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TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL BUILDINGS AND SETTLEMENTS

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TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL BUILDINGS AND SETTLEMENTS

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

THE ECO-SYSTEM OF TRANSMISSION IN TRADITIONAL KACHCHH WEAVING: NEGOTIATING ARTISANAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND SAFEGUARDING PRACTICES IN THE FRAMEWORK OF UNESCO'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE CONVENTION

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Using knowledge transmission as a site for safeguarding and deploying the concept of indigenous modernities, this paper develops a methodology for making visible artisans' practices of heritage construction. I situate my work within the broad framework of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. By using the repertoire of two master artisans and their interpretations of the environment and their responses, I show how they are in a constant process of actively constructing their heritage and it is through its practice with different audiences, that their heritage is re-constructed, and thus safeguarded.

1. INTRODUCTION

In India, the production of heritage has largely been shaped by the "authorized heritage discourse" (AHD) which takes its cue from Western heritage practices.¹ When applied to traditional craft practices and artefacts, which play a prominent role in national culture and heritage conversations, this has led to policies and interventions which arise out of a normalized discourse rather than from artisans' perspectives. Recent works in the disciplines of culture and heritage move away from discourses of repetitive or frozen cultural practices in need of preservation and see traditional craft communities as perceiving and actively interacting with modernity.² I situate my work within the framework of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003 by UNESCO (ICH) which is the first international treaty addressing heritage of a non-material nature, and is noteworthy for its stipulations of community involvement in safeguarding their intangible heritage practices. Using this framework involves understanding what ICH means by the terms 'intangible heritage' and 'safeguarding' and how this impacts artisans practicing craft in India.

Intangible heritage is defined by the ICH as:

[...] the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity [...]

(Article 2.1, UNESCO 2003)³

This holistic definition which includes not just the objects of traditional craftsmanship, but also its situated social practice and knowledge allows for a paradigm shift within Indian craft discourse which has historically focused on the technical production and preservation of a material tradition. The ICH goes on to identify continued transmission of knowledge, skills and meaning across generations as a site for safeguarding. It recognizes that the viability of intangible heritage practices requires that the transmission is relevant to the community and is continuously recreated, so that no two manifestations or expressions of a practice are the same.⁴ While there is an emphasis on reinforcing and strengthening the "diverse and varied" circumstances which facilitate the practice of intangible heritage and its transmission, the Convention, somewhat out of character, points out that:

[Communities have developed] their own systems for transmitting their knowledge and skills, which more often than not depend – or, unfortunately, depended - on orality rather than on written text.⁵

Going further, the Convention's attempts to provide a non-prescriptive approach to safeguarding and self-conscious endeavor to avoid freezing or fixing practices in their pure forms, fall short through its own rather static definition of safeguarding measures. Safeguarding, as defined by the Convention are,

[...] measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.

(Article 2.3, UNESCO 2003)⁶

The dissatisfaction expressed by the Convention on orality as communities' preferred means of transmission seems to indicate that the Convention is unable to reconcile the dynamism implied by its definition of transmission with historical modes of safeguarding methods. Scholars, policy makers, law makers and anthropologists have criticized the Convention for failing to engage in depth with the complexities between the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage, particularly where safeguarding measures are concerned.⁷ Inadequately developed methodology has meant, as some scholars have critiqued, that safeguarding efforts have fallen within historical modes of preservation with roots in the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology.⁸ This has led to governments tackling communities' roles in safeguarding in cursory and shallow ways.⁹ Intangible heritage is ephemeral and traces its roots to non-physical heritage, invisibility, immateriality and is integral to the identity of the community which practices it. Decoding its meanings requires practices of engagement and articulation which do not follow dominant modes of knowledge structures.¹⁰ Current practices of appropriating the fluidity of intangible heritage which flows over a continuum of past, present

and future, and freezing it into the present pushes for an epistemological rethink of safeguarding frameworks.¹¹

In the following sections, I develop an approach to safeguarding practices situated within the realm of critical scholarship on hybrid and alternate modernity, which implies that hegemonic policies of heritage are not absolute and its subjects are not passive recipients.¹² My theoretical framework employs Hosagrahar's concept of *indigenous modernities* to safeguarding as negotiated sites of transmission played out by the social actors in constructing and re-constructing their heritage.¹³ I then give a brief description of how colonial contexts of modernity have endured in Indian government policies post-Independence to shape craft landscape in India. Through my field-work in Kachchh, Gujarat, I show how the concept of *indigenous modernities* allows for less visible narratives to emerge and offers alternative practices of heritage, transmission and safeguarding.

2. APPROACH TO RESEARCH

The Convention satisfactorily engages with dynamism with regard to transmission. Since contradictions arise in how static safeguarding measures, with a predilection for the written, engage with this dynamic entity, I will begin by detailing out the constituent elements of transmission. As transmission essentially deals with knowledge, its acquisition, diffusion and practice, let us briefly examine its history.

A written, universal and timeless approach to knowledge emerged as dominant during the Enlightenment eras, where a pre-occupation with achieving an objective, context-independent knowledge absorbed thinkers like Rene Descartes, John Locke and Immanuel Kant. This positivist approach continued into modern thought in the twentieth century and marginalized oral, local and temporal understandings of knowledge.¹⁴ Though post-modern thought pertaining to knowledge has moved beyond the objectivism of Enlightenment, it has been criticized for being arbitrary and relevant only to the norms and interests of specific individuals or groups. Rather than engage in opposing reductive views and dualisms of knowledge, Agrawal proposes an approach which provides openings to the dynamism of knowledge held by specific groups or communities.¹⁵ He argues that it is virtually impossible to classify a body of knowledge as "scientific" or "indigenous" and to view transmission as following prescribed paths since there has always been intimate contact between Western and indigenous cultures over centuries, which results in "variation, communication, transformation, exchange and learning."¹⁶ This dynamic view of knowledge as fluid, unfinished and changing within the constraints of context, time and space allows for developing a more robust understanding of the constituent elements of transmission. Newly introduced elements whether material or social, develop their own social trajectories as communities or individuals insert them into pre-existing systems which subsequently spawn

new pathways. As communities continue using these elements in their social strategies, the elements - composed of knowledge, skill, technical procedures, gestures, tools, materials or expression - are continuously renewed and reassessed in response to the changing social relations and participation within community practice as well as in contemporary social and economic contexts.¹⁷ Coming back to ICH's definition of transmission situated in intangible heritage practices which are "constantly recreated in response to the environment....and provides a sense of identity..." we can surmise that in addition to skill and knowledge acquisition, transmission also encompasses innovation and appropriation.¹⁸ Evidently, these elements are not just acquired at distinct moments in an individual's life trajectory, but are an everyday practice whose meaning is continuously reconstructed through their life journeys and is essential to the identity and construction of the self.¹⁹ Analyzing these sites of transmission, which encompass learning and everyday practice, helps us gain better understandings of socially situated practices and material culture within historical contexts.

