

The Invisibility of “Sari George” in London: The Material Translation of Parallel Modernities

Lucy Norris

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Lucy Norris, *UCL*

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- **Third Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls”**, 11-12 September 2007, UCL, London, UK. Contact person: Valeria Papponetti, valeria.papponetti@feem.it
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The Invisibility of “Sari George” in London: The Material Translation of Parallel Modernities

Summary

The essay on ‘The Invisibility of ‘Sari George’ in London’ investigates the impact of public policy, which is directed to creating a cultural profile of a community for external consumption, by funding arts and cultural production towards the internal generation of social and cultural capital. In the example of London’s East End, this has led to the creation of an increasingly homogenized Cultural Quarter known as Banglatown, where the identification of the area with the largely Bangladeshi immigrant population has become codified through all levels of local government and is incorporated into the structures of development funding laid out by the Mayor’s Plan for London. The study investigates the politically inspired cartographic construction of the cultural area by looking at Wentworth Street, a road lying adjacent to Banglatown, which has to date largely been ignored in local planning and diversity funding, yet where the interaction of a broad number of immigrant communities dealing in African cloth continues to develop a centuries-old pattern of trading established in the European colonial past and rooted in pre-colonial contacts. The paper takes the example of a genre of cloth, Sari George, which are made in South India for the West African market and are traded by both Adeni Jews and more recently, West African women.

Keywords: Immigrant Communities, Diversity Funding, Parallel Modernities, London

Address for correspondence:

Lucy Norris
University College London
Gower Street
WC1E 6BT London
United Kingdom
E-mail: ucsakln@ucl.ac.uk

Lucy Norris

UCL

The invisibility of “Sari George” in London: the material translation of parallel modernities

One aspect of the current debates held under the rubric of ‘multi-culturalism’ focuses upon the public funding of cultural diversity programmes. Their aims and intentions, and their ability to both fulfil them and be judged to have done so, are carried out within a wider political context that is mindful of the fine line between support for community cohesiveness and expression on the one hand, and the risk of ghetto-isation on the other. This necessarily brings to the fore the related question of whether such public funding in turn adds value to the cultural realm as a whole, or whether it actually stifles the development of artistic innovation and expression (Munira, 2007). Jacobs posits the inevitability of the homogenisation of cultural diversity through the very programmes intended to fund diversity (Jacobs, 1961). As the debate has recently intensified in the UK, so the focus of the public gaze has increasingly turned to examples of immigrant communities living in large cities, and the degree to which their cultural integration to so-called “mainstream society” is both desirable and achievable vis-à-vis the maintenance of their own cultural identities.

Public policy may be aimed towards the material improvement of the economic and social conditions of such communities, which often suffer from high unemployment and poor-quality local environments, while arts and cultural funding in particular may be directed towards the internal generation of social and cultural capital, although the extent to which social capital is generative of economic well-being is itself debatable (Guetzkow, 2002) (Kuechler, this volume). Linked to this is the strategy of creating a cultural profile of a community for external consumption. In the example of London’s East End, this has led to

the creation of an increasingly homogenised Cultural Quarter known as Banglatown, where the identification of the area with the largely Bangladeshi immigrant population has become codified through all levels of local government and is incorporated into the structures of development funding laid out by the Mayor's Plan for London.

This paper aims to undermine the boundaries of such politically-inspired cartographic constructions both literally and figuratively by looking at Wentworth Street, a road lying adjacent to Banglatown, which has to date largely been ignored in local planning and diversity funding, yet where the interaction of a broad number of immigrant communities dealing in African cloth continues to develop a centuries-old pattern of trading established in the European colonial past and rooted in pre-colonial contacts. The paper takes the example of a genre of cloths, Sari George, which are made in South India for the West African market and are traded by both Adeni Jews and more recently, West African women.

The study asks why the existence of a vibrant wholesale market of spectacularly bright patterned cloth specifically designed for the African market, and renowned throughout Europe and West African itself, appears to be invisible to the London diversity funders and promoters of tourism. Here, textiles are bought in vast quantities to be taken away and made-up by local tailors of African origin into highly fashionable garments. The paper suggests that the materiality of the lengths of cloth themselves, their ephemerality as fabric rather than tailored fashion lends them an intrinsic open-ended potential for re-fashioning and renewal of the complex webs of relationships between individuals and the multicultural world in which they live. The textiles make it possible to be an African living in Europe or travelling internationally, dressing themselves within a fluid set of aesthetic preferences that are continually evolving within cultural parameters understood by manufacturers, dealers and consumers operating in the space of the imaginary and desire. As a transient material for wrapping and unwrapping the body in ever-changing social contexts, African cloth as a traded commodity and an aesthetic concept is difficult to contain within rigidly demarcated

urban areas. Finally, the paper uses Larkin's concept of "parallel modernities" to suggest that the creative negotiation of these material preferences operates without reference to the dominant culture's aesthetics (Larkin, 1997), which in turn adds to the market's invisibility in the discourse of how to develop London's cultural diversity.

