

IIAS Reports

Overwritten and/or erased: Rereading biographies of cloth in the global ecumene

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CLOTH HAS BEEN, AND CONTINUES TO BE, an important trope in nationalist discourses and features in many projects of cultural revival, design intervention and trade protection in countries of the South. Its persistent use and uncritical acceptance as a depoliticized artifact¹ of history (and culture) by individual nations, and growing salience within wider globalized discourses of heritage and international development, prompted a renewed focus on contemporary circulations of cloth at a recent IIAS roundtable at ICAS 8, Macau. The biographies of cloth presented at *Cloth, Identity and Power*, sought to recover those trajectories of cloth that have been overwritten and/or erased in master narratives of national or global histories. The conversations at the two sessions attempted to make visible, not only the contradictions inherent in the use of cloth in processes of identity construction, but also the intersecting asymmetries of power from contexts as diverse as Afghanistan, India, Laos, Indonesia and Africa.

Postcolonial historiography has alerted us to the interrelations of cloth(ing) with politics, and case studies abound on the disparate narratives of nation and civilization in elite cultural imaginaries of anti-colonialism and national (also gender) identity formation in Asia and Africa. Cloth has also featured in pre-colonial and colonial cartographies as a currency and commodity of exchange since the era of slavery and the rise of empire. Re-reading trans-national biographies of cloth at the roundtable not only pointed to the location of cloth in hegemonic structures of power in the global ecumene but also shed light on other, forgotten and more complex routes of appropriation and loss since colonization.

Local appropriations and/or erasures in the 'social life' of cloth in multiple contexts are subaltern micro histories embedded in wider global trajectories.² They permit us to recast the alleged processes of globalization in order to foreground pathways and subjectivities whose hidden presence may still be retrieved from the interstices of cloth. That this tracing of anonymous circulations remains an unfinished project in the history and anthropology of cloth was made more than apparent from the roundtable case studies abstracted below.

Can a lesser known, culturally valued cloth like the *Ulos* of the Batak ethnic group in northern Indonesia be revitalized for the wider market to suit both the demands of international fashion and sustainable development? This is an important question for Merdi Sihombing, a fashion designer promoting the use of natural dyes among weavers in Samosir Island, Lake Toba in northern Sumatra. How is culture invoked to negotiate globally-defined environmental norms associated with chemical dyes and the 'taste' for indigo-dyed cloth in high-end Japanese consumers? Is the *Ulos* an 'Indonesian' textile within the self-orientalising discourse of national heritage or is it also about the assertion of a unique Batak identity in fashion circles currently dominated by the Japanese?

Again, what are some of the processes involved in the establishment of British textile and costume designer Simon Marks' design studio in Bali, and his self-referencing as a *Gora Khatri* [lit. white printer from western India]? Tracing the social life of a cotton cloth designed by this Gora and printed

by the *Khatris*, a community of hereditary hand-block printers, is surely more complex than a story of outsourcing within global networks of production and distribution. It is a story that needs to be told precisely because it is a response to colonial narratives of 'craft' through a transnational remapping of 'tradition' for the global marketplace.

What links an international development project on hand spinning and dyeing mohair yarn with women silk weavers in both Lao and Cambodia? It is the path journeyed by Carol Cassidy, via Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as an American weaver/artist and craft consultant with Third World development organizations in the mid 1980s. After her involvement in a UNDP program as textile advisor to the state-run 'Lao Cotton', in the years of reconstruction after the genocide by the Pol Pot regime, Carol eventually remained in south-east Asia to set up a commercial silk design studio, employing local women weavers in communist Laos, followed by another one in Preah Vihear, Cambodia. 'Lao Textiles' is both a private brand as well as an icon of national 'culture' and 'development' through cloth, and highlights once again the need for examining new mediations between cloth and structures of power and knowledge.