This begs the question; how do I analyze this dynamic entity without falling prey to the very methods which succeed in freezing it? A phenomenological approach provides sensitivity to everyday lived experiences. It offers a method of questioning and possibilities for experiencing openings and insights by rejecting definitive solutions.²⁰ An ethnographic practice situated within the philosophical realm of phenomenology takes off from the situated effects of seeing, listening and reflecting. It involves mapping the "phenomenal landscape, following locally the workings of multiple relevant dimensions and scale from their densest interactions to wherever they may lead."²¹ In any community, one can always identify experts as those who possess "greater sensitivity to cues in the environment and a greater capacity to respond to these cues with judgement and precision."²² In my ethnography, I use the narrative of two such 'expert' master artisans and their interpretations of the environment and responses, to show how they are in a constant process of actively constructing their heritage. As an ethnographer in a traditional weaving community, I situate myself in relationship to the 'everyday practice' of heritage-making and remaking; as participant, I mediate and am part of the act of transfer.

I use transcripts to infuse a temporality into my writing, and to represent conversations or narrations. I have translated the artisans' narratives from Hindi to English, almost verbatim, to retain the spoken cadences and expressions. But transcripts, no matter how nuanced, have been criticized for imposing a hierarchical structure to the fluidity of experiences and flattening them.²³ I navigate the difficulty of capturing the dynamics of lived experience through transcripts in two ways. First, I bring in the subjectivities of both the researcher and the participants. I acknowledge my subjectivity as an urban, middle-class, South Indian woman educated in Western institutions which influenced how I engaged with the conversations. My initial impressions, which bring in the subjectivities of both the narrator and the listener, form one layer of analysis coming from dominant discourses of modernity and heritage. This subjectivity is important to acknowledge

since artisans themselves refer to concepts like "tradition" and "heritage" which come from their experiences of engaging with the discourse. The third layer creates a self-reflective space through which I critically engage with the experience. The three layers of transcript, discourse and critique together offer interpretations of how particular types of knowing and being take place in the context of artisan's life worlds which contribute to their safeguarding ecosystems. The concept of *indigenous modernities* creates a lens for my critical analysis by making visible practices that negotiate or oppose the dominant discourses.

Hosagrahar's definition of *indigenous modernities* as used in her work on built environments is a useful framework for looking at craft and traditional artisans as participants within the larger and dominant frameworks of modernity, but on their own terms.²⁴ Here, 'indigenous' emphasizes context and locality, and *indigenous modernities* "denotes the paradoxical features of modernities rooted in their particular conditions and located outside the universal paradigm centered on an imagined 'West'" and "celebrates the simultaneity and engagement of the traditional and the modern".²⁵ *Indigenous modernities* can be seen as localized performances of modernity by the social actors - in this case the artisan community. Hosagrahar has theorized the framework of *indigenous modernities* to illuminate how locals usurped public and private built spaces and developed their own oppositions to or negotiations with colonial projects of modernity. She uses the transformations and re-interpretations that the traditional *baveli* (homes of the ruling class) went through during colonial times, from princely mansions to modest homes or dense multi-family dwellings to analyze the fragmentation of domestic landscapes. These embodied the social and economic conditions of the time as well as the aspirations of the local population to both mimic European architectural elements as well as contest them. Her analysis establishes how the dominant characteristics of modernity such as technological progress, efficiency and rationalism were displayed in these re-interpreted spaces on indigenous and local terms. I extend this framework by using the concept of *indigenous modernities* to make visible alternate practices of transmission, safeguarding and heritage by traditional artisans of Kachchh from the weaving community. In the next section I provide a brief description of the colonial context of modernity in which my enquiry is situated.

3. THE DISCOURSE OF HERITAGE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The heritage discourse in India needs to be viewed in light of colonial agendas as well as Indian Government policies post-Independence. Emerging as a response to the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the aesthetic, social and labor aspirations of the Arts and Crafts Movement was subsequently transferred to the colonized nation, India. British depictions of an idealized Indian village and its crafts provided fertile ground for various ways in which Britain could position itself in the dual role of custodians of "traditional" India, as well as the agents of progress, who would set India on the path to modernity.²⁶ As the colonial power

consolidated, knowledge gathering became key as a means to set up progressive systems. Craft, being one of the largest economic sectors, came under much scrutiny. The subsequent activities of interpreting, conserving and disseminating, by those authorized to do so, conferred a hierarchy of importance to certain crafts and inscribed values and meanings of those crafts in particular ways as heritage. This discourse of heritage which foregrounds salvage, preservation and dominant knowledge structures variously set up areas of contention between tradition and innovation, economic survival and context response, and subordinated an indigenous modern to a global modern.²⁷ Paradoxically, in early 20th century, the politics of difference served Indian nationalist agendas as well. Through hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, Khadi, a non-industrial means of production, was used as a form of protest against British manufactured goods and as the solution for the empowerment of the lower castes. Post-Independence, the newly formed Indian Government found the nationalistic rhetoric around craft of too much value to jettison. Craft was claimed as a unifying national heritage resource and its producers, a viable economic resource who needed to be incorporated into various development agendas. The political thrust of modernizing India through Nehruvian socialism was to be rooted in culture and heritage, provided by craft.²⁸ The rhetoric of preservation and saving dying cultural practices for livelihoods and heritage display drove generous funding towards developing craft design, national awards, and connecting artisans to markets. Continuity and survival of material tradition informed the setting up of museums like The National Crafts Museum in New Delhi and The Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad. Craft was thus co-opted as a shared and inherited heritage, holding particular importance important for nation building.

Eight successive five-year plans implemented policies of juxtaposition of cultural heritage with modern industry to set up an economic model around craft without letting go of the 'Indian Village' ideology. This ideology still foregrounds material tradition and its technical production and dictates government policy. My research proposes that it is through analyzing artisans' heritage practices within their temporal contexts and multiple layers of safeguarding mechanisms that communities create on their own, understandings can develop to create enabling and supportive ecosystems and government policies.

4. THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF KACHCHH

The history of Kachchh has revealed that the area has been an economic tour-de-force for centuries.²⁹ Much of its economic strength lay in the historic craft production of the region. Thus, using craft as a prism to view the changes that have shaped the social, cultural and economic landscape of the region has much merit. The changes themselves have been of two types - one, a slow and steady socio-economic change which was shaped by the political climate of the country over 400 years and the second, a cataclysmic change wrought by

the devastating earthquake of 2001 which forced a whole new economic landscape on the region which might otherwise have taken its own time and course.³⁰

Social Identity of the Weavers

For my fieldwork, I interacted with the traditional weaving community of Kachchh known by their caste name of Vankars. The weavers of Kachchh migrated from Rajasthan about 500 years ago and settled in different parts of Kachchh. I met with different families in two separate visits over the course of three years from 2016-2019. While the Vankar community of Bhujodi possess inherent similarities in their socio-cultural and technical practices, their market strategies vary based on families' social and economic capital.³¹ Through two such families in different social circumstances, I show how two master artisans' interpretation of their life journeys within the socio-historic contexts display active practices of transmission and strategic safeguarding of their heritage.

5. SITES OF TRANSMISSION

My first interaction with Purshottam Bhai was when I went to Kachchh in Jan 2019 as faculty with design students of Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology from Bangalore collaborating with artisans who were alumni of a design school for artisans called Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya (SKV) in Kachchh.³² As faculty, I helped facilitate a workshop between the students and Purshottam Bhai. Instead of a typically meandering conversation, as artisans gauge their audience and shift across topic, the workshop mode imposed a structure on Purshottam Bhai to stay within a linear historical narrative. Purshottam Bhai's story is not just his or his family's life histories, but a combination of placing their life histories within the larger social, economic and political contexts and his reflections on how those influenced their practice.

