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Made in Ethiopia:
Traditional Ethiopian Textiles

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In his *New York Times* review of the first major gallery sale of Ethiopian art in the United States, Holland Cotter notes “cultural breadth is one of the most thrilling things about Ethiopian art. It is also one reason it remains little studied. It requires scholars equally conversant in European, Islamic and African art - a tall multicultural order.” (Cotter 2005) Scholars of the region echo this statement with calls for the need to increase multidisciplinary efforts in the study of Ethiopian art. Many of these highlight the study of textiles, especially in their relationship to trade and foreign influences. However, a tendency to focus on externally produced components for the elite bypasses a subject quite central to art production in Ethiopia: the woven cotton textiles that have held a place in the heart of culture and tradition for centuries. The art of weaving and embroidery linked to traditional garments has survived the ebb and flow of commerce, religious struggles, wars, changes in fashion, production demands, and major imports of foreign textiles. The resilient nature of this industry may be found in the way these textiles inherently represent the cultural breadth of Ethiopia referred to earlier. A review of the cultural and historical variations in Ethiopian cloth and symbolism, across regional, ecclesiastical, and garment-based applications, forms the basis of a view toward the country’s current goal to become an international apparel hub.

The well-established breadth of diversity in Ethiopia’s languages, religious beliefs, and ethnic backgrounds – “a museum of peoples” according to Italian scholar Conti Rossini – is thought to have its foundation in two major forces: “commerce and nation-building, both of which worked to bring the region’s diversified inhabitants together as one nation.” (Horowitz 2001: 20) Geographically situated near the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, Ethiopia has a long history of trade with India, the

Mediterranean, China, and the Middle East. Christian influences have been strong since King Ezana, the ruler of the Aksumite kingdom, converted to Christianity in the fourth century. Major connections were also forged with Christian countries in the West, especially Italy and Portugal, and there was consistent interaction with neighboring Islamic groups (Horowitz 2001: 19).

Ethiopia has long been an important center for handmade cloth and textile production in East Africa. In their examination of the significance of textiles in this complex cultural history, Christopher Spring and Julie Hudson surmise that textile production in Ethiopia operated under a patronage system until the beginning of the twentieth century. Under direction of the “powerful ecclesiastical and politico-military elites,” weavers and embroiderers created garments that helped to define rank within a complex hierarchical society (Spring and Hudson 1995:120). The exact details surrounding the sources of early woven cotton materials and looms, the cultivation and production of cotton, and the extent to which their origins reach back into Ethiopian history are not yet firmly established (Spring and Hudson 1995: 29; Gervers 2004).

G. Edward Nicholson argues that Ethiopia, as one of the world “centers of variability and domestication of several cultivated plants,” was also likely the origin for the first domestication of cotton. The presumed existence of trade with Meroe at the time supports the likelihood that Axum used the cotton that was extensively cultivated in Ethiopian regions at the time. He also notes that at the time of his research in the middle of the twentieth century, cotton grown by farmers and plantation-style mills was not enough to sufficiently meet the demands of the country, and “the most important Ethiopian import (about one third of the total value of imports)” was manufactured cotton

(Nicholson 1960: 3-5). In later research, Michael Gervers refutes Nicholson's arguments about the beginnings of cotton cultivation in the region, based on evidence of textile trade with Muslim Arabs, India, and China. He argues that in the medieval period, cotton cloth in Ethiopia "was only worn by religious authorities and the upper class," and must have been imported (Gervers 1990). Either way, over time the importance of popular patronage and the prevalent need for cotton cloth garments as part of Ethiopian cultural traditions has supported production in all its forms.

Woven cloth is produced by men, as is most embroidery, although women are beginning to participate in that craft more as part of contemporary production (Picton and Mack 1989: 19). Women, quite often the female family members of weavers, are responsible for procuring raw cotton and for spinning it for weft threads on the looms. Knowledge in all of these techniques – spinning, weaving, and embroidery – is passed down from generation to generation (Silverman 1999: 11, 245).