Introduction

If you go to the area of Wentworth Street and Middlesex Street in London's East End, lying immediately next to London's financial district, the City, you might be immediately struck by the overwhelming number of shops advertising "Laces, Swiss Embroideries, Wax prints and Georges"ⁱ. A closer look reveals that these fabrics are all destined uniquely for a West African clientele, and that competition is fierce, with more than 60 adjacent outlets vying for trade. Yet when one steps back literally and metaphorically, and reflects upon the way in the area functions compared to the way in which it is presented and marketed culturally and commercially, one finds that the presence of these textiles, these shops and these customers are remarkably opaque in the wider public consciousness. Despite the bright colours, arresting patterns and aesthetic impact of the windows and shelves full of cloth, both textiles, traders and customers are seemingly invisible in official discourse, policy and planning on the management of cultural diversity and sustainable development in the heart of London.

In this brief presentation, I want to suggest that the emerging study of the "social life" of these textiles, the contexts of their production and consumption, reveals a series of overlapping networks of people, things and imagery that operates both within and through the interstices of the more settled fabric of the infrastructure and local "communities" in the area. These cultural flows of people and cloth span continents and connect diverse artists and producers from South Asia, Japan and Korea to West African consumers via Europe, specifically London. Networks of business, community and family ties create associations whereby members of very different cultures come to have quite specific relationships mediated₃

through objects, which serve to define differences between disparate groups yet at the same time weave them together in a dynamic matrix of artistic production and consumption. The point which interests me in relation to this work on sustainable diversity is that these networks cannot be brought within the bounded confines of concepts such as “culture” and “sustainability” in relation to place and community without allowing for the opening up of those categories through the close study of desire, the attraction of things, and the space of the imaginary. In this example, it is the desire for self-making and projection through the consumption of particular textiles which creates dynamic cultural expression that reverberates with modernities located outside of the West.

I would like to overlay the perspective of the agency of objects (Gell, 1998; Buchli, 2002; Miller, 2005) and the perception of material qualities over the more usual description of city spaces and inhabitants...to say that one must bring the object and materiality into view for a complete picture of cultural interaction and sustainability. In this example, the examination of dynamic flows of cultural material results in destabilizing a centre/periphery understanding of the city as dominant culture trying to either incorporate (as in tolerate cultural difference within a holistic framework), or assimilate (whereby immigrant groups are required to adopt the predominant cultural frameworks of the host society), diversity and instead posits the agency of concealed parallel modernities, located in the interstices of the cityscape, in creating sustainable networks of diversity.

Here I take the example of a particular type of “George”, one of many names for a genre of textiles that have been made in India for the West African market for centuries (Eicher and Erekosima, 1987; Evenson, 1994; Lutz and Eicher, 1996; Eicher et al., 2002; Lutz, 2003), and how the trade in them is incorporated into the growth of a relatively new London wholesale market in the East End.

The Area

London's East End has been a destination for immigrants arriving in Britain for centuries, and as many have become established, they have moved out into other areas of the city and country, to be replaced by newcomers with very different religions, languages and ethnic backgrounds. During medieval times, weavers from Flanders were invited to settle outside the City walls, and in the 16th C Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal were invited as merchants and moneylenders. After the Edict of Nantes in 1685, 40-50,000 Huguenot silk weavers fleeing persecution in France arrived in England, and many settled in the East End - there is a political ward today known as "Weavers". Later on throughout the 19th C, Jewish refugees arrived from Eastern Europe, many of them taking up work in the cloth trades, often dealing in second-hand clothes. More recently, since the 1970s, the area has become predominantly Bangladeshi (in Spitalfields and Banglatown 97% of the population are from Bangladesh originally), and many people continue to earn their living from the ready-to-wear garment trade, whether in workshops or through piecework at home. The engagement with textile, clothing and fashion thus has a long history in the area, presenting both an opportunity for refugees to make a living when one has little to invest, and drawing on the value of imported techniques and skills. However, the area has much housing from the 18th centuries and semi-industrial warehouse spaces, which have increasingly attracted an alternative, white, middle-class crowd for the past 20 years or so. Many of the old streets now have architectural Conservation status, and many small expensive jewellery workshops, design studios and trendy bars can be found.