We sat in a circle on the ground, in front of Purshottam Bhai's fly shuttle loom where his older brother was working. Over in the other corner, his mother was busy setting the warp. The room was on one end of low buildings set around a sunny open courtyard. We could hear the sounds of the daily household work coming from the other end of the buildings as children ran in and out of the house. Most weavers' homes in Bhujodi follow this traditional pattern of an open courtyard with the working and living spaces set around it. With the click-clack of the fly shuttle setting a rhythm, Purshottam Bhai spread out an old *dhavla* (shawl) in front of us (Figure 1). As we examined the intricate motifs in black and grey on a field of white, he began his story:

I learnt from my father and grandfather. Both were weavers. I learnt just by playing and watching. We used to weave for the Rabaris. Each weaver family was associated with one Rabari family and would weave for all their requirements. If there was a wedding, then they would let us know a year in advance and we could plan for that. As weavers we did a bit of

farming during the rains, but were free rest of the year. They would give us specific orders for *chaniyas* (skirts), *odhnis* (veils) and whenever we were free we would weave. They would give us wool from their sheep, we would weave and in return get grains or oil. That was our market. We were completely dependent on one family. They were quite well-off as they would sell milk, *ghee* and other goods. For the Rabaris, we wove only in natural wool - white, black and grey. Slowly, it happened that a slightly big weaver family, if they have finished their work for a Rabari family and they had a little extra money left, they would weave some extra *dhablas* and walk to the neighbouring villages to sell. Earlier there was no other means of transport. Each *dhabla* weighs about 3 kilos, so carrying about 20 kilos worth of cloth they would walk to the neighbouring villages and try to sell and return by evening with whatever did not sell. That was our market.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019].



Fig.1: Traditional Dhabla for Rabari community (Source: author)

It is significant that Purshottam Bhai starts his narrative with the *dhabla*. Historical texts inform us that for over four centuries, weavers catered to the nomadic sheep herding community, the Rabaris, and the farming community of Ahirs. Despite these social and economic links, the weavers were considered low caste and lived on the outskirts of the village. In the 16th-19th century it was important for artisans and craftsmen of

various trades to live close to the communities they catered to as well as to centers of patronage. The ties between communities living next to each other formed networks of social and economic interdependence. As I watched the video I had recorded of Purshottam Bhai spread out the tattered *dhavla* before us with a flourish, I suddenly realized that I was seeing 400 years of a community's history. This tangible piece of cloth was not a static entity but one alive with embedded socio-economic and cultural identities of the Vankars and their patrons. It was not just a historic past that was no longer viable, but a past which constantly forces the artisans to re-interpret their selves and set up newer meanings and versions of their identity in response to their varied audiences. Placing his own family within the post-Independence historiography, Purshottam Bhai says:

We had our own workshop with about 25 *karigars* (artisans) that we employed. If other weavers couldn't sell their goods they would come and sell it to us and we would buy it from them and pay them. My grandfather was quite settled in his work and also had connections in Bhuj. Since my grandfather had a cycle he would take his goods by cycle, but would feel bad for all the other weavers in our community who had to carry their burden and walk. He started thinking about how to make the customers come to us rather than us go to them. With that in mind he started a co-operative of weavers in 1954, so that everyone's wares could sell in one place. Since Bhujodi was close to the administrative town of Bhuj, the collectors and other government officials would come here for meetings. So that raised the level of Bhujodi.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019]

The national rhetoric and discourse highlights how development schemes and co-operatives were government initiatives to aid weavers in the upheaval after Indian Independence in 1947. It wasn't just the artisans though who came under the umbrella of modernizing projects and development schemes. These were also aimed at settling nomadic communities which had huge impacts on the lifestyle of Rabaris, curtailing their nomadic activities and impacting their traditional professions of animal herding. The community who were once the patrons of the Vankars could not afford their traditional hand-woven woolen and cotton garments anymore.³³ The weavers lost their customary markets and had to expand their horizons beyond their immediate neighbors.

Listening to Purshottam Bhai speak about his grandfather and how the co-operative came about, made me realize that an important piece had been left out of the discourse. While there was government support towards setting up co-operatives, the weavers were also actively reading the political climate of the time and deciding their own courses of action. The sentiment of "helping the community" is an important and recurring theme among artisans and I will refer to it again, later in the paper. Though expressed as a sentiment, it encapsulates important judgement calls made on the ground to create a safeguarding ecosystem.

In Purshottam Bhai's telling it was his grandfather, Kheta Bhima Vankar's position in the community combined with his initiative and political acumen that led to the co-operative in Bhujodi. Kheta Bhima Vankar, along with two other weavers, was able to establish judicious connections with the administrative center in Bhuj and ensure that whenever government officials visited, meetings were held in Bhujodi. This not only benefitted the Bhujodi weavers by allowing them to procure yarn at better prices and giving them more negotiating power, it had the intentional added benefit of bringing Bhujodi into the radar of government officials in the Kachchh administration. As a result, even today the weavers in Bhujodi are in a better position than other villages in Kachchh. Through these measures, Purshottam Bhai's family flourished along with the larger Vankar community.

Purshottam Bhai spreads out a grey shawl in front of him (Figure 2). It has traditional *dhabla* borders on the selvedge, but the field is spaced out with thick horizontal stripes of traditional motifs. He says:

This was designed by Prashant's grandfather [neighbouring weaving family] many years ago. The selvedge border is like a traditional *dhabla*. But the field has all over work taken from all the different types of borders inspired by a traditional *dhabla*. There is no *machi tanko* (the stitch used to join two lengths of shawls) in between. It is full width.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019]



Fig. 2: Kachchhi Shawl design originating in the 60s (Source: author)

From written accounts of the period between the 1960s-1980s we understand that new technology and material like fly-shuttle looms and merino wool started becoming available. The success of government

training programs and platforms for design and marketing provided by the newly-established Gujarat State Handicraft Development Corporation (GSHDC), and its retail outlet, Gurjari have been well documented.³⁴ But the changes in design, product and material also hold weavers' journeys of adapting to changes in the ecosystem. During my many conversations with other weavers in the community and gathering their stories, I have realized that in the weavers' own telling of their histories various members of the community are remembered in different contexts as making significant contributions. Placing these within the historical context illustrates changes on the ground which elude archival techniques and documentations of material culture. The grey shawl that was emblematic of a successful design re-interpreted from the *dbabla*, which Purshottam Bhai displayed as "Prashant's grandfather's design" still holds a place of importance within the community as their own success story. One which shows how they interpreted and navigated the tangled webs of design, technology and development and emerged from a highly localized network to a community with a tremendous amount of social capital, with links to markets, government bodies in Gujarat and Delhi and independent designers from all over the country.



