

## Textiles, Clothing & the Human Element

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### Abstract

Years ago, anthropologists gave no attention to clothing and dress; but in the 1980s, a new research agenda was created placing the body surface at center stage (Tranberg-Hansen, 2004). Now culture is seen as a process created through agency, practice, and performance—no doubt, clothing very much has a human element. Just as important, we now understand that the globalization process has both local and global impact. Highest on this local/global interaction is the process of consumption. Certainly we are not surprised by this when we know that clothes may be inspired from France, tech-packed from New York, sourced from all over the world, produced in China, and sold in shops on the other side of the globe.

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### I . The Human Element

The human element is what makes textiles and costume symbolically, politically, socially, and economically compelling. “Human element” has been defined as a complex multi-dimensional issue that affects the entire spectrum of human activities. Recently, Dow Chemical ran an award-winning, impressive ad campaign using “The Human Element” to market the chemical industry. The campaign used compelling images and touching voice-overs to illustrate how life depends on countless contributions from humans. The theme purports that the practice of chemistry is ultimately about serving people.

In 1987, the Clothing and Textiles Research Journal published Dr. Jean Hamilton’s article, Dress as a Cultural Sub-System: A Unifying Metatheory for Clothing and Textiles. As a tool for stretching our

thoughts, the metatheory seeks a common disciplinary language regardless of our specializations. If we use the metatheory to look at the human element of textiles and clothing we must consider the social framework of technology, social structure, and world view.

Hamilton’s meta-theory has three cultural components illustrated like a layer cake, and includes Technology, Social Structure, and World View. These three components represent the ways in which we satisfy our culture and are illustrated in Figure 1.

Technology satisfies our material needs and provides us with the tools, material culture, and infrastructure to maintain existence. Social structure satisfies our social needs and includes the ways in which we organize ourselves. They are the established patterns of behavior. World View or Ideology satisfies our psychic needs and has to do with the way we

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think about things. The three components of culture are interactive. When a change in one category occurs, it is likely to result in change of another category.

Alongside the cultural components are the organizing mechanisms, or the ways in which we adapt to our environment. Whatever the unit of analysis, whether it is a local weaver’s guild, or traditional costume, or contracted sweatshops, or gift exchange—the organizing mechanisms help us to understand how humans, textiles, and costume are intertwined.

No doubt, the complexity of humans is embodied in the organizing mechanisms of Hamilton’s meta-theory. This includes economic, socialization, communication, arts & aesthetics, world view, technology, and politics. But to focus today’s talk, I will focus on three domains: (1) social relations, (2) political significance, (3) economic significance. I will also address sustainability and the future of textiles and costume. Many of the examples I will provide come from my years of research and teaching.

Throughout history, textiles have impacted human life. Whether in the form of personal expression, exploited human labor, or expressive artistry— textiles and clothing are important to humans. Textiles can take many shapes and decorative variations. By changing colors of warp and weft, or layering colors of dye, or sandblasting surfaces the potential for differentiation is endless. Textiles can be worn, exchanged, displayed or used to communicate ideological values and human conditions such as poverty, wealth, status, gender and sexuality, political affiliations, ethnicity, age, occupation, or consumer behavior. And they can create significance and meaning to our lives. In each of these cases—and many others too numerous to mention—textiles and costume are closely linked to human life.

Two points are important to consider: (1) Textiles and costume are often divided along gender lines, and (2) the modern capitalist fashion system occurs at break-neck speed in order to meet high consumption

<b>World View</b>							
<b>Social Structure</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Socialization</b>	<b>Arts and Aesthetics</b>	<b>Kinship and Family</b>	<b>Communication</b>
<b>Technology</b>							

<Fig. 1> Hamilton's meta-theory.

patterns throughout the modern world— often negatively impacting human life. The result has been that much of the traditional symbolism as been removed and factory workers have been exploited. For many societies, though, clothing remains imbued with highly significant meaning.

## II . Social, Political, and Economic Significance

### 1. Social significance

For the most part, textiles and clothing are couched in a social milieu. Across the globe, textiles layer social meaning not only in birth and death, but also in rituals of marriage, religion, social movements, or sporting events. Dress can identify groups, delineate social classes, and create social distance. As the world becomes increasingly globalized, textiles and clothing traditions have been hybridized. For example, what does it mean to be “French haute couture” or “Italian leather” or “Indian Bandhini”? How has modernity impacted Guatemalan backstrap weaving or Old Order Amish dress?

In June 1991, I packed my personal belongings and my ten-and eleven-year old boys and moved to Jamesport, Missouri to do a year of participant observation research living among the Old Order Amish. It was perhaps the most peaceful, reflective, and revealing year of our lives and resulted in lifelong friendships with several Amish friends with whom I remain in contact to this day.

