Case study

Picassos of the Thar Desert: a textile tradition of Jaisalmer
A visual anthropological research project

By Elizabeth Wickett
Phase I  Formulation of the proposal

This project began after the purchase of two textile hangings in the market of Jaisalmer in the heart of the Thar desert in Western Rajasthan. I 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 my colleague, Vimal Gopa, a collector of antique textiles whom I had met while filming the Epic of Pabuji in Jaisalmer, 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, I had learnt that 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, reputed to number as many as 74, 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 what was then 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 is this remote, trans-boundary area?

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.
Phase II: Library Research

I began to review publications which might feature some background information on these patchwork textiles or even the gold and silver embroideries. I 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. One art book on the textile 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. I 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 I could determine. I also looked in Pakistani publications but again could find no images or descriptions of this type of work. I 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 had worked in Rajasthan as a Community Participation consultant to a Programme for water sector reform in Rajasthan in 2008. During this period, I travelled to water-stressed villages across the Thar desert of Rajasthan and in particular, the Jaisalmer area, with my colleague, anthropologist Dr. Priyanka Mathur. I also gained some knowledge of the cultural environment of Jaisalmer in my study of the role of bhopas and bhopis in the oral Epic of Pabuji. I knew that with the help of my colleague, Dr. Mathur, I would be able to meet with women sequestered in their houses to discuss the textiles (men would not have been able to do this). I also knew that with my Jaisalmer colleague, Jethu Singh, an independent sociologist, we would be able to find key informants and undertake the transcription and translation of dialogue in Jaisalmer, once the filming was concluded.

I applied to the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research for a grant. I the 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. I would record my findings on high-definition video and submit transcripts to the Foundation on completion of the project. My proposal was accepted and with this grant, I set out to discover the answers.

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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.
Phase III: The Field Project: filming the process of discovery

I met Dr. Mathur in Jaipur and we set off on the sixteen hour journey to Jaisalmer on the midnight train. Once we had settled in, we started by trawling around the various emporia of Jaisalmer for such textiles. At this point, we had not selected key informants, that is, spokespersons whose commentaries we would trust. Instead, to start with, we wanted to survey a spectrum of views from textile sellers. Interviews would be conducted in English and in Marwari/ Hindi, depending on the competence in English of the interviewee.

My initial strategy was to inquire as to the name of the textile when I saw examples of the hangings. In the first shop, prominently situated on the main forecourt of the fort, I was 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. I 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.

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

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

How to corroborate either of these theories when I did not have official access to these Thar desert communities? It was not possible to wander around in the desert as the locals could do. Security concerns in the border areas remained high and in order to venture beyond the 50 km cordon around Jaisalmer, as a foreigner, I would have been required to obtain security clearance, a process which could take at least a month. Instead, 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 Shites?

With the help of local friends, in particular, Jethu Singh Bhatti and his contacts, we rented a car and 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.

On 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

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4 Wild petunias are the only flowers which bloom across the desolate Thar desert landscape.
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, we 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 moment of the nikah (wedding) ceremony. 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 head band to be worn by the groom as a crown (mori), 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.

In the conversations that ensued, my Rajasthani colleague, Priyanka, would lead with the questioning in Hindi but occasionally, I would pose a question and Priyanka would translate. If translation were necessary, one of the sons or daughters who had been to school would translate the question into their local Rajasthani dialect.

We asked about how the tradition was transferred from generation to generation. Nubbi 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.”

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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.
Nubbi in Chaudriya village said,

“In earlier days, mukko 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, Priyanka 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 heavy).

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”.

I 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.”

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
Fatima 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.

**Design development**

As we perceived and they explained, 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 Video Post Production**

The post production phase is one of the most complicated since during this time, the transcripts must be completed and the film material edited.

Working in High Definition video using a Canon HF 11 camera was in one aspect, wonderful, and the clarity of image was superb, and in another aspect, problematic. The image files in High Definition (and in particular, the medium known as AVCHD) are huge and un-malleable. I struggled with this format but fortunately was able to work with editors in Egypt who did not command state of the art fees for documentary post-production. In order to be able to edit these files, special editing programmes were required: either Cineform to be used as an intermediary tool to allow for easier editing, or alternatively and considerably better, the excellent but expensive Adobe Premiere Pro CS5 which allows for editing with playback facility in AVCHD, without the need for an intermediary programme.