Recent moves to promote the area, which has high unemployment, include cultural tourism, as the area is rich in Jewish history (burial grounds, synagogues, notable homes, schools etc), and darker, "gruesome" attractions, as it contains the streets where Jack the Ripper stalked his victims. These older associations are reflected in the architecture, shop fronts and growing heritage trails, promoted by guided walks, numerous books and the display of old photographs in local shops. Some Jewish residents remain, and London's oldest Bagel shop₅

still thrives on late-night openings. Latterly contemporary visitors have come to sample Bangladeshi attractions such as the famous curry-houses of Brick Lane and buy material from the cloth shops.

In addition to the built environment and local communities, the handful of streets known as the East End are also famously the home to several markets, which allow a shifting population of sellers, buyers and goods to meet at weekends, constantly changing the character of the space and reflecting the diverse character of its users. Colombia Road flower market is a fixture on the white urban middle-class scene in particular, while Spitalfields market, originally a fruit and vegetable market housed in a 19th building, was until recently home to an alternative market for small-scale designers, food stalls and importers of ethnic goods, again seemingly to be mostly for white European consumption. However, despite vigorous campaigning, half of it was knocked down and replaced by expensive new glass-walled shops and office space, opened in Spring 2006.

A few roads further east, Brick Lane market on Sunday mornings is an old flea market quickly becoming a trendy destination, especially since many of the stalls from Spitalfields moved to the old Truman Brewery that shut in 1988. Brick Lane itself is part of a nexus of roads that have now been renamed “Banglatown”. Full of restaurants and clothing shops, street signs are written in Bengali script, and a giant metal arch across the bottom of the road, designed by Mina Thakur in 1997 features red and green, the colours of the Bengali flag. It is akin to the Chinese arch marking the entry into Chinatown in London’s West End, and is making a similar statement to visitors, both welcoming them and defining the area’s ethnicity. Every September, the annual curry festival takes place where tables and chairs are put out on the street, with accompanying fashion shows and music. Leaflets for a walking tour of the area point out the long association of south Asians with the area due to colonial contacts (the East Indian Company warehouses stand in close proximity), as sailors at the docks, *ayahs* (nannies), and early political campaigners.

Development Plans

The aims of wider development plans, of which these initiatives form a part, are declared to be to meet the needs of a World City while helping to raise the standards of living for local communities (Mayor of London, 2004). In the immediate environs of the riches of the City of London, the East End has traditionally been a deprived area, and efforts to raise living standards, employment prospects and provide educational facilities have a long history in the area whether by local communities themselves, charitable institutions or more recently, government initiatives.

Within [the borough of] Tower Hamlets, the City Fringe is a genuinely mixed area, with a long history providing a range of employment uses which serve local communities or which need to be close to the economic powerhouse of the City. For centuries the area has been a focus for immigration, and the concentration of minority communities, most recently the Bangladeshi community centred on Brick Lane. The area has a diverse socio-economic profile, with many deprived communities, as well as pockets of great affluence. The need for an Area Action Plan arises from the continually changing form and function of the City Fringe and pressures for change. (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2006: 17).

As one of the residents commented in an earlier focus group, there was a call for the whole area to be called Spitalfields, rather than “the Fringe”, a reference to its more wealthy and powerful neighbour, the City, but this idea did not seem to have been taken up by the Council (London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2006). An Area Action Plan was published in the autumn of 2006 that lays down the foundations for development strategies designed to take into account the needs of the local community.

The area has recently been designated a ‘hub of creativity’ by the City Fringe Partnership (City Fringe Implementation Team, 2006), which has formed “Cluster Action Groups” to

develop the areas of Furniture and Design, Jewellery, Fashion, Print and Publishing, health and social services, the visitor economy: hospitality and catering, and cultural tourism.