When we live with a group of people outside our own culture for an extended period of time, we learn all kinds of things about that group. The

Amish are located in rural communities throughout the Americas. As a large Christian-based group whose core values focus on separateness from the world and commitment to tradition, family, and community, their values have set them apart from the rest of the world making them a cultural curiosity.

The Amish often refer to themselves as “plain”. Yet each Amish community is unique with its own set of rules called the *Ordnung*. Outsiders have difficulty understanding why some Amish allow a tractor engine mounted on a flatbed wagon to power farm equipment while another Amish community strictly enforces the use of only horse-drawn power. These variances reflect specific rules of the *Ordnung* and result in a continuum with orthodox Old Order on one end and the progressive Beechy Amish on the other. It is these varying rules that also explain variations in Amish dress.

For most Amish, clothing represents several dimensions of their cultural values including nonconformity, humility, modesty, utility, thrift, and group conformity. Amish dress is both a separator and an identifier. They also believe that the church, rather than fashion trends should control identity. Outsiders might view variances in group wardrobe as confusing, but for the Amish their choices make perfect sense. As outsiders interact, some changes in dress have occurred. Over the past fifty years, athletic shoes, eyeglasses, and head scarves have been introduced for work days. Even though traditional or ethnic dress seems to honor tradition, careful observations reveal that it is dynamic and changing. All the more so, the Amish consider notions of style even if the “latest style” is culturally contained. For example, in Amish stores, stacks of colored head scarves are sold to the Amish teenage girls who buy the scarves to match their dress, with colors changing from year to year.

When members from other Amish communities visit change occurs. When I was doing my research,

a young girl from Indiana had moved into the community. In her Indiana community, women wore snaps as closures on their dresses. But in Jamesport, dresses are held closed with straight pins. Concern from the Amish elders was raised because young Jamesport girls were seen trying to “get by” sewing snaps onto their dresses. A special meeting was held by the church hierarchy and the girl from Indiana was told that if she wanted to stay in Jamesport, she had to remove all her snaps and replace them with pins like the other Jamesport girls. If she refused, she would need to return to Indiana. This is one example of how social control is exerted. Indeed, while she was in Jamesport she did remove her snaps, but she stayed only a few months because she decided Jamesport was too strict.

In 2006 I was among a Fulbright-Hayes study group to India on a project called “Fabric of India Life”. Our Fulbright experience focused most on the Rajasthan area with special attention to the Rabari textile artisans. The Rabari are formerly a nomadic people now scattered in villages throughout northwest India. The textiles of each of these groups evolved through necessity as portable vessels, furnishings, and items of clothing. There is a commonality of dress and artisan textiles among the Rabari communities. While, each community and tribal group has its own lexicon of motifs and embroidery stitches, specific differences in colors, fabric, and decoration will signify each community, and also within that age, and marital status.

The people of this region share a common dowry tradition. In addition to the usual gifts of jewelry and household utensils, a bride must bring to her husband’s home a large number of richly embroidered textiles which she and the women of her family have created. This dowry will consist of costume for the bride and groom, hangings for her new home and trappings for their domestic animals. A toran is created to hang over the

doorway for good luck. Traditional dowry requirements were so onerous that it was causing serious social and marital problems within the community. Recently the council elders of the Dhebaria community issued a ruling that banned embroidery on dowry (Edwards, 2003). Their primary aim was to reduce the costs of dowry and the increased time it took to create dowry. Elders declared that dowry was destroying the community as a whole. By banning embroidery, they could redirect wealth into community development but to do so would require a major revision to the process of Rabari marriage. Implementation of the ban freed women of social obligation and subsequently they are free to produce embroidery for the market or purely as a pastime. This also means that many young Dhebaria women have lost the cultural knowledge of their own traditional embroidery techniques.

## 2. Political significance

Governments influence clothing -and clothing influences governments. Clothing is used as a tool to demonstrate the power and authority of a nation. Many examples exist for illustrating textiles and political significance. Easy to store and transport, prestige textiles awe patrons, smooth the rough edges of diplomacy and earn foreign exchange. Especially noteworthy were empires that compiled warehouses of textiles as a means for creating revenue and enhancing authority. Imperial China was particularly impressive when its divisible units of value in silk became precursors to paper money.

Throughout history, textiles have been used to bestow, exchange, or sacrifice. But seldom have we thought about the political significance of second hand clothing. In my research in textile recycling, many cases exist where trade laws forbid countries to ship used apparel to certain other countries. The second hand clothing business is worth more than \$1 billion each year in global trade. Supporters of second hand clothing point

out that the trade increases employment and provides low-cost clothing to people living in poverty. For example in Senegal, it is estimated that 24,000 people are involved in the trading, distribution, repair, restyling, and washing of used clothing. It has been estimated that \$1m worth of second hand clothing generates about 150 jobs in a developing country. Yet policy makers report that second hand clothing is often contaminated, and undermines fledgling garment industries. This politically motivated charge impacts our landfills and reduces the possibility of extended life for clothing.