As the film is a participatory creation of filmmaker, interviewed and interviewee, the mainly unedited film (minus any dreadful errors of focus or sound) should be completed and deposited in the archive as such. This can then be studied as footage in the original language of the film, with accompanying transcripts in English.

Transcripts are a very important but also time-consuming part of the post-production process since comprehensibility is as essential as accuracy. The translation into English of transcriptions of conversations on this occasion was written down using video playback. This we did *in situ*, that is, in Jaisalmer. After filming, Priyanka and I would work together to produce a draft translation of the textile dialogues as my knowledge of Marwari and Hindi was not sufficiently good to allow me to translate the commentary. The technique we used involved organising the dialogue by Question and Answer, and writing down each line in relation to the time codes on the footage. The time codes enable the filmmaker to track down each sentence of commentary later for eventual subtitling. It is crucial that this process be done immediately, after the filming, to avoid forgetting any interesting new dialectical vocabulary or explanatory details. The translations are then polished and typed out as formal transcripts later.
Where texts in performance are being filmed and documented, it will be necessary to include a linguist on the team who is an expert in the target spoken language. He or she will then produce a handwritten transcript from video playback which can then be typed up later and submitted with the videos to the archive.  

The editing of video in a foreign language is the most costly phase of the filmmaking process and may involve a considerable amount of negotiation before a reasonable price is ascertained for the job. In most cases, the editor will not understand the language of commentary so for the editor, the job is doubly difficult. The budget should be based on a realistic estimate of the time required and the skill and speed of the editor since otherwise there will be overruns.

Production of an anthropological documentary for purposes of screening to an unfamiliar audience, if that is envisaged, involves an even more complicated and lengthier process. Such films require much more complex visual and sound editing, and the subtitling of commentary, which is particularly taxing. Editing is normally paid for by the hour on a cumulative basis, not including the final sound mix. This is done separately once the visual edit has been completed and subtitles added.

**Phase V Analysis**

The conclusion reached from our filming and visits to villages is that *mukke* is a living and firmly entrenched contemporary tradition, but that the patchwork hangings are not. 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, Uzbek and other Central Asian textiles and may have been used by the Mughals in India who created the tradition of hanging carpets along the walls of their palatial chambers and step wells (*baoris*). However, 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 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’,

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6 In the case of Jaisalmer, such a text would be in Marwari, a Rajasthani language which is written in Devanagari script like Hindi but bears no relationship to it.

7 These details apply to editing in AVCHD in particular. Other film formats may be considerably easier to edit on computer, depending on its age and memory capacity.
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 compensation.

The women are not unhappy about these exchanges since they need domestic items for the household but it is clear that entrepreneurs have exploited this tendency of these women to cast off their older, less glittering embroidery pieces. 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. My colleague, Dr. Mathur, has suggested that some Sindhi Musalman 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.

The desire of communities to accommodate religious difference is illustrated in the film by my colleague, Vimal Gopa who unrolls a textile called bukhani. In this piece, Muslim mukke is integrated into a spectacular band of appliqué, traditionally worn on the shoulders by a Hindu bridegroom. He cites it as a palpable mark of successful religious integration.
Creation of a textile hanging

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* is glittery and tinsel shiny (depending on the origin of the thread), older *mukke* has acquired a subtle, luminous sheen. 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 an abstract painting.

**Phase VI Going back: taking the films to the field**

A fundamental component of any visual anthropological research project of this type, in my view, is the requirement to return to the field with the finished videos. This is important as it is vital to show those featured in the film how the final film has evolved. As researchers and filmmakers, we need to ensure that our films do not transgress any cultural boundaries. It is also important to secure the consent of those in the film to its screening in other contexts.

Filming women in particular, in environments where the tradition of *purdah* is pervasive, requires special discretion. Women do not have access to television and sometimes electricity (as is often the case in Rajasthan) may not wish their faces to appear in public, so this should be ascertained. In this case, as Sindhi Musalman women (like women in Pakistan) do not veil their faces this is less of an issue.