Two items that are central in traditional Ethiopian dress, the shamma and the kemis, particularly offer rich visual representations of cultural context. Most people in Ethiopia wear the shamma, a term used to refer collectively to the different types of thin cotton shawls worn by both men and women. The shamma has long played an important part in the way dress defines hierarchy, rank, and status throughout all levels of Ethiopian society, and continues to do so today. The variations in the weight of the shawl, based on the number of layers and the thickness and quality of the cloth, determines part of the hierarchy. The main composition of the shawl is white woven cotton, which is left plain with no decoration, or has the addition of a plain colored border or a multi-colored band with patterns in silk or rayon. This border is called a tibeb, and the prestige of a garment

is based on its width and the rich complexity of its design and materials. Underneath the shamma, women wear the long cotton dress known as a kemis. Decoration on a traditional kemis includes elaborately embroidered designs along the neckline and down the front and back of the garment. (LaGamma 2008: 35; Gillow 2009: 160; Spring and Hudson 1995: 122). Again, variations in the weight and type of the cotton cloth or linings used bear indications related to status, fashion, and regional influences.

Pastels were introduced as an alternative to the white base cotton cloth used for shamma in the middle of the twentieth century, but were abandoned when the colors ran with washing (Gibson 1998). With newer dye options available, contemporary clothing designers do incorporate color variations into the cotton base for a kemis or traditionally influenced garments, but the preference for white remains strong. At one time farmers who wanted to distinguish themselves from peasant serfs who wore the same style of plain, workaday cloth would dye their white shamma with a foot-wide red border (Messing 1960: 558). Other color variations in the weft threads of the embroidered designs are sometimes added to show patriotism. This would include the addition of the green, yellow, and red associated with modern Ethiopia (Messing 1960: 558-9). Traditionally, a more limited palette of colors was used, each with very specific symbolism attached. White and yellow meant death, black was tied to rain, and red was equated with blood or the meat of life (Gillow 2003: 162).

The ways that traditional textiles, especially in the form of shawls, are worn also vary by region and have a variety of meanings. In his study of the Doko society of the Gamo highlands in south central Ethiopia, for example, Ray Silverman shows there are four basic ways to wear the popular cloth referred to as net'ala. For every day use the

border is folded over the right shoulder and the cloth covers the wearer's back. In cases of rest or recreation, the border is worn over the left shoulder. If the border is pulled up over the wearer's face, he is in mourning. And finally, for religious activities the net'ala is opened all the way up and the border spans across both shoulders. Simon Messing published in much further detail his own study of the nonverbal language communicated through traditional Ethiopian dress, which in 1960 included the ways a significantly styled shamma would let observers know the wearer's mood, the measure of his pride, or to publicly refute a legal accusation. Again these communications varied by region, and were marked by adaptations in size, texture, cloth, style and importance of the shamma throughout the population. In modern dress, consumers and designers alike are experimenting with ways to fuse these types of traditional messages and styles with contemporary fashion that holds pride and relationship to heritage.

Adaptations in embroidery are a key part of this. The decoration on the kemis, while still tied to the same elements and associations of prestige as the shamma, also remains strongly embedded in protective connotations. In the long tradition of embroidery, "symbolism is expressed in pattern," with a meaning that often reaches beyond purely aesthetic aspects (Paine 1990: 7). The development over time in the motifs and designs of the embroidered decoration of a kemis is also a visual display of the diversity that plays such an important part in Ethiopian culture. Specifically, the combination of Christian and traditional African beliefs in religious conviction is still prevalent in Ethiopia today.

The cross, in its representation of the crucifixion, is an important protective symbol in Ethiopian culture, and "it assumes a protective capacity, based upon its perceived ability to avert evil." Therefore the various forms the cross takes play a great visual role in both secular and religious aspects of life (Horowitz 2001: 75). Likewise, the

embroidered designs on the kemis commonly mimic the pectoral cross often worn around the neck, and additional symbols are incorporated in the same way they are added to the designs of ceremonial crosses to add to the garment's protective powers and as a display of faith. One of the desired features in the design of a processional cross is its ability to reflect light across its decorated surface, which adds to its splendor in radiance (Horowitz 2001: 75). The incorporation of silver or gold threads into traditional embroidery on gowns and into the woven panels of the shamma design, not only indicates the richness of the garment, but might also have been influenced by the same goal of resplendence.