In Tamil Nadu, cloth is associated with the politics of heritage-making, whose roots are in the ideology of a distinctive Dravidian civilization challenging the overarching discourse of nation founded on Aryan supremacy. Focusing upon two hand-woven silk and gold cloths, ornamented with computer graphical motifs, I show how political parties and private merchants use cloth to generate mass affect within the discourse of regional heritage. One cloth depicts a world heritage site – the shore temple at Mahabalipuram – invoking regional architectural legacy, while simultaneously demonstrating technical (weaving) prowess; and the second is a cloth inscribed with the script (1330 couplets) of the *Thirukkural*,³ specifically commissioned by the then ruling party to gain electoral purchase at the World Classical Tamil conference in 2010. Both are powerful declarations of the efficacy of a distinctive 'Tamil' culture that can be possessed and repossessed through cloth. The biographies of the two cloths reveal to us new legitimations of work emerging among artisanal weavers in south India. Ones that help them actively engage with neo-liberal consumption and information technology, on the one hand, and Tamil heritage-making on the other, whilst boldly reconstituting the dictates of tradition.

Showing 'who you are' through one's clothing in Afghanistan is an expression of political allegiance in a conflict society, according to Willem Vogelsang. The example of Hamid Karzai, whose installation as 'President of all Afghans' involved relinquishing his Pashtun dress in favour of an eclectic ensemble of garments selected from different parts of Afghanistan, was an act of consolidation of one's position on the international stage of diplomacy. Karzai's sartorial transformation won accolades from Gucci as the 'best dressed politician in the world', but was the ridicule of many of his Afghan opponents and subjects. The continued resistance of fundamentalist Afghan leaders to urban, western educated models of leadership through the deliberate Talibanization of the traditional *shalwar kamiz* and turban are, as this case presents, fresh instances of overwriting upon clothing in conflict.

And finally, the story of 'African wax' in the nexus of cloth, identity and power must be read as the history of subaltern appropriation. It challenges the place-based rootedness of culture and tradition, and belongs to what Françoise Vergès calls an "alternate cartography" in the history of imperialism and post-colonialism. Embedded in the routes charted by Dutch colonial trade and slavery from Java to Africa, it draws our attention to those practices of cultural appropriation that enabled the overwriting of the colonial order. Vergès refers here to the counter hegemonic construction of a differentiated African aesthetic and cultural identity through the agency of design on cloth. Its persistence as national 'style' in the post-colonial states as well as among the diaspora, points to the 'fictional nature of race' and its assumptions of a monolithic African identity in the global hierarchy of race and culture.

These diverse biographies provide a discursive re-telling of the imbrications of cloth(ing) within contemporary global regimes of design, development, heritage, trade and politics. The roundtable underscored the importance of mapping the nodes and networks of power underpinning the circulation of cloth(ing) in the globalized political economy of the present. It focused on new actors implicated in writing contemporary (and future) biographies of cloth, and drew our attention to hegemonic discourses that continue to circumscribe cloth years after the dissolution of empire. The meeting of Asian and African leaders in 1955 at Bandung was instrumental in inserting the newly independent states into the UN system of international cooperation "towards a cross cultural dialogue without the baggage of imperialism";⁴ yet *Cloth, Identity and Power* interrogated precisely this alleged 'international cooperation' in the twentieth century, together with its reframing of Asia's and Africa's altered engagement with the West, so deeply embedded in stories of cloth. The roundtable shed light not only on the fact that this discourse continues to govern production, exchange and labeling of cloth(ing) in the contemporary global milieu, but also on the need to recover eclipsed claims of culture and identity to be found in past, present and future biographies of cloth.

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Notes

- The term 'textile' in popular and academic discourse alludes to this objectification, making cloth amenable to practices of knowledge production such as collection, conservation, classification and cultural and economic valuation.
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- The *Thirukkural* has a pivotal place in Tamil culture and is the moral and ethical treatise ascribed to Tamil poet-saint Valluvar.
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Left: Lao shawl. Photo courtesy of Ellen Kaplowitz.

Right: Printing process. Photo courtesy of Simon Marks.

Far right: Textile designer Merdi Sihombing. Photo courtesy of Sebastian Hutabarat.