Fig.3: Iconic Kacchhi shawl design with mirrorwork (Souce: author)

Purshottam Bhai spreads out the next re-interpretation of the *dbabla* - a black shawl with red and white traditional border and small *dbolkis* (Traditional motif meaning drums) and mirror work in the field (Fig. 3):

After that, this design came with *bhuttis* (small motifs) in the field. At this time the Rabari men were at out at work, the Rabari women in our village were free at home. So Prabhaben thought

of giving them some work, and since they traditionally embroidered for themselves, she got them to embroider the shawls with mirror work. She took these shawls to Bombay and got a good response. So she would come back and give us more work. In this way, a new age of weaving started at this time and there was a lot of good response for our work.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019]

In 1965, craft pioneer Prabha Shah who had a retail outlet in Bombay was introduced to the weavers of Bhujodi through the district co-operative officer in Bhuj.³⁵ Her specific inputs in alterations to their traditional products to suit an urban clientele proved successful and this re-interpreted shawl with mirrorwork incorporated in it became an iconic item. Weavers pursued strategies of working with independent designers as well as government officials to gain market knowledge and develop market links. They also expanded their product range by re-interpreting traditional designs for urban markets. This re-interpretation was also reflective of the social and economic climate of the time where consumers wanted something light, easy and affordable. By staying aligned and cognizant of key design and technological events in the 20-year span between the 60s - 80s weavers strengthened their safeguarding ecosystems. In the early 1980s, some weavers attended the Surajkund Mela (exhibition) near Delhi, where artisans from all over India are invited. Here, they discovered acrylic yarn from Ludhiana. Now they could produce colourful shawls quickly, without breakage in yarn.

We started producing a lot more. Weavers would stay up until late, producing larger volumes. The fly shuttle loom made the work happen faster and the acrylic yarn didn't break as much as the pure wool. As the market for this rapidly grew to Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Bangalore we tried to keep up and produce huge volumes. We were buying so much acrylic yarn from Ludhiana, that the traders there became curious and started wondering what we were making. They surveyed the market and realised we were making shawls and that these were flying off the shelves. They decided that they could do the same with power looms. In 1996, they spent a year surveying and in 1997 all these shawls made on the power loom came into the market. Yes, those who know can recognise the difference between hand loom and power loom, but those who don't know will buy the cheaper, power loom version. So from 1997-2000, our entire market went down. No one was buying our shawls.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019]

Seen in the light of the political climate and policies of that time, the downfall of Kachchh handlooms seems almost inevitable. National sentiments in the 80s saw handloom as a sunset industry, while mill and power loom were seen as growth sectors. The New Textile Policy of 1985 removed protectionist policies that

handlooms had enjoyed so far and allowed power looms to enter into areas that would set them up as competitors.³⁶ In line with the liberalisation policies of free trade and competition, the government withdrew from many economic activities related to craft and handlooms. Historical accounts see national policy as the major factor contributing to the weavers' turn of fortunes. While I do not deny that, it is important to point out how Purshottam Bhai sees it from a different angle and how it has affected their practice:

There is a rule that as something grows more desirable and popular and when you try to cater to that, you start working less, weaving plainer and plainer cloth and easier designs in an attempt to keep up, then this becomes a danger to the place itself. If the power loom imitates what we do and the customer loses trust in our handwork, then the pride in our work goes and it is a loss. Only if we keep that safe, can we pass it on to the next generation.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019]

As I have shown throughout this account, the weavers have always been aware of the political and economic climate and have made their decisions based on environmental and socio-historical cues. So Purshottam Bhai does not just ignore the politics of the times or attribute greed to loss of livelihood. Instead through the statement, "danger to the place itself " he alludes to how the weavers practice, place and identity are inter-linked and how close they came to losing that value. This is a lesson that he and others in the community hold close to how they take their practice forward.

It is difficult to say how long the weavers would have taken to recover from this downturn. Something far more cataclysmic happened soon after. On January 2001, the earthquake hit. A newspaper report from a leading national *The Times of India* reports the extent of damage,

[...] Bhujodi, which has produced seven national award winners and is home to the country's finest shawl-making, hardly has a home standing. The January 26 earthquake has brought the houses down, left the looms broken, shattered dreams and affected a tradition Gujarat was proud of.³⁷

With a vast number of lives and livelihoods lost in almost every village in Kachchh, the future looked extremely bleak, with many predicting that it would set back developments of the region by decades.³⁸ Purshottam Bhai, in his narrative, does not refer to the earthquake except as a way to mark time. He continues with his narrative of the weavers' strategies to counter the power loom after the earthquake. Purshottam Bhai displays a blue wool shawl with a *miri* (braided pattern) woven into the border (Fig 4):

No one was buying our shawls. We decided to change our material completely. We got soft wool, which was more high value. We also incorporated the *miri* into the border of our designs. The *miri* is typically woven on the edge of the *dhables*. Earlier we used to do the *miri* so that the cloth doesn't open out. Now it has become a design. It is something that the power looms cannot replicate. This way we could differentiate and tell our customer that was power loom and this is hand loom.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019]



Fig. 4: Wool shawl with miri on border (Source: author)

Though the weavers made use of the opportunities offered by government programs and other institutions, the impact of the power loom imitations and lessons learned was not something they would forget in a hurry. Legal mechanisms like Geographical Indicators which protect place-based crafts have been instituted which contribute more to an illusion of safeguarding and do not actually provide tangible measures with which the weavers can counter threats. The government in a bid to spur economic recovery in the area created new tax-free zones which brought in private sector investment. More than 300 industries set up shop in Kachchh.³⁹ Though this created jobs in the region, it weakened the traditional artisanal occupations, with many younger members of these communities opting to work in factories rather than pursue their hereditary occupations. Significant interventions for the weaver community came through an NGO Khamir, and design schools for artisans like Kalaraksha Vidyalaya and Somaiya Kala Vidya, who worked on furthering the innovative capacities within the craft communities.

But the weavers have also pursued their own strategies for creating a safeguarding ecosystem in a new, more competitive environment. Purshottam Bhai's explanations of how the use value of the *miri* has been re-interpreted as design feature to differentiate the hand woven from a power loom product tell another story of reinterpretation and transformation. In the next section, I analyse the weavers' own strategies to maintain the identity of the handwoven, in technical, social and economic ways in the post-earthquake, neoliberal environment.

S RD S R S

I met Shyamji Bhai first as an independent researcher in 2016 and again in 2019. The family of Vishramji Valji and his sons, particularly Shyamji have been extensively written about in publications and blogs.⁴⁰ This is no accident. Shyamji Bhai's family have carefully cultivated their position of being the gatekeepers of their community. From a continuous history of national award-winning weaving and a strong network developed by his father, Shyamji Bhai and his brothers have developed their practice judiciously utilising the opportunities afforded to them by the political and social environment. At our first meeting, Shyamji Bhai carefully questioned me on my research and whom I had met in Kachchh. He then proceeded to construct the foundations of how the Vankars' weaving tradition should be perceived.

If clients ask us to do plain cloth, we will do it for 2 or 3 months, but after that we will make them understand that in this kind of work, the beauty we bring to our hand skills is lost. This is not our tradition. We will tell them that if they would like us to continue this sort of work, we can't do it. If you put our design, [something of our identity], then we will do this work. If for ten years we only do plain cloth, then the skill in our fingers is lost and our mind can't clearly think of designs. Bring any Bhujodi weaver's work to me, I will know who made it. We know whose it is. It is inside the work. Not the plain ones. But in the motifs - the traditional work. The way the design is placed is each family's own. The customer doesn't know, but we know. This red shawl - try and ask anyone to make this. He will look at it and say that this is Shyamji Bhai's, and though he can make it, he will not do so.

