsequent rulers encouraged the development of a sophisticated and elaborate artisanal tradition of embroidery called *zari/zeri* in which real gold and silver threads were used.³ We had visited the exhibition of the Maharajah's costumes in the Jaipur Palace Museum and had seen these costumes executed in pure gold and silver on display. Precursors to this craft had existed in the courts of Rajasthan. Were these metallic thread embroideries inspired by the *zari* tradition? Mr. Charan also insisted that the hangings were made by 'men' who would make a geometric composition from the patches that would become a hanging for sale 'to tourists'. Women would merely sew the cotton bindings around each patch.

The second emporium owner then showed us a series of embroidered *mukke* hangings executed using silver thread. We asked, what was the difference? He argued strongly that Shiites used silver thread and Sunnis, golden thread. Their religious orientation as Muslims clearly distinguished their style of embroidery.

³ In the film, Vimal and others describe the technique known as *kali zeri*, done with black metallic thread, in patent contrast to *mukke*.

I was unsure, were there Shiites living in India? Were the silver and white patchworks made by Shiite women in India or elsewhere, for example, Pakistan, and the gold work made by Sunnis? This seemed eminently possible but I needed corroboration. He also asserted that he and his teams would go to the desert and procure these embroideries directly from women. Their actual place of origin, he said that he was not unclear about, the reason being that every style or set of motifs was designed and produced by an individual woman in an individual village. The range of stylistic variations was seemingly infinite and so far, un-catalogued.

The team agreed that we would remain within this perimeter to find ‘the women who make *mukke*’. We would go to Muslim villages in the vicinity of Jaisalmer. According to some of my informants, these were all presumed to be Sunni, not Shiite villages, but in which case, where were the Shiites? With the help of local friends, we drove out into the desert hinterlands of Jaisalmer to two villages. There we found women producers.

‘The women who make *mukke*’

We had been told by emporium owners that ‘the *mukke* tradition was dying out’, as if to suggest that their hangings were concocted from ‘antique’ pieces, but found instead, that the embroidery tradition was thriving. As if to advertise their handiwork, the elder women were dressed in their *mukke* embroidered dresses and seemed sufficiently enthusiastic about our project to bring out various samples of their dowry pieces. Most surprisingly, the contemporary pieces were distinctly different from the patchwork pieces on display in Jaisalmer market. These were much gaudier: a melange of gilt and vibrant ochre threads with pompoms or pink and blue beadwork decorations, seemingly shaped to represent the fabled wild petunias, ‘flowers of the desert’.⁴ These colourful embellishments did not usually appear in the *mukke* hangings; moreover, none of the women used silver thread.

One embroiderer, Fatima, showed us how these *mukke* pieces started off as rough patterns, scrawled on plain blue cotton. As she showed, designs are constituted using gold metallic thread to form the bodices and yokes which will comprise part of their daughters’ bridal dowries. In the Thar desert, patchwork is evident in all costume apparel. It is famously celebrated in the appliqué squares used to make up the famous *ralli* quilts, also part of the Muslim bride’s trousseau. The patchwork principle appeared integral to the women’s design concept. Women implant these heavily embroidered gold bodices into dresses, composed of other patches: matching sleeves, shoulder and under-arm pieces of different coloured fabrics. These are then attached to a vividly patterned cotton or velour skirt. Beads appeared to be an innovation, perhaps influenced by trends in Pakistan and as we learnt in the second village we visited (Chaudriyya), in some cases, beads are imported from Pakistan, expressly for the embroidery designs.