Wentworth and Middlesex Streets

Lying just south of Spitalfields, and East of Brick Lane, a mere two minutes walk away, is Petticoat Lane market. This is an old market that actually takes place in Middlesex and Wentworth Streets, most famous for Sunday morning trading, and is thought to be one of the oldest surviving markets in England. It was originally set up in 1608, and during the 1750s Huguenot weavers were selling their petticoats and undergarments. According to one popular account, in about 1830, the more prudish Victorians changed it's name to Middlesex Street, to avoid having to refer to women's underwear,¹ but the old name came from its long history as a centre of the clothing trade. By the 19th C it had become a second-hand clothing market largely run by Jewish immigrants, and contemporary accounts refer to a multitude of languages being spoken, such as French, German, Russian, Polish, Hebrew, "with the Yiddish compounds of them all".² At the height of its popularity, the market apparently covered three miles of stalls, numbering over 1000, more than half of which sold clothes.³ The shops lining the streets were largely run by Jewish traders with families living above, and the whole area was bustling with petty traders and dealers.

Today, Petticoat Lane market remains an ordinary street market selling discounted, cheap clothing, watches, shoes and underwear to a diverse clientele looking for a bargain. As one tourist website puts it, everything "from street-cred clubwear to over-orders of designer goods

¹ <http://www.victorianlondon.org> accessed 18/9/06.

² extract from *Victorian London*, compiled by Lee Jackson, quoted at <http://www.victorianlondon.org/ql/queenslondon315.htm>, accessed 18/9/06.

³ <http://www.images-of-london.co.uk/jss/product.php?xProd=37>, accessed 18/9/06.

and last year's must-haves".⁴ When I visited late in 2006, a few foreign tourists were in evidence clutching guidebooks, other visitors may have been there just to look around on a Sunday out, but most looked purposeful and the stalls were busy.

However, the presence of several groups of African women with their shopping bags and striking clothing made from African prints reminds us that the market stalls running down the centre of pedestrianised Wentworth Street, and expanding on Sundays into Middlesex Street, bear no relation to the retail businesses located in the shops behind. In fact, it is clear from the web-based tourist literature that the history of the market and details of what is for offer are all self-referential, often repeating and recycling the same information, creating a "virtual tourist destination" of its own. Most themes seem to identify this market with an older, English heritage, even though that includes significant immigrant influences. Some claim that one can buy Asian fabric here, although I have not yet noticed any Asian fabric shops of the type found nearby in Brick Lane. It is as though one ought to be able to buy Asian fabrics here, but in fact just a few of the shops and stalls sell scarves and *kurta* for a westernised Asian market. It is the image of the area which is being constantly re-created, and it appears that few writers have recently looked at what is sold on the street.

In a paper outlining the potential effects of creating a Cultural Quarter in the City Fringe (Shaw and MacLeod, 2000), the authors draw on related work that opens up the difference between the *identity* of a place, and its *image*; the image of a place being how it is perceived externally and thus it may exist quite independently from the facts of objective reality. They quote one source which defines a place's image as 'the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people can have of a place. Images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with the place' (Kotler et al., 1993: 141). As

⁴http://www.londontown.com/LondonInformation/Attraction/Petticoat_Lane_Designer_Fashion_Market/82c9/9
accessed 18/9/06.

Shaw and MacLeod make plain, the potential for conflict between the development of cultural tourism, which depends upon the creation of images of place, and spatial identity, is obvious in the context of disadvantaged neighbourhoods on the periphery of a central business district in a large city (Shaw and MacLeod, 2000: 4).

To continue with the problem of image, when referring to the official name change of Petticoat Lane in the 19th C, a website called *ICONS: a portrait of England* notes that “Petticoat Lane in the east end of London is surely the most famous street that doesn’t exist”.⁵ This has curious echoes of another avatar of the market. I was informed by one Nigerian cloth dealer in Balham that for the West African population who travel here, the street is actually known as “Liverpool Street market”, referring to the nearby mainline railway station, and apparently that is where West Africans arriving in England head for. The Asian history of the area and its East End location have little resonance for these customers, who, are operating within a completely different set of images and cultural identities connected to the international African reputation of the cloth shops and their wares.

African cloth retailers

When beginning this research, I was expecting to focus upon south Asia shopkeepers selling Asian textiles to West African customers, and bought by Nigerians in particular. But during a brief survey of the shops in Wentworth Street and its intersection with Middlesex Streets, it was surprising to learn that the majority of shops in the street are catering to the West African market in one way or another, even if it was not immediately apparent, and that they are not predominantly Asian businesses.