[Shyamji Bhai, 2016]

Reflecting on my first interaction with Shyamji Bhai, I understood later that through his narrative, he was trying to frame my understanding of their perspectives. Shyamji Bhai's strategy of actively safeguarding their heritage is by constructing a cultural framework for his audience, be they designers, students, academics, craft organizations or potential buyers. For Shyamji Bhai, everyday practice is embodied in the term *karigar* (artisan). It includes not just an artisan's expertise, but is a manifestation of the attention and care given to every piece they weave. *Karigari* is an attitude towards their work, which is embodied in the cloth. It reflects

the artisan's knowledge of their client and their connection with them.⁴¹ Shyamji Bhai tries to ensure that his audience reciprocates and brings the same level of understanding and care into every interaction, so that a culture of valuing and desiring artisanal knowledge and expertise becomes commonplace.

Shyamji Bhai is emphatic about maintaining a balance of production and holding on to their identity and skills. The weavers had decided that they had to stay ahead of the power looms by controlling their production volumes, using higher value materials, and ensuring that they added elements of design which the power looms could not replicate. Shyamji Bhai's language of design refers to centuries of "accretive transfer" and the relationship between a master artisan and a particular textile language.⁴² In describing the affective, emotive quality of the motifs, Shyamji Bhai isn't merely aestheticizing his craft, but forcing us to think critically on how design is socially embedded into their practice and a response to their environment, similar to Purshottam Bhai's telling of the *dhabla*.

Shyamji Bhai spreads out an old carpet in front of me:

This camel hair carpet is hundred years old. It has been with me for twenty years. For three years I went to the person who owned this and asked him to sell it to me. I explained my work and why I wanted it. Finally, he sold it to me. So like that I have collected pieces. We have a good collection now. We need to take inspiration from here. Some students from Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya come here and we discuss with them how to take inspiration from old things. We give reasons for why a particular thread comes after another. Everything has a purpose and we explain that to the younger generation.

[Shyamji Bhai, 2016]

Shyamji Bhai has collected over a hundred older pieces from various parts of Kachchh for the past thirty years which he eventually wants to display in his own museum. He uses these pieces variously to showcase their inherited heritage to tourists, or to show how designers how he re-interprets them for contemporary markets, or to share his research process with academics and to pass on the richness of vocabulary and proper design placement to the next younger generation of weavers. Through re-interpreting the meanings embedded in the older pieces in different contexts, Shyamji Bhai offers an active consumption of heritage different from a museum experience.

Some designs that our family make, we call donate designs. If we make six designs and three of those are successful then in a few years we will stop making the three that are successful, so that others in the community can make those. For example, this [picks up a shawl] is inspired by old kambhal (blanket) in local sheep wool. We revived this in 2010 and until 2014

produced it. Now it is in every shop in Bhujodi. I am not the owner of this. We can take the risk of making six designs. We are in a position for that. Now we can take things to the next level.

[Shyamji Bhai, 2016]

The sentiment of "helping the community" that I had referred to earlier in my paper recurs here as a safeguarding strategy, but in a different social context. Shyamji Bhai's emphasis on decisions made by his family to ensure that the whole community flourishes is taken in the context of a sense of individualism, especially in the younger generation, that has been creeping into the community's weaving practice. Shyamji Bhai's deliberate circulation of the more successful interpretations and his emphasis that eventually all their designs belong to the whole community is a strategy to actively diffuse this issue. The threat of traditional artisanal occupations vying with the local factories is especially high for the Vankars, since weaving requires that the entire family be involved in all the various stages. Shyamji Bhai's active practice of his heritage is a demonstration of the many possibilities that open up through embracing artisanship. His home set behind traditional wooden doors with an exceptionally large courtyard with the walls of the family's living quarters decorated with the traditional *lippan* mirrorwork, hosts visitors from India and abroad for workshops and collaborative work. He himself travels extensively taking part in national exhibitions, world fairs, teaching workshops and residencies. For both Shyamji Bhai and Purshottam Bhai, ensuring continuity of their practice entails a two-fold strategy of pursuing higher education for their children while ensuring their situated practices continue.

Our work brings us joy, we think this is what our grandfathers made, this our fathers made, this we made, what will our children make? That's how we think. We don't teach our children weaving right now, but we make them understand. Look, we make this, see how much value this has. In craft you will get respect. Here the whole world will come to you. You won't have to go to them.

[Purshottam Bhai, Jan 2019]

6. CONCLUSION

I started this paper by developing the contradictions inherent within ICH's definitions of transmission, which allowed for a fluidity of practice, and its rather static engagement with safeguarding measures situated within an Enlightenment approach to knowledge. Through my methodology, I developed an approach to safeguarding through artisans' own practices of transmission, which engages with the active constructing and re-constructing of heritage and its consumption. My ethnography, situated in the phenomenological

landscape of everyday practice, used the three layers of transcript, subjectivities of the researcher and the artisans constructed through the dominant discourses of modernity and heritage, and the concept of *indeginous modernities* as a lens for artisans' interpretations and reflexivity on their practice, to illuminate how heritage is actively constructed and thus safeguarded. Using the transformations of the *dhabla* (Figure 5), I showed how its re-interpretations reflect the artisans' response to social and economic upheavals. I also made visible the decision-making processes that weavers engage in to maintain the identity of the handwoven, in technical, social and economic ways which contribute to their safeguarding ecosystem.



Fig. 5: Three transformations of the dhabla (Source: author)

The evolution of intangible practices does not necessarily depend on *what* elements have been transmitted, but rather on understandings based on *when* they are put into practice. Socio-historic meanings are entangled

in the sites of transmission and these actively contribute to safeguarding practices and heritage construction. This constant tension between maintaining a continuity of inherited tradition and making adjustments within the social, economic, cultural and technical contexts are what contribute to maintaining a safeguarding ecosystem. Recognizing and making visible this ecosystem, always taking into account its context specificity and temporality, allows for more robust and supportive policies by governments and international bodies.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

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NOSTALGIA AGAINST EVOLVING FORMS OF TRADITION AND HERITAGE, THE CASE OF THE NUBIAN CULTURE

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NOSTALGIA AGAINST EVOLVING FORMS OF TRADITION AND HERITAGE, THE CASE OF THE NUBIAN CULTURE



This paper examines the evolving forms of tradition of the Nubian community due to their relocation in new settlements on one hand, and to the impact of globalization induced by international tourism on their traditions and everyday life on the other. The influence of these new agents is discussed. It was demonstrated that in spite of their relocation, and the fact that the global nature of tourism and the accompanying virtual media create challenges for the Nubian community, new modes of reinterpreting their heritage emerged. The introduction of different ways of addressing tradition in contemporary Nubian society are outlined.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nubia was an ancient African Kingdom. It dates back to around 6000 BC. The land south of Egypt north of Sudan, occupying village clusters along the banks of the Nile, was a territory of mystery and legend. Wealth and exotic products came from there; a great civilization of gold mines, ebony, ivory and incense which was always prized by its neighbors.¹ Much of Nubia is now drowned by the waters of a lake, as a result of building two dams at Aswan, south of Egypt. In the last hundred years, Nubia has slowly yielded its secrets, its vanished cities and lost kingdoms brought to light by the excavator and analysis of inscriptions, and hence gained importance. But what happened to the Nubian people?