## 3. Economic significance

Regardless of a country's economic situation, the clothing industry – from fiber to costume – is a major economic factor. During the post 1978 Chinese Reform period, the development of China's textile and apparel industries was a process of liberalization in which the government cultivated and encouraged market competition as a way to modernize China and enhance the economy. The development of China's textile and clothing industries is a part of the state agenda (Zhao, 2008). Chinese made garments exported to the United States is predicated on the global political economy. As it turns out, clothing is not just a business, but one that involves cultural meaning -both economic and political.

When India became interested in an export market, the Indian craftsman modified the colors they used to conform to export market tastes. This resulted in such a hugely successful penetration of European markets that European cloth makers responded by industrializing textile printing.

India is one of the world's most environmentally hazardous countries ranking 7<sup>th</sup> from the bottom. On the Fabric of India Life Fulbright in 2007, we visited the Rabari tribes in the rural areas of Kutch – a region that seemed an untouched bucolic area. When we returned just 3 years later,

we were shocked to see two new coal-plants on either side of the small KalaRaksha school. The untouched environment had been replaced with an Ultra Mega Power project, one being the largest in Asia. While, no doubt, India is in need of modern energy, the impact on the human element must also be considered. Pollution from the plants comes in the form of air, water, biological, and noise (Goffman, 2008). During the construction phase, Rabari women were hired to help install insulation on the new buildings. One woman came home and complained that the cotton was cutting her arms. In actually, she was not installing “cotton”, but fiberglass insulation without the protection of gloves on their arms. Completion of the project means that 24 hours a day, 7 days of the week power plants are now a constant presence in the lives of Rabari tribes.

### III. Manufacturing Processes

Three essential variables exist in textile weaving: The interlacing of warp and weft, surface decoration, and the colors used. Variations result in weaving traditions that reflect local customs and preferences. Industrial age innovations in spinning and weaving grew out of an English effort to compete with India cottons—particularly the manufacturer of calico as a less-costly substitute for chintz. In the eighteenth century, it would take Indian hand spinners 50,000 hours to process 100 lbs. of cotton, the industrial age brought machines that could do 100 pounds in 135 hours. But, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, textile and garment manufacturing fled from industrial countries to developing countries. Much like their western counterparts, third world textile factories exploit labor, predominantly female labor and compete for yarn with hand-loom weavers.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in an explosion of design possibilities with the availability of industrial yarns and dyestuffs. Humans



<Fig. 2> Rabari tattoos inspire batik designs.

ascribe a wide range of social and cultural meaning to cloth with motifs that are often abstracted from life. The Rabari attribute color and motif ideas to cultural symbols. Figure 2 shows a Rabari woman whose tattooed arm serves as inspiration for the artist’s batik design on silk.

Misinterpretations also happen. For example, Ikat traditions of Guatemala, Indonesia, and Asia are culture specific but no doubt labor intensive everywhere. Many are stunning pieces of art—collected, displayed, and worn. In the 2009 fashion season, couture designer Oscar de la Renta used ikat as his central inspiration (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEiWPlgEnkE>).

#### 1. Tourist markets

In the case of cloth made for the tourist market, artisans are concerned about sellability resulting in products that no longer are true to the culture. Products produced for the tourist market have been commoditized.

Moreno and Littrell (2001) reported that marketing craft objects to local tourists has resulted in significant change. Not only do products change to meet consumer demand, but so do the processes. Often it is intermediaries and non-indigenous producers who envision what the final product should be— frequently making changes to indigenous craft in order to meet the demands of a commercialized tourist market. The result can lead to tense relations between the negotiating parties.

Where merchants and artisans display their handi-

crafts, changes are inevitable. Not only do artists need to accommodate tourist's taste, but also they must change their production processes to meet the higher demands. Both negligence and care might co-exist. Even though rural artisans might produce low-quality for export markets, they would apply high standards to cloth for indigenous social and ritual purposes.

## 2. Guatemala

In May 2011, I traveled with a group of textile enthusiasts to Guatemala to study textile artisans and their work. Undoubtedly, some of the most colorfully costumed people in the Americas are the Highland Maya of Guatemala. While traditional native dress has disappeared in many parts of the world, Guatemala remains a place where a high percentage of the indigenous people still proudly wear their traditional dress called the *traje*. *Traje* is village-specific or language-group related, thus with 21 different ethno-linguistic groups, the variety of indigenous dress is astonishing. *Traje* consists of the *huipil* (traditional square-cut blouse), the *corte* (or skirt), and *faja* (or belt). Each group also adorns with some type of headpiece or hair ribbon. Figure 3 shows a Mayan woman in traditional *traje*.