During the filming process, I asked women about the tradition and learnt that the *mukke* metallic embroidery tradition is intimately bound up with Sindhi Muslim traditions of marriage and dowry. At marriage, girls bring with them an array of dowry pieces, and these are laid out for inspection at the

⁴ Wild petunias are the only flowers which bloom across the desolate Thar desert landscape.

moment of the *nikah* (wedding) ceremony.⁵ Each bride is required to bring with her seven or eight embroidered dresses, a range of accoutrements, plus several *ralli* quilts. Bodices are designed in such a way as to interweave and juxtapose designs of circles, rectangles or quadrilaterals within the square cloth. These motifs are seldom symmetrical and as a result, form abstract and in many cases, quadrilateral shapes. Women showed us various examples demonstrating the scope of variation within traditional designs and the gamut of pieces they would make for each daughter's dowry. For each wedding, with their young daughters at their sides as trainees, they would craft embroidered bodices, an opium bag (*kisa*), a headband to be worn by the groom as a crown (*morr*), a 'kohl' or *kajul* bag (often festooned with sequins) known as *surmedani*, bolster cushions and other smaller bands described by the embroiderer Nubbi as *kashida*, an Urdu word meaning embroidery. Most women said that they do not do *mukke* embroidery for the tourist market.

The women's *mukke* designs differed from one village to another. The designs were infinitely varied and tend to be identified by the names of familiar objects from the environment of the village, e.g. *gatti* (a disc-like shape said to be 'a stone grinder'), *dabbo* ('a round box') *chakri* ('courtyard') and *tikka* (a name used to describe the small dot placed on the forehead by married women as an indicator of marital status, but in actuality, 'a small mirror' or piece of mica).

I asked about how the tradition was transferred from generation to generation.

Nubbi in Chaudriya village said: , We start young girls at 5/6 and by the age of 10, they are well-versed in it. When they grow up, they will need to wear it: it will make their lives easier, In earlier days, *mukko*⁶ took the shape of *gatti* (stone grinders), leaves, flowers and stars. Some call it *bharat* (the Rajasthani name for embroidery); others call it *dabba* (the round gold embroidered discs). '*tikka*' is the name of the little mirror Another woman said, "We call this design *hingonia*, (a cylindrical fruit in a circle) like the tree, and we call this 'ball' embroidery: *khatora bharat*. At that point, I asked, 'But isn't it heavy for you?' (In Jaisalmer, the summer temperatures frequently rise as high as 50 degrees Centigrade and the embroideries are thick and weighty). Nubbi replied with a grin, admitting, "Yes, it is true, but we have to wear it. Initially it's uncomfortable, but a young girl in her in-laws house must wear it –it's compulsory. In our society, it is obligatory to wear *mukko*.she then asked, 'Do you teach all the girls around? When do they have time to go to school?' Nubbi was quite frank, "They only go to 5th standard... though actually, only a few girls stay till 5th standard. Only boys study till 5th grade.

Education is still regarded as of limited value in these villages, especially for young girls whose time will be spent in domestic tasks, bringing up children, on the farm and in producing *mukke* embroidery to retain their longstanding Muslim tradition.

⁵ When revisiting the village to screen the videos to the women who assisted us in the film, I was asked to show a DVD on my laptop of the *nikah* wedding of one of the woman's daughters. I observed that the presentation of the dowry to the groom and his family was a fundamental part of the exchange of vows and marriage ritual.

⁶ Nubbi called the embroidery tradition '*mukko*'.



Photograph 2: A belt featuring *mukke* design with golden thread

Nazma in the first village had made it clear that *mukke* (as she pronounced it) was a proud insignia of her status as a Muslim woman in Jaisalmer. *Mukke*, therefore, is a sign of religious identity which women above child-bearing age are required to display.



Photograph 3: Woman with Mukke

Design development

Women develop designs as a collaborative process. They show prototypes to each other and agree on forms. The most creative women become the innovators, and as their craft is practised, hour upon hour, day by day, they develop designs which become gradually imbued in memory. These designs are then replicated again and again by their children, with embellishments and modifications as they evolve. When they move off to their new abodes on marriage, the designs move with them. Their daughters are traditionally married off at a very young age but the matrons of the village told us that they do not normally move to their in-laws' houses until their first few children have been born. Only when they have reached the age of 25 to 30, a stage of maturity which confers enhanced status, do their daughters wear '*mukke*'. The transition to this position of eminence in their husband's house is marked by this distinct change of costume. In the meantime, they dress in modest, dark coloured patterned *salwar khamis* with ribboned bodices, not unlike dresses worn by women in Baluchistan.