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Dating back to 1889, one of the major plans of the British occupation to Egypt was to increase cotton production. More water was required to implement such a plan, however, and therefore, in 1902 a dam known as the Aswan Dam/reservoir across the Nile (a few kilometers south of Aswan) was built. The dam was heightened in 1912, and again in 1933. The elevation of the dam first affected only the northern region of Nubia, but as the height of the dam increased most of the Nubian Valley was affected. Many homes were moved to higher hills where cultivable land became scarce. Those with longer memories say Nubians have been disadvantaged since the first damming of the Nile at Aswan, which reduced the amount of land they were able to cultivate, forcing many of them to migrate north.¹

In 1952 Egypt's government decided to erect another “High” dam in Aswan. The whole Nubian Valley was then to be covered by the lake formed by the new Aswan High Dam. While the dam facilitated the generation of hydroelectric power to serve the needs of the country and protected parts of Lower Egypt from seasonal flooding, it also swamped again larger parts of Nubia and threatened architectural monuments and complexes

by inundation. Both the people and the historical sites suffered the same fate. This urged the international community to start projects saving many of the Pharonic monuments. However, despite the efforts exerted by UNESCO and the Egyptian government, some monuments were forever lost. Nevertheless, they managed to pull off perhaps the largest and most impressive archaeological rescue operation in human history which rehoused Nubia's most significant monuments, such as the temple of Abu Simbel south of Aswan.²

Nubian people had to be moved to newly reclaimed land, to New Nubia in the Komombo area up the hills, 50 kilometers north of the city of Aswan. One hundred and twenty thousand Nubians were relocated in 1964 when their villages were drowned, and they had to face new contextual circumstances: physical, environmental and social. The Nubians were counted in an Egyptian census only once, shortly before they were uprooted. Back then there were 100,000; today, though estimates vary, advocacy groups say they may number as many as 3 million of Egypt's 90 million population. The government has made efforts to placate the community over the decades, providing some compensations and allocating a Nubian representative on the committee that wrote the last constitution.³

Now that an international awareness towards the value and magnitude of the Nubian rich culture and their dramatic circumstances, Nubia became on the list of important and attractive touristic culture heritage destinations. A flux of tourists from around the world became interested to visit and explore the old civilization and its reminiscences. Contemporary Nubian society is facing challenges, due to the forced migration and to the effects of modern lifestyle imposed by international tourism and globalization. Relocation issues on one hand, and the speed of modernization effects on the other, represent the threats that face Nubian community now. These points are worth raising intellectual reflections regarding the controversy of accepting evolving traditions in their "new homeland", and the appreciation of alternative ways of addressing heritage in contemporary Nubian society. The impact of new forms of tourism with the predominance of mobile communication, social media, and online interaction, the terms "virtual" and "tradition" became controversial. How did the Nubian community adapt to relocation circumstances? Did the Nubian community manage to reconcile the "modern and the traditional" in everyday life?

This study is partially based on a survey conducted by architecture students of the American University in Cairo (in Spring 2019) on Nubian villages in the quest for cultural authenticity in current real-life Nubian environments versus the evolving forms of modernity vs tradition. Research methods included observations, interviews with random sample of inhabitants (male and females, young and old), shop owners and tour guides.⁴

A disconnection between young and old generations was revealed, and the attempts of addressing new tools for cultural tourism was investigated. Concerns related to commodification of authentic traditions are identified, observations of staged authenticity where craftsmen respond to growing demand to suit the expectations of the tourists are documented. The aspects of acculturation and modernization in young Nubian generations are described. The impact of new agents of globalization that confront traditions, values and everyday life is highlighted and analyzed.⁴

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

The aim of this paper is to examine the interplay between tradition, nostalgia and modernity in the search for authenticity in the Nubian community. This is pursued by describing the changes that occurred to the Nubian community after their relocation then and now, and the impact of tourism and prospects of digital media in the Nubian villages. The research question addresses issues related to the means by which tradition and heritage evolve in new settlements and different landscapes. More specifically, how Nubian people adapted to new environments and how do they re-interpret their traditions now in light of modernity?

4. NUBIA THEN AND NOW, RELOCATION ISSUES

Due to the forcible relocation in new settlements north of Aswan, different circumstances emerged to which Nubian people had to adapt. Those who are old enough to have lived in old Nubia remember with painful nostalgia and carry bitter memories of the day they had to desert their homes and watch them sink beneath the rising waters. They used to live in close communities surrounded by nature, the problems of poverty and unemployment were irrelevant, before their recollection.³ They lived simple life off the land by the river, they made extra money through commerce. "We would eat dates all day and use our hats, or the scarves of women, to catch fish. We made our own bread and we never got sick," says Abdallah. The grief was visible in his eyes as he looks into the distance.⁴

S C

The family in old Nubia was the primary agent of socialization, while today, with universal education, young generation acquiring digital and multimedia ways of communication new means of socialization emerged. The ever decreasing land availability due to the construction of the Dam led to the emigration of males to cities seeking state jobs, which created an imbalance in the sex ratio, especially in the middle-range age. Such an imbalance further led to natural decrease in the population.²

What was worse for the Nubians, is that most of the villages were miles from the Nile, a hardship for people accustomed to cultivating crops along the river's fertile banks. In fact, Nubians social life historically was

strongly attached to the River Nile, it played an important role in their culture; the bride and the groom used to go to the Nile in their marriage night and wash up with the river's waters for good fortunes and a lot of children, they “baptized” their children in its waters, on holidays they set dishes to float away on its current.⁴

W S R C D S

Though New Nubia was supposed to mirror old Nubia, preserving its culture while introducing modern utilities, many Nubians found it was in reality a charmless development of small concrete housing which, unlike the lush Nubia they left behind laid in the desert. (Fig.1,2) New Nubian villages were given their old names, but rather than being located along the banks of the Nile, were 3 to 10 kilometers away. The Nubians were moved to 44 new villages north of Aswan. What they found then, was a startling blow. In some villages, houses hadn't been built yet — there were just chalk outlines. Houses that were ready were small and cramped, often without running water or electricity. Farmland couldn't be farmed because a canal hadn't been built. Nubians used to talk about their homeland as “Places of peace and honesty, a blessed land, a sheltered place, beautiful villages along the Nile with spacious houses and groves of green palm trees”.⁵



Fig. 1: New Nubia, July 15, 2018 (Source: <https://news.mb.com.ph/2018/07/15/egypts-young-nubians-revive-dream-of-return-to-homeland>)

Nubian fishermen would hunt crocodiles, (worshiped by the ancient Egyptians and exists now in their collective subconscious), stuff them and use them as talismans to protect against evil eye. (Fig.3) Crocodiles and baby crocodile are now kept for tourists showcasing.⁶ Older Nubians vividly recall life in their original land. They talk of sprawling villages with large houses painted in brilliant colors, with lands made fertile by sediment from annual floods. A hamlet that often used to represent a clan or kinship unit, while in New Nubia the dwelling patterns were built in four blocks to the size of the living quarters, and during resettlement houses were allocated on the basis of family size. As a result, the dwelling patterns that were based on kinship disappeared.