Although there are several shops that sell cheap mass-produced clothing similar to that found in the market stalls in front of them, most businesses are directly aimed at Africans. As

⁵ <http://www.icons.org.uk/nom/nominations/petticoat-lane>, accessed 18/9/06.

Adeline Trude commented, Wentworth Street is for “destination shopping”, for trips where one is buying large quantities of cloth for weddings, funerals and so on, when one wants the best quality, latest designs and widest best choice available (Trude, pers.comm.). Everyday clothing can be purchased in smaller shops in localities with West African communities across London, where a chat and a gossip may be as important as the purchase, but Wentworth Street market is apparently the largest African textile market in Europe, and offers both retail and wholesale cloth.

Buyers travel from France, Germany, Italy and across Europe where there are West African populations, as well as coming directly from Nigeria, Ghana and lately Gambia to stock up. Alongside the cloth shops are jewellery shops selling large coral beads, often from Italy or the Far East, and expensive designer watches. Several shoe shops sell beaded slippers and party shoes, often with matching jewellery and handbags, either distinctly African in taste, or Indian, which is also popular. The whole aesthetic of goods is of bright, colourful cloth and jewellery, to create outfits and images of self that are about appearing physically large, wrapped in layers and layers of cloth, to appear shiny, wealthy and well-connected. Fashion boutiques stock glossy magazines featuring images of extended West African families in matching clothes hosting and attending functions in Africa, Europe and the US. Marriages, birthdays, retirement (and funerals, though less often featured), are occasions for international clans to come together and show solidarity through cloth (Rabine, 2002).

Along the street, every now and then are men’s shops, selling European suits, shirts and ties to well-off Nigerians. European children’s party wear is also popular, and a few luggage shops sell outsize cases to take it all home in. None of these shops sell clothes that would be worn by any other ethnic group, and indeed this is a highly nuanced, competitive and specialised market. In addition, there are no other related attractions which might bring in

curious tourists, such as African food outlets, music shops or venues, whereby outsiders could “sample” the culture – it is very much a market for a particular clientele “in the know”.

How then did this market develop, and in terms of cultural diversity and art-works, what is the context in which images of self and performance are being created?

One of the immediately confusing elements in this research was connected to the shopkeepers and staff. For going into the cloth shops, looking at cloth and asking lots of questions, I found myself talking to elderly Jewish men in skull caps, younger Jewish women, Ghanaian and Nigerian assistants, several younger Asians, and middle-aged African business women. Understanding the dynamics of this market is an ongoing project, but the outline is already quite intriguing. As we have seen, the area was predominantly Jewish in the 19th C, and looking back at Kelly’s directories which list the shops in a street by name, it would appear to have been so right up to the 1970s (Kelly's, 1965, 1976, 1986). The directories are inexact sources of shop details, as many shop names are indeterminate as to the ethnicity of those who run them or own them, but lists of Jewish-run family shops recur over the years, including branches of famous London institutions such as Bloom’s kosher restaurant, Kossoff’s bakery and innumerable drapers, furriers, tailors and so on.

By the 1960s a few Asian trading names begin to appear in the lists, either surnames, or trading names such as *Durga Arts and Crafts*. Most appear to have been textile outlets, selling fashion clothing. It may well be that the shops or their leases were still owned by Jewish traders who had themselves moved out of the area; in any case, few Jewish families now live here, as we have seen, the ward is almost totally comprised of Bangladeshi residents. Yet although one might have expected to have seen Asian restaurants, sari shops and so on, in fact a very different scenario occurred. Around 1967 the shop *Raynes* started trading in African cloth; apparently by 1969 *Middlesex Textiles* had also opened in competition, situated

opposite. During the 1970s a few more outlets opened, and only a handful of African cloth shops were trading in the two streets until 7 or 8 years ago.

After many conversations in the street, a partial history can be sketched out, albeit with some major queries unresolved. The original cluster of shops selling African cloth are all run by Jewish traders, and that until recently the trade was essentially controlled by two Jewish families. One started Raynes textiles, and led the way with innovative designs, reflecting changes in fashion buying by their West African customers. The other family started Middlesex textiles, and now 5 brothers and brothers-in-law from the original family own most of the established shops such as *Vogue fashions* next door, *Hello Dolly*, *D & Lee* and *Sheraton*. The two families fled Aden in 1965-6 after the final massacre of the Jews there forced the remnants of the community to leave forever. Both families had been cloth merchants in Aden, and must have had good knowledge and contacts of previous emigrants to draw on when they moved to London.