Three aspects of embroidery are considered to be particularly effective in their protection from the evil eye and other dangers. These include the placement or position of the decoration, the use of pattern that incorporates mystic power, and "assertive" materials, which include elements that are shiny, made from coins, reflective, or noisy (Paine 1990: 132). Just as clothing has the general purpose of protection for its wearer, embroidery is also believed to offer the same, in both physical and spiritual ways. Embellishments are placed at edges and openings of a garment, particularly at the collar, encircling the neck, and cuffs, to block evil spirits from entry (Paine 1990: 133).

Repetition or doubling of a pattern strengthens its protective forces, as does the incorporation of geometric elements that have their basis in ancient mythology. Those often seen in Ethiopian design include the zig zag, crescent, triangle, 8-pointed star, and cross (Paine 1990: 140). The evil eye might also be overpowered by alternating colors along the edge of a garment or cloth (Paine 1990: 132), and these are certainly employed in the majority of designs woven into the tibeb, and are also seen in kemis decoration.

Newer embroidery patterns and designs tend to showcase a modern, brightly colored palette with cotton threads imported from India. The design named "Aksumawit" incorporates traditional colors in its green, yellow, red, black, and white, along with repetitive elements that include crosses and stacked triangles, perhaps meant to be reminiscent of the pyramids at Aksum. "Prime Minister" is very contemporary in its

hues, but matched with traditional protective pattern elements of stacked triangles, zig zags, checkerboards and a lattice framework. While these examples are clearly more contemporary expressions of Ethiopian embroidery, they still remain quite true to tradition when compared closely to older examples. The ability of Ethiopian artists to create innovations in this manner shows the successful way that “contemporary makers of hand-patterned cloth draw on their dynamic traditions, continuing to satisfy the widespread desire for highly personal and expressive design in a medium that is intimately connected with daily life.” (LaGamma 2008: 35)

The importance of local patronage is paramount for traditional methods to remain relevant (both culturally and socially) and to be incorporated into contemporary applications (Picton and Mack 1989: 11). There is a demand for traditionally made products (or products that are traditionally referential) in the higher end of the domestic income scale, and for small designers and producers, the profit margin is extremely high: often between 50 and 100 percent (James 2014). Due to the absence of large chain department stores in Ethiopia, small design businesses are thriving and providing employment for traditional weavers and embroiderers. Another successful example of a different model is the LemLem company, founded by Ethiopian supermodel Liya Kebede as a way to preserve traditional weaving methods. The clothes are designed in New York, manufactured with cotton fabrics dyed and produced by Ethiopian weavers on traditional looms, and sold around the world.

This ability to reach foreign markets or even larger markets within Ethiopia is also a key factor in sustaining and growing the textile and garment industry on all levels. The Ethiopian government, along with tremendous support from the United States and the European Union, has recognized the importance of this sector and its potential poverty reduction and employment growth. According the textile industry a priority sector status, the government has “issued an unprecedented series of policies, including revision of investment codes, tax and tariff adjustments, preferential land and lending

policies, and favorable export policies,” all in the hopes of supporting a position and emerging role in the global textile industry (TIDI 2012: 17).

The push for more textile production, import, export, and factories ties back to the fact that cotton is one of the main inputs for production. An increase in the need for cotton enhances the Ethiopian agricultural industry and development on which the country’s economy is quite dependent (TIDI 2012: 20). Ethiopia is the second largest nation in Africa, with a young population that is projected to reach 90 million this year at a median age under twenty, according to the United Nations census. The economy is the fourth largest in Sub-Saharan Africa, and has been expanding by at least nine percent each year for the last decade. All this, combined with the estimate that only three percent of land suitable for cotton cultivation is tapped (TIDI 2012: 35), places the nation in a position firmly poised to support growth in industry and production, all while maintaining ties to traditional culture and heritage.

A popular Ethiopian proverb notes that “gold in one’s hand is like copper,” as a reminder that “there can be great beauty and value in the experiences of everyday life.” (Silverman 1999: 3). An idea that follows this same spirit is that which points to the study of traditional cotton garments and the strength of their visual representation of diverse cultural elements through Ethiopian history. As indicators of status and importance, garments and textiles from this region reflect the ebb and flow of style, trade, and modernization through their incorporation of imported prestige materials along with locally produced artistry in color and pattern variations. The resilience exhibited by the weavers and embroiderers of Ethiopia, on both large and small scale, seems to support this country’s efforts to expand its position in the global textile market in a way that remains true to tradition, and where gold in the hand remains truly golden.

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