Fig. 2: Old Nubian house.
(Source: <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/traditions/nubians>)



Fig. 3: Nubian house decorated with dried crocodile. (Source: <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/traditions/nubians>)

The dwelling quarters used to reflect patrilineal clan/tribal affiliations. In all types of hamlets, dwelling quarters were separated from each other by natural divisions, such as small hills and barren land. Inside the dwelling quarters, closeness of patrilineal relationship determines the spatial location of housing. Each hamlet had a mosque and a guest quarter (modiafah or a mandara). Before relocation, the extended family constituted the typical domestic unit in Nubia. This was a unit of at least four generations of double descent. The able-bodied men worked in cities and sent remittances. Due to the nature of land and dwelling redistribution that occurred after relocation, the domestic unit became smaller, encompassing only two or three generations of relatives.³ The palm trees that were characteristic of the old Nubian environment did not exist in the new villages. The rocky hills that separated the villages and hamlets from each other also do not exist. The previous widely separated hamlets are currently brought together, resulting in increasing the density of the settlements.

R D

S S



Fig. 4: New Nubian house painted. (Source: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/2/140131-egypt-nubia-dams-nile-constitution-culture/>)

Typically, a traditional Nubian house would consist of a backyard, a sleeping room that is topped with a dome, a storage room, a kitchen and a bathroom. Villages were built by clay, stone and sand, roofs were of palm grain stalks, which was most suitable to the harsh hot environment and social values. Relief decoration was a characteristic of Nubian houses. Icons of animals were made to protect houses from the evil eye. After resettlement, relief decorations were replaced in the concrete houses by painting religious motifs and adorned with colorful finger paintings (Fig. 4) to recall their mud bricks domed houses in old Nubia.⁸ Due to their dissatisfaction with their new homes, a large proportion the inhabitants of New Nubia migrated to other parts of Egypt, though many dreamed of returning as near as possible to their ancestral homeland.⁹

R S CR S DC R

To represent their strong faith, art and architecture played an important role in expressing the unique characteristics of the Nubian culture. This includes symbols representing peoples' beliefs and habits; which appears clearly in the drawings and decorations of the walls of the houses and its entrances. It is represented as well in the beads ornaments, necklaces, pottery, and dishes' decorations.¹⁰

The art forms in old Nubia can be divided into three categories: utilitarian, decorative, and symbolic. The utilitarian arts included the making of plates, mats, fans, baskets, and jars from material available in the environment, such as straw and clay. Women practiced these activities. Bright colors distinguished the

Nubian's from other Egyptian or Sudanese plates or jars. This art form disappeared nowadays because the mass production utensils became abundantly available in the market, and baskets that used to be made from palms, they are replaced by plastics for utilitarian purposes for sale for tourists. (Fig.5)



Fig. 5: New plastic baskets.
(Source: Shams El Din, 2019)



Fig. 6: Nubian women dances.
(Source: <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/traditions/nubians>)

The decorative art included mainly bead necklaces and bracelets. Grooms and brides used these ornaments to decorate themselves. Since resettlement, modern decorative jewelry, has replaced these items. Women traditionally made the bead necklaces, and today a commercial imported version of these necklaces is cheaply sold in the market.¹⁰ Old Nubian women are still attached to their traditional crafts and festivities, and traditional food preparation. Until today old Nubian women tell tales to their children in the Nubian dialect, they chat Nubian songs, perform traditional dances, and cook traditional food. (Fig.6)

The symbolic art is represented in the architecture and paintings on the walls. As you wander through the remaining old villages, you'll quickly realize that everything has a deeper meaning. The village is filled with geometric shapes and bright colors. The triangle shapes represent the three most important sources of life for Nubians – the earth, represented by a neon green, the sun, represented by a stunning yellow and the sky /

Nile, represented by various shades of blues. (Fig.7) The sword for the Nubian represents championship and bravery. The crescent and the star, which are Islamic symbols, reflect optimism, the same as the black cat that represents optimism and joy in Pharonic beliefs, in contradiction to the majority of cultures all around the world who links a black cat with a bad spell.



Fig. 7: Colorful houses. (Source: <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/traditions/nubians>)

5. THE IMPACT OF NEW AGENTS OF GLOBALIZATION THAT CONFRONT NUBIAN TRADITIONS, VALUES AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The concept of tourism involves occupation, consumption, collecting souvenirs and physical reproduction, while the concept of tradition and values requires a sense of ownership because it entails existence over time and the transmission from generation to the other.¹¹ Usually, tourism demand for souvenirs, arts, entertainment and other commodities exert influence on hosting community, where basic changes in human values may occur. A dichotomy may arise between the image of the self and the expectations of the “other” which in extreme cases, creates an image dictated by the aspirations of the “other” for the different and the exotic, at the expense of preserving the self.⁷

This dichotomy results in adopting and /or inventing new ways of addressing traditions, values and everyday life rituals.

The commodification of local customs and local traditions may freeze customs in place and time for touristic consumption. Tourism can turn local culture into commodities when rituals, traditional ethnic rites and festivals are staged and ‘sanitized’ to conform to the expectations of the tourist resulting in what has been called “reconstructed ethnicity”.¹² In the Nubian case, craftsmen were found responding to growing demand for artifacts that are no longer in use nowadays, to suit the expectations and the demands of the tourists. The stereotyped expected vision of Nubians extends into their homes, where tourists who wish to see a traditional Nubian village seek out the “authentic” Nubian way of life in Nubian houses, traditional music and artifacts, dress, family patterns and food. The home may thus become a cultural commodity both for tourists and locals. The current/modern real lived in Nubian homes contain television, VCRs, internet, and ceiling fans within the mud plastered walls, barrel-vault ceilings and “mastabas”.¹³ But isn’t this a way of addressing the economic needs of the community, responding to touristic demands without compromising traditions? evolving the tradition to maintain the feeling of the authentic setting and re interpret it in a modern way.

While some Nubians resigned to their fate and accepted their new homes in the deserted landscape away from the Nile, others like the residents of village of Gharb Sohail refused to leave the river and sought refuge on some islands near Aswan. (Fig.8,9) This village is one of the few last remaining strongholds of the Nubians. It is a little village that represent the old authentic flavor of the Nubian culture, and offers more than the eye meets. It is a preserved isle expressing one of the oldest civilizations in history, where Nubians have not only conserved their ancient traditions but also developed ways to offer its flavor to visitors, “As we passed through the narrow market of the village filled with accessories, handicrafts, incense, perfumes, and