The earliest shops in fact quickly moved from initial establishments in Dalston, an increasingly popular destination for West Africans arriving in London, and subsequent Jewish traders followed suit. Obviously over the past few decades some shops have opened various branches at once, trading in Dalston, Wentworth Street and other markets in London, but Wentworth Street remains the highest concentration. Perhaps Jewish connections in the Wentworth St area offered leases on shops that were up for offer, and the market is more centrally located for travellers and wholesale buyers – the reasons are not yet clear. It is also not yet understood how they came to trade particularly in West African cloth, and whether this was opportunistic good business in London or the result of previous contacts with buyers in Aden. Certainly Aden was geographically well situated for involvement in the trade between India and Africa. However, their initial arrival in Dalston coincided with the growing community of Nigerians coming over to the UK with plenty of money to spend on clothing. From 1976, Nigeria imposed an import ban on textiles, which resulted in their being¹³

smuggled across the border from neighbouring Benin, or for African traders to come to London and literally take home stock in suitcases. Shopkeepers speak of Nigerians, flush with wealth from the oil and diamonds boom but denied the opportunity to buy foreign goods, arriving with suitcases full of money anxious to spend as much as possible on textiles to take home, fuelling the “suitcase trade”.⁶

Today these shops employ Ghanaian male shop assistants to help with building up a rapport with the customers, whilst some also employ Asian assistants. One shop set up by the next generation of a large Jewish retailing family talk of their collective experience working for all the family shops in the neighbourhood to gain experience, and the young Jewish woman running shop where I met her certainly was well informed about the nuances of West African fashions, the politics of cloth and the ramifications of social obligations to dress up. It has often been commented upon by scholars of African textiles that an intimate knowledge of localised aesthetic preferences and current fashion is essential for successfully manufacturing and marketing cloth in West Africa (Steiner, 1985; Picton, 1995). These dealers have had to build that up, but they are now threatened by large numbers of West African business women opening up shops in the street. Aggressively undercutting their established Jewish competitors and selling many cloths of lesser quality imported from new producers in the Far East, especially China, they present a challenge for the older Jewish firms, who feel the pinch. Recently *Raynes* moved from 3 shops to one smaller shop, although ostensibly it is for total refurbishment, the current manager admitted business is difficult for them.

In addition, many older shopkeepers complained of the attitude of the local council to the market. The street is within the congestion zone, which puts off passing traffic. Many feel that there are too few regulations for the street stalls, which they feel lower the tone of the place,

⁶ It is of course hard to ascertain the subsequent aggrandisement and mythologizing of the “suitcases bulging with cash” image of Nigerian traders, but it is certainly a time when black market trade was booming.

and there has been no investment in the infrastructure of the area: the lighting, pavements, signposting or advertising. It would be worth researching in more depth attitudes towards the creation of the Cultural Quarter, and the perception of the money invested in the neighbouring markets. But if there is a potential mis-match between the attitudes of the local Council and the shopkeepers over the status of the market, what is equally interesting might be the perception of this market and its African cloth by its customers, largely West African women.

Here I want to focus upon one type of textile on sale in the shops, known as “Georges”, and look back at its history and cultural connotations as an indicator of its importance today.

Georges

During the 18th and 19th century European colonial period, the global textile trade incorporated both the trading of textiles from Asia to the west, Africa and across the Atlantic, and the imitation of these textiles by the nascent industrial mills of Europe, the US and the Far East. The long and complex history of Dutch wax prints, for example, is now relatively well known, whereby wax prints destined for Indonesia were not successful, but were bought by African soldiers stationed there (Picton, 1995). The West African market was soon developed by English, Swiss and Dutch companies in competition with each other, and although company structures have changed in the period since independence was won by African countries, the wax prints continue to be produced in Europe and Africa, and are sold today in cloth shops such as those found in Wentworth street. Of course the salient point is that what is deemed to be iconic in terms of West African dress is in fact a product of colonial global industrial capitalism and is a relatively recent phenomenon. Another popular range of contemporary fabrics is the Swiss laces, now imitated by the Chinese and Koreans, about which less is known in terms of history of design and aesthetic appeal. However, it is in the particular translation of pattern that has occurred through one genre of textiles in Nigeria known as “Georges” that I now focus on.