In this instance, I was determined to take the films to the villages and show the women embroiderers the results of the filming. The trip would be expensive and difficult but I believed it to be part of the process. I would use a laptop computer for the screening. I needed to ascertain that they ‘liked’ and approved of the films as principal informants but also, as someone who has worked all my life with women, I nurtured a developmental motive.

I flew to Jaipur where I met Priyanka and again, we embarked on the sixteen hour night train to Jaisalmer. Once there, we rented a vehicle and retraced our steps to

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8 I had to balance battery life with each day’s schedule to make sure that I could show the films, though in some cases, as the battery was running down, I was glad to find that villages we had visited previously had become electrified.
the villages where we had filmed. Fortunately, the women were present. A huddle of women and young children crammed into a room and squeezed onto a charpoy.

I showed them the full interview in which they had described the process of making *mukke* and they were enthralled. One woman, suddenly self-conscious about her missing front tooth, even asked me if I could contribute to replacement of her missing tooth! Fortunately, where an aggressive and anxious clutch of men had surrounded us during the filming in one village, on this occasion, they were fortunately not in evidence. 9

My other motive was the desire to broach the subject of the hangings and disposal of antique embroideries in exchange for pots and pans. In the aim of creating a developmental initiative for women from this research project which might benefit them, the producers, we also showed them various hangings produced from *mukke*. Their aesthetic tastes had been conditioned to reject the frayed and older embroideries. I wanted to illustrate the prices being charged for these tapestries and explain how such artistic tapestries could be devised by them using their own ex-dowry collections, and sold for profit.10 Why should the women producers not sell hangings made from their own *mukke* for the elevated prices sometimes obtained by male entrepreneurs?

The women were amazed to hear the prices obtained for these hangings. They said that they would be willing to make the tapestries, and understood how to do it, but what emerged as the principal problem was the question of how to market their handiwork. Most Muslim women are circumscribed in their movements by male protocols: women go to market for specific purposes and to specific shops. Often men do the shopping and they remain at home. Women cannot be seen in certain public places. Young unmarried girls cannot leave their desert villages on any pretext but even mature women said that they would find it difficult ‘to go to hotels’ where such textiles might be sold. 11 Their sons, however, did work in hotels in Jaisalmer, so we suggested that links be formed with the hotel owners and agreements struck to arrange for them to sell their work in these tourist venues. We look forward to hearing how these plans evolve.

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9 The men told the women that ‘we would take their photos and sell them down in the market’. In fact, this was precisely what often did happen in the markets of Peshawar in the former North West Frontier Province (now Pakhtunistan) in the 1990s. Photographs of young girls would be stolen from families and ‘purveyed’ by unscrupulous men. For this reason, women and girls would never agree to be photographed. They would, however, agree to be filmed as part of the developmental video programme I devised that I called ‘Woman to Woman video’. Tapes could not be bandied about in the markets and used to destroy their reputations.

10 I had worked in San‘aa in Yemen with women craft producers where, with very little encouragement, they had formed their own co-operative and flourishing business. I was convinced on the basis of this experience that in Yemen, women could conceive a way to make money from these old textile pieces if they could solve their problems of access to markets.

11 Women ‘who go to hotels’ are prostitutes.
The other conclusion I was forced to reach was that the low profile ascribed to the mukke embroidery tradition was not accidental. It seems that the dearth of publications on this form may derive from a form of ‘wilful blindness’ or blatant religious discrimination. In the context of a strong Hindu movement in India, and the unfortunate marginalisation of Muslims in India by successive governments, the fame that should have accrued to the textile tradition has been hidden and in a sense, suppressed. The public face of the tradition lies in the patchwork hangings. The original dowry articles are rarely if ever seen by tourists. The origins of the embroidery are obscured. And yet, the ecumenical spirit of Jaisalmer and the adjacent Dhat region continues to burn bright, despite this.

Phase VII: The project in retrospect: a re-evaluation

Encouraging women to make tapestries from their old dowry pieces was a positive result of the research project. But in this project, I only partially achieved my aim. I had undertaken to investigate the origin of a particular patchwork tradition that involved a technique known as mukke, and this I had accomplished. I knew who made the original embroidery and who made the hangings and why. But to the larger question of why some were silver and others gold, I had no definitive answer.

