

The art of craft for social and cultural identity in ethnic groups of India

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In order to please people with familiar attractions and ideas, it became something like a fashion in ethnographic museums to present "art", better than craft or culture in general. Naturally, also the discussion on the appreciation of art or significance of the term within different cultures as well as ethno-social groups got a new dimension.

The contemporary discussion on the different categories of art, understanding as craft, folk art or classic or modern art, is basically initiated by people coming from the European developed determination of art in the 18th/19th century and the way of looking at things from a highly specialised social system with the focus on fine art in opposition to technical and crafts' production. The aspects of determination and critics are taken from the way of life of our highly differentiated society. But ethnic groups do not have this differentiation between craft and art, and do not have any special expression for "art" related to the European philosophic categories. Nevertheless no people, no society is without art. More over they consider their work as a craft related to the aesthetic expression of their respective society according to order and necessity. It is the aesthetic of life in culture, which represents the personality of men in a certain surrounding with a social context. With the more or less skilful craft of an individual it is the conscious expression of the life of a group represented in colours, graphic pattern or plastic forms, delegated more and more to skilful specialists, who have to carry out the social desire as well as the common feeling, belief and dignity with respect to the material from nature, their interacting living space. As Mr. Castells highlighted in his plenary speech: "in a world of different languages and broken mirrors art is a communication protocol to reconstruct bridges between the network and the self". So, cultural transmission may be identified through art codes for understanding between communities.

Art is the basic expression of culture in relation to local life with ever indigenous handicraft means and moulds in ethnic and folk groups. In all societies the overall creative craftsmanship is basically like a language, like an expression of the philosophy of life, the social code for cultural expressions. While first of all being an information for the own community, outsiders feel so much difficulties in understanding and accepting what is art in ethnic groups. Basically it should be understood as a craft and skill for communication. In this presentation, I like to draw your attention par example on nomadic and rural societies in western India, but the samples could have been taken from ornaments in hunters and gatherers groups as well.

The paper reflects a special exhibition on richly decorated scarves, which belong to the very common and daily used clothes of the women and men in desert areas of western India and Pakistan. The people referred to are nomadic herdsmen as well as rich permanent settled peasants, landlords and merchants. The most important piece of their cloth is the odhani, a veil, a rectangular big scarf, which is always worn protecting the head and back, if necessary or wanted also the face. The weaving of the cloth itself is less spectacular, nowadays more and more textiles come from industrial mills and fabrics. But the colouring and designing is always a very individualistic group interest and a matter of self-identification, made by the women and men themselves or by specialists according to order.

Honouring the 50th anniversary of the Republic of India as well as of the foundation of Pakistan, there have been presented two major exhibitions of this special textile craft in western Indian territories, one in the V & A Museum in London, one in the State Museum for Ethnography in Dresden. Both exhibitions focused on the same groups and nations, whose original territory for nomadic migrations got divided politically, but their cultural expression and artistic language remained comparable with understanding pattern vice versa, showing the common historical development. Along the pattern and designs in colouring, stitching, painting or printing the individual relationship, the traditional contacts, social exchange, marriage customs, but also the nomadic traits and trends might be read like in a story book, made by people with natural creativity, self-conscious individuality, but also with conscious separation from near neighbours, who do not belong to the circle of the own group.

The colours are connected to birth, youth, aged people and dead: red means an expression of youth and fertility, the colour of marriage cloth par excellence; yellow is associated to new rising, the spring in nature, given birth to a new generation, a son, resembling the sun which fosters growing; indigo remembers the blue of the sky covered with rain clouds at the monsoon, the time for love and longing; grey, black and dark violet are colours of the old age, widowship and mourning; white expresses the wisdom of the age, high spirituality. The basic designing gives strong expression of a special



group, their relation to spirituality and surroundings and group-identity. Asked for technical details of the design, the crafts-men or woman hardly will describe the process, but give a lyrical name, which denominates the content expressed in the symbol.

The muslim Pathans in Northern Afghanistan may be identified by their strict geometric and highly abstract pattern. Men and women do both the stitching for their clothes.

In Pakistan Beluchistan and Sind the geometric and abstract ornaments are mixed with floral designs, who resemble the richness and originality of islamic gardens. The speciality of Sindi women consists in the shining combination of shisha-work (mirror-stitching) with long stem stitches of untwisted silk to make "phulkari" – the flower garden, which itself is very common and typical in the northern neighbouring country Punjab. Shisha-work is very common and spread among the nomadic shepherds' and cattle-breeders' communities of the same desert areas on the Indian side, in Rajasthan and among the Rabaris of Kutch. But women of Kutch and Kathiawar prefer to embroider with round chain stitches, which allow them to produce circles and spirals for a very lively designing.



The women embroider their philosophy of nature, expressed in the denomination of their designs, never they describe their doing by technological aspects or terms.

For instance: *kharek* work, literally means "fruit of the date palm", is made with narrow bars of satin stitches, closely laid together to form triangles, small squares and other geometrical figures, like an outlining and a filling-in stitching. The bars are called as *nehran* – rivers.

Or observe the design *hurmitch* (sindhi) or *hawaliya (kutchi)*, literally it means "a thorny acacie", done with detached interlacing stitches arranged into geometric patterns, which very lively resemble the only important wood plant in the desert, the acacie, valuable for the organisation of life (fire-wood, wood for furniture and construction of huts).

Look at *pakka* – "pure" or "solid", refers to the solid, permanent materials of their surroundings, the stones; it is done with tight square chain and double buttonhole stitching in geometric and floral patterns.

Highly sophisticated is the *soof*–embroidery. Literally it means "triangle". It is done with very fine surface satin stitching worked in only geometric forms, particularly the triangle, which get composed so that they resemble as animal or human figures as well as flowers or natural hills. The peacock is the most beloved animal represented.

Another natural motif is called *buta*, meaning "rain of flowers"; with a combination of *pakka* and *soof* stitching rich blooming and sun like flowers are represented, an expression for longing for beauty, welfare and prosperity.

Full of life and mythology are the embroideries of the Kanbe, peasant community of the Kathiawar peninsula. Their artistic expressions in rich picture like, colourful embroideries reflect the strong attachment to the brahmanic gods and goddesses for luck, prosperity and fertility, for Ganesh, Lakshmi or Vishnu-Krishna. Like paintings they are used for wall decorations, as well as ornamentation for animals.

The motive of the daily life within the village is represented with coloured cotton thread and shining pieces of mirrors as it were told for people who may be able to understand.

The advantage and speciality of these exhibitions have been to draw attention at handicrafts and products for the daily use in the common life or social rituals, which are never seen by the users as artistic or something special. Most of the embroidery for the, in deed, artistic decoration of the textiles is done by women in their leisure time, but not for fun, more over it is the inherent social order to do so, to show the manpower, personality and spiritual richness of the own community before the social partner in marriage, trade negotiations or at gatherings of different communities.

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