The Madras “handkerchief” was a cotton square a yard long in stripes and cheques. Bengali silk imitations were extremely fashionable in Europe and the US at the end of the 18th C: known as bandanas, it was only when cheaper Chinese imports in the 1840s arrived that they went downmarket, and American cotton versions became iconic as the cowboy neckerchief in the 19th C (Bean, ND). In the African context, the importing of European imitations led to the distinction being made between these and “Reals”, an African abbreviation for “Real Madras Handkerchief”. It was not until the invention of synthetic dyes such as Turkey red that European textile manufacturers were able to compete on quality with their Indian counterparts, but the discerning still favour “Reals”.

I now want to turn to the work of the American anthropologist Joanne Eicher, and various scholars working alongside her, Tonye Erekosima, Sandra Lee Evenson and Hazel Lutz, on the role of imported Indian cloth in the Kalabari region of south-east Nigeria. Amongst the Kalabari, Madras chequered cloths are known as “Georges”, referring to the early colonial period before Madras was developed, and the British had a military garrison there, Fort St George. These cloths came in lengths of eight squares, each yard marked out, in order to avoid heavy taxes per piece at the time. Eicher’s work began in the 1960s where she started to document the importance of Georges for Kalabari lifecycle rituals such as weddings, funerals and the inauguration of chieftains, and tried to establish a history of their importance going back to the late 19th century. The Kalabari are famous as traders between the country’s interior and the external world, and imported objects such as Indian cloth, gold, coral beads and walking sticks have all been symbols of their skills as intermediaries and their ability to obtain scarce luxury goods from European trading ships. Each family strived to amass as many Georges as possible, storing them in trunks, inventorying them and bringing them out on display at ritual events. They become heirlooms guarded by elder women, and family genealogies can be recounted through the telling of cloth histories.

The possession of old cloths has to be seen alongside the strong desire for new cloths, balancing the right to reserve certain designs for certain clans with the attraction of innovation in design and the continued power to purchase the latest. The Georges are one of several types of Indian textile all used in Kalabar and the Delta regions today by the Ibo peoples, and they also include striped cloth (about which little is published) and embroidered velvets. Market women in Nigeria selling Real Madras handkerchief have had trading links with the same manufacturers in Madras (now Chennai) for decades, and old patterns can be recreated to order. One of the oldest textile companies, A Brunneschweiler and Co, was a Swiss company making wax prints for the African market. They later moved their business to Manchester and have been trading as ABC for years. They also opened a branch in Chennai making Madras cloth for Nigeria and Ghana. This trade has been studied by Sandra Evenson, who discovered that the firm's design books documented the orders for particular designs and colour-ways going back for decades (Evenson, 1994). The importance of branding for quality assurance and status is extremely important, and one of ABC's still extant labels is INTORICA, an acronym for India to Africa.

The naming of cloth is particularly complex, and different ethnic groups will have specific aesthetic preferences, cloth traditions and naming conventions for very similar if not the same cloth. Amongst the Ibo, all Indian cloth may be referred to as *injiri*, or "Indias", while during my research in London, the term "Georges" seems to be generic to any fabric from India. "Plain" or "real" Georges seems to refer to the plain cotton cheques in madder red and indigo, which made up the bulk of exports from India to Nigeria in the early 20th C and are still worn today. The velvets embroidered with gold threads which Lutz focuses upon present an opportunity for constant innovation; they are still made in Chennai, and are worn as wrapped around the waist as "aprons" on top of skirt wrappers (Lutz and Eicher, 1996; Lutz, 2003). As such, they tend to be rather stiff, and have recently started to have 3D representation imagery applied to them. Lutz's doctoral research in Chennai implies that each time a structural

change occurs in the production and trade networks, the design elements change. There are also “beaded Georges”, which can apply to tops to be worn with the velvet wrappers, fancies, and lately “Sari Georges”, to which I will return.

As Lutz explains, during the 1970s, independent Nigeria imposed an import ban on textiles which badly affected the Indian suppliers – approximately 30,000 hand weavers in Chennai were put out of business. ABC was taken over by its rivals, and most European businesses in this trade went under. At this point, West African traders came to India to look for “Real Madras”, and started to establish contacts of their own, fuelling the growth of small businesses. Old textiles from the Kalabari cloth boxes were copied by small weavers in India. By the late 1990s, “zari Georges” were also on sale. Here the aesthetic has moved again. Benarasi saris, one of the most famous and opulent of Indian saris, incorporating gold thread in the weave, have been altered by the application of gold thread embroidery in different patterns overlaying the surface. Lutz documents finding examples of Zari George that are still divided into 8 pieces, as the traditional Georges are, but which bear little resemblance to their earlier counterparts. I have bought examples of these in Wentworth Street, covered in intricate chain stitch embroidery and raised flowers or palm trees in plastic and artificial silk. Indeed, some of the more ornate products could, until recently, be legally imported into the US and UK under the multi-fiber agreement as Indian veils, *ordhinis*, from where they would be smuggled into West Africa.