In the playback of the videos, I discovered to my horror that some of the salesmen I had filmed fabricated ‘exotic’ origins to the textiles. In their wish to answer my questions, and their determination to entice me to buy something, they had ‘embroidered’ their accounts of their origin.

Unfortunately, the degree to which the descriptions of textiles had been influenced by the imaginative reveries of the emporium owners only emerged when the films were screened. The various entrepreneurs who had participated in the filming saw the video (I was not present) and began to laugh hysterically when they saw how absurd some of their wild theories appeared on screen. (I was only later informed of this).

One of these fantasy explanations concerned the Shiite embroideries. It had been suggested to me not once, but twice, that silver thread was used by Shiite Muslim women to create their dowry pieces, and gold used by Sunni Muslims. This would seem to be apocryphal, but not conclusively. The jury is still out.

My colleague, Vimal Gopa, had always maintained that there were no Shiites extant in that area of India, even though one of the men working in his shop claimed to have been to ‘Shiite villages’. As far as I am concerned, the quandary remains unresolved. Women in the villages near Jaisalmer are clearly working in gold thread only, but many of the hangings on sale are composed of embroideries done in silver and also in pink metallic thread. They are all a form of mukke, also called safazeri (in the case of the white) and comprised of pieces from kanchli and cushion embroideries emanating from areas, they candidly state, they have not visited and I have not seen.
One theory proposed by a Muslim man in Jaisalmer is that the white pieces have been bleached in the sun and this has been done by widows at the death of their husbands. Another theory is that these piece emanate from a large desert region near the town of Barmer, about three hundred kilometres from Jaisalmer close to the border with Pakistan, in the trans-border region traditionally known as Dhat. The emporium owners of Jaisalmer have admitted that they do not know where the different examples of mukke come from because they are collected by peripatetic salesmen who do not label the pieces according to place of origin. As a result, Vimal Gopa as a collector, is now interested in discovering the truth: who makes which type of mukke, and for what purpose?

To go to the villages where the mukke tradition is most vibrant and possibly diversified, I would need to obtain permission from the Border Security Patrol. However, I would then be able to hear from the embroiderers themselves. I would hope to be able to find out how they draw their own distinctions in design and understand the distinctions in thread colour which characterise their unique style. The entrepreneurs clearly state that every village boasts its own embroidery traditions and styles and it is impossible to be absolutely sure where a piece comes from unless you can witness the woman presenting her work. This may be the only way to determine if Shiite textiles are being produced or whether, in fact, the use of silver in mukke is an aesthetic choice or a religious one.

I am contemplating this follow-up research endeavour and if I able to do this, I will ask a colleague, Dr. Vandana Bhandari (from the College of Textiles in Delhi where she teaches), as well as Vimal Gopa, to accompany me. She has done extensive research into Rajasthani textiles for her dissertation, now published in a spectacular coffee table book. Her work has the distinction of providing the sole reference and ethnographic description of mukke to be found in any publication, as well as the sole illustration of this spectacular embroidery tradition. It reads as follows:

“mukke is the local name for metallic (gold or silver) thread wound around a core of cotton fibre... It is done mostly in the Thar belt in Rajasthan, especially amongst the Sindhi Musalman and Meghval communities. The metal thread is doubled, laid on the fabric and couched down by stitching with another thread” (Bhandari 2004).

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12 Jaisalmer is a haven for refugees who came from Dhat, now situated in Pakistan but a place still celebrated in the lyrics of the Epic of Pabuji and in Jogi songs performed in Jaisalmer. They form a tightly knit group of exiles who crossed over into India first in 1947, then in 1961 and again in the 1980s. At certain point in the phases of in-migration, the Indian government gave them land and a house; at another phase of in-migration, they received nothing and were left relatively bereft. Nevertheless, they continued to intermarry with the Dhat expatriate community exclusively and retain their language tradition.


14 I stumbled upon her book in the Nachana Haveli in Jaisalmer while making the film, and in the text on pages 63 and 66, I found this description of Mukke-ka-kaam (or mukke work).
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.