Design innovation and its transmission are spurred on by the fact that on arrival in their new surroundings, married women introduce their beautifully embroidered *kanchli* to their new family and neighbours. Older traditional patterns are reconfigured and new designs born within these forms as women continue to produce articles of embroidery for their daughters, their prospective husbands and their grandchildren.

Phase IV - Analysis and Conclusion

The main conclusion reached from our filming and research visits to villages is that *mukke* is a living and firmly entrenched contemporary tradition, but that the patchwork hangings are not traditional. Women are not involved in the design or production of hangings made from recycled pieces of *mukke*. Patchwork hangings are traditionally produced in Afghanistan and in Turkoman and Uzbek communities and are still used as wall hangings. It is conceivable that Central Asian textiles may have been used by the Mughals in India as the tradition of hanging carpets along the walls of their palatial chambers and step wells (*baoris*) has been well documented. However, from our observations, hangings are not traditionally used in Sindhi Musalman houses in the Jaisalmer area. They are produced by artists for the tourist market (and we filmed one artisan chopping in half perfectly symmetrical *kanchli* bodices (not of *mukke* but of a different type of Meghwal cotton embroidery) and placing the 'patches' on a rough sheet).

Women's overriding concern is for the production of useful dowry pieces and the transmission of these *mukke* techniques to their daughters and granddaughters. Their daughters must be wed with ample trousseaux and knowledge of *mukke* techniques is a vital skill for any young girl entering the competitive marriage market. *Mukke* dresses are worn at marriage and then only by women from the age of 25-35 onwards. We were surprised to find, however, that women regard the 'old', somewhat faded pieces of *mukke* as tawdry remnants of their craft, of no particular value. And for this reason, they barter their valuable *mukke* handiwork to itinerant traders who arrive in the village with pots and pans or in some cases, give them over for as little as ten rupees in compensation.

The women are not unhappy about these exchanges of textiles for pots and pans since they need domestic items for the household, but it is clear that entrepreneurs have exploited the tendency of women to cast off their older, less glittering embroidery pieces as worthless. We were told that the merchants who ply the villages and engage women in this barter system would normally acquire 5 to 10 pieces per transaction in exchange for a small handful of rupees or an aluminium pot. These patches are sold on to emporium owners. Artists are then employed to concoct patchwork hangings. These intricate patchwork creations command a high price, far beyond the price of several aluminium pots.

One of the more interesting results of the research which emerged was the degree of syncretism across Jaisalmer and the border areas as evinced in textile use. Some Sindhi Muslim's wedding traditions, such as the wearing by the groom of the wedding band (*morr*), are known to be intrinsically Rajput. Nevertheless, they have been retained and integrated into the wedding rituals of these Muslim groups, despite their conversion to Islam many centuries earlier.

From observations of various *mukke* hangings for sale and our discussions with one of the artists, it seemed that in order to create a tapestry, the artist would normally compile a set of older and better quality dowry pieces, circular and square, geometric and quadrilateral, sort them by colour, style and

motif and then combine them. The attraction of slightly tarnished and frayed *mukke* in these hangings is the antique lustre of the metallic thread. Whereas new *mukke* appears glittery and tinsel shiny (depending on the origin of the thread), older *mukke* acquires a subtle, luminous sheen over time. A base cloth is smeared in starchy glue, and the hanging is deliberately designed by matching and juxtaposing shapes, working from the borders inwards. The result, a dazzling mosaic of silver and gold threads in geometric patterns, is an intricate and visually spectacular landscape for the eye to revel in, as it would in the myriad shapes and colours of an abstract painting.

As the project will involve understanding design as well as ethnographic differences in the embroidery tradition, I think as a research team, on this type of quest, we should be successful. It seems that projects never end: more and more questions unfold that need answers.



Photograph 4: Silver *mukke* with *Zari* work

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