During work in Wentworth Street, not only did I come across traditional Georges, but also variations of Georges in all shops which cater for the visiting or resident Ibo population. Thus I found velvet wrappers known as Georges, embroidered sari lengths divided through decorative motifs into 8 pieces and beaded saris, which in fact are actually beaded Indian saris cut in two and sold as pairs for skirt wrappers and tops. Shop assistants and customers all attest to the requirement to wear Georges if one has to attend a Ibo function, whether in Europe or Nigeria, the rural Rivers state or upmarket Lagos venues. A trawl of websites¹⁸

reveal fashion articles on George wrappers termed “First Lady”, “Oxford Georges”, “VIP majestic Georges”, “Intorica George”, “raw silk Georges”, “Million Stones” and “Concorde Georges”.

There is some anecdotal evidence that African women actually wear Indian saris as saris when dressing up on social occasions where ritual dress is not obligatory. I have been told of women wearing saris to parties, weddings, or to watch the screening of Hindi movies in West Africa; I have also recently seen a West African woman in Brixton, south London, wearing a bright green sequined sari over a black top on a Saturday evening. Coupled with the predominance of the Indian shoes, handbags and jewellery on offer in Wentworth Street, it is interesting to question this aesthetic preference beyond the traditional explanation of colonial influence and opportunity. It is also perhaps proper to mention that these cloths are not cheap; lace lengths sell for £100-200, the best beaded saris appear to sell for around £150 – 200; often women are shopping for whole families and will spend £1000s: it is a sartorial investment that is not lightly undertaken.

Conclusion

Historically the trade in cloth for the West African market was mediated and controlled first by Royal Trading Companies during the European age of expansion, then by British businesses during colonial consolidation, and today they are created in one postcolonial state for consumption in another, with wholesale markets in European capitals. However, I suggest that the retail and consumption of these cloths in London today reflects a noticeably different aspect to this earlier centre-periphery characterisation, and to the concepts of cultural diversity, assimilation and segregation otherwise sketched out by researchers and commentators on the city.

These textiles could be viewed as indices of a trans-national cultural flow that has been largely ignored in discussions of multi-culturalism and globalisation in London, namely the 19

imaginative engagement of people from non-Western countries with cultural forms from another non-Western culture, a concept described by Brian Larkin as “parallel modernities”. His research investigates the appeal of Indian film to the Muslim Hausa in north Nigeria, whereby film showings, videos and imagery of film stars are found throughout public culture. Larkin demonstrates the power of such media flows, “disrupting the dichotomies between West and non-West, coloniser and colonised, modernity and tradition, foregrounding instead the ability of media to create parallel modernities”. Ibo women in particular may have a long tradition of wearing Indian cloth, but Nigerian women in general share many aesthetic preferences with Indian cloth producers.

Both Indian and African women approach clothing in terms of cloth that is chosen and then tailored or simply wrapped around the body, and the aesthetics of shine, glamour and gloss, of the importance of colour, of matching accessories and newness of outfits are common to both cultures. Cloth itself is an important element of gift giving in India and the creation and maintenance of exchange networks, and the wearing of new cloth symbolises these relationships. Similarly, West African gift exchanges include cloth, and matching outfits are often commissioned for family and clan events, where the image of group identity maximises the visibility of networks. Cloth, as opposed to clothing, retains its potential to be fashioned, and through its material qualities, cloth conveys certain ideas about aesthetics, culture, identity and communication that have a particular resonance with other cultural groups and act as agents in their translation across boundaries (Küchler and Were, 2003). Such translations may commonly occur in a cosmopolitan city such as London yet remain invisible to researchers and exponents of cultural diversity funding, precisely because they are unmediated by the dominant culture, and do not therefore generate the same debates regarding assimilation or segregation of minority cultures. Yet their vibrancy and potential for an ongoing cultural interaction which may transcend such simple dichotomies deserve recognition in urban planning structures and policies.

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