If you wander through the highland villages of Guatemala, you will see women gathered to weave on their backstrap looms the end products of which are coin purses, placemats, or other domestic textiles for the tourist market. Many of these textiles end up at the Chi Chi market or in tourist cities like Antigua. But even when fair trade is considered, the economics of their production is far from ideal. In my 2011 visit to Guatemala, a handwoven napkin sold in Antigua for \$10.00 each. But the woman who produced the napkin made less than \$.15 per hour for her labor. While it is true that textile weaving provides one of only a few jobs that a village woman in Guatemala can get, her receipts still keep her at poverty level.



<Fig. 3> Traditional Mayan *traje*.

For years, Mayan women have produced textile products from back-strap looms using colorful cotton yarns acquired through local providers. But when cotton hit an all time high in early 2011, Mayan women could not afford the yarns for their weaving. Two things resulted: they began using recycled plastics as weft in their backstrap weaving. And they learned how to hook rugs using strips of cotton from the used clothing *pacas*. *Pacas* are literally a bale of used clothes shipped into Guatemala from western countries, primarily the United States. Clothes sell for Q3-Q15 per item (or \$.38 to \$2.00 USD). See Figure 4.

The biggest challenge on learning to hook rugs was to honor their traditional designs but transfer designs from their traditional arts to a visually expanded mode and to learn the concept of “back-ground”. Using the fist as a unit of measurement, the Guatemalan women learned how to hook rugs by identifying sources for designs from their surroundings: Huipils, the stone pattern on the rock wall, the pattern on the iron gate, the quatrefoil shape of the window—rug inspiration is everywhere.

Most women found that extracting elements

from their clothing could honor their own textile heritage while at the same time they learn new skills that would be economically beneficial. These rugs sell for ~\$500 USD. Figure 4 shows a rug that was inspired from traditional dress.

Soon women were telling stories about how the sale of rugs has impacted their lives. One woman said, “I used to have to go to the mountain and chop firewood that I sold door-to-door. I worked like a man and I still feel the work in my body. Now that I am selling my rugs I don’t have to go to the Mountain anymore. I am a lucky woman.” Another woman said, “I used to be a low person. That is how people see you if you can’t read or have never been to school. Now that I am selling my rugs I see the world differently. I am not a low person anymore.” These strategies were made



<Fig. 4> Hooked rugs inspired from *traje*.

possible through workshops taught by outside intermediaries from the United States. The Mayan artisans who learned the new techniques not only had economic benefits that could help the women feed their families, but they also learned new skills and design techniques which broadened their product mix.

#### IV. The Future

Wearing clothing is uniquely a human characteristic. For years it was unknown when humans first began wearing clothing, but new technologies has changed that! A new nuclear DNA technology has led to a technological breakthrough that has determined that humans began wearing clothing around 170,000 years ago. The discovery was based on a certain type of lice that lives only in threads and hair (Mauch, 1/9/2011 from [http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.aspx?subjectid=13&articleid=20110109\\_13\\_A20\\_LOSANG875792](http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.aspx?subjectid=13&articleid=20110109_13_A20_LOSANG875792)). Until this study, direct dating of clothing has been nearly impossible because clothing does not survive well over time. Not only has the DNA dating given us a clearer understanding of when humans began to wear clothing, it also has significance for a broader understanding of the human element.

In today’s world, with Facebook, high-speed internet, and hyper-communication, a global impact has been felt and resulted in breaking down traditional concepts of fashion. Understanding fashion as a global phenomenon reveals shifts in global production and vast economic differences between those who produce and those who consume. No doubt, the meaning of clothing varies across regions of the world. There is a world of fashion out there, dominated by the economic power of the West, even if the West no longer fully controls inspiration and production. Yet the human significance of global garment production is enormous.

Yes, textiles and costume rank high among our

most personal possessions. They provide humans with identity, creative expression, protection from the elements, gender distinctions, and economic security. Textiles and costume are inextricably linked to the Human Element.

### Acknowledgements

I was trained as a cultural anthropologist. Throughout my career I have used culture theory and research methods in my scholarship. I have conducted systematic research on the Old Order Amish, fair trade organizations, and textile recycling. Anthropologists often build bridges between cultural worlds. They blend respect for cultural difference and the awareness of common humanity. This, combined with interdisciplinary research methods, helps anthropologists to understand, make policies, develop programs, and improve the human condition. For me, understanding both the global nature of textiles as well as the local cultural nuances has been an important part of my academic career.

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