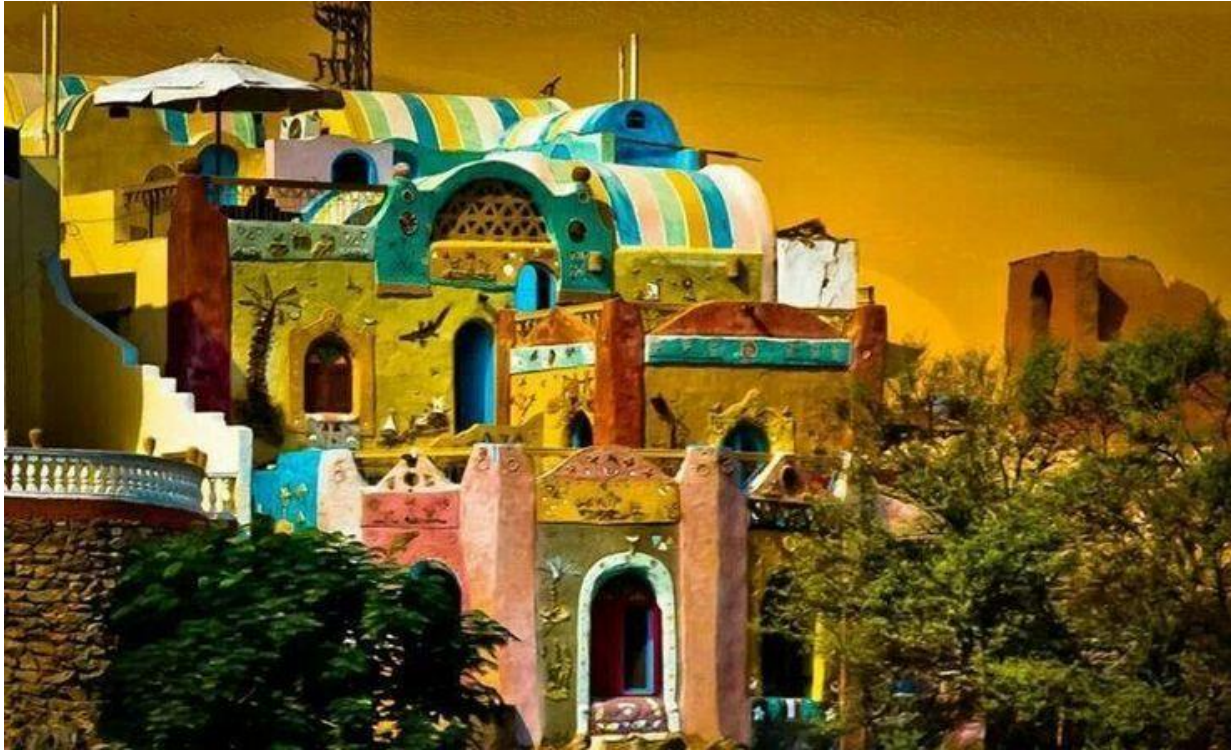


Fig. 8: Gharb Soheil village houses. (Source: <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/traditions/nubians>)

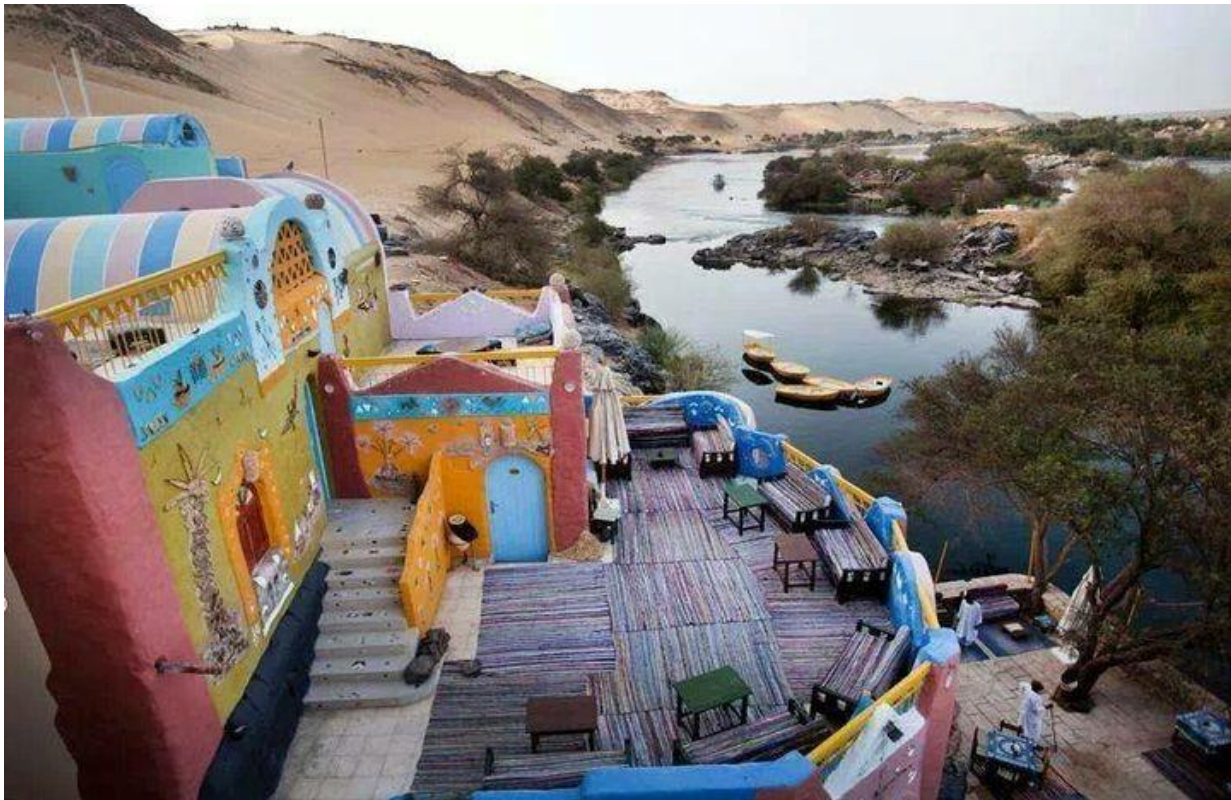


Fig. 9: Preserved setting. (Source: <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/traditions/nubians>)

colorful spices, our local guide explained how strongly tourism drives the economy of the village”.⁴ The houses are brightly colored and have walls decorated with scenes from everyday life, geometric and figurative images, wall-mounted objects, dried crocodiles, or the evil eye to send away bad luck. While most uprooted Nubian communities have lost touch with their heritage, the proximity to the Nile has made it possible for the residents of this village and some other nearby Nubian settlements to cling on to their precious culture despite the dramatic changes their communities experienced in the past decades. These villages thus provide an opportunity for tourists from across the world to see and to experience the rich heritage and culture of the Nubians. They are hosted by Nubians in their houses to have a meal or a cup of tea or to sip traditional herbal drinks, and to wonder around in their market places. “We marveled at the craftsmanship of these people as the intricately carved jewelry and attractive handicraft items lured the buyer in us to venture into the colorful street-side shops”.¹⁴

6. IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON YOUNG NUBIAN GENERATIONS

The study revealed a disconnection between old and young Nubians, that is demonstrated in their cloth, language, and most importantly use of modern technology. Many of the younger generation have abandoned the traditional cloth for jeans and shirts. They are unfamiliar with many aspects of their Nubian heritage, preoccupied with fitting in with the rest of the Egyptian and international society. While older generations still hold to the dream of returning to the banks of the Nile, younger generations are more focused on fixing the problems they face in new Nubia, and have no interest in going back to old Nubia, of which they have no memories. (Fig.10)

The traditional Nubian language is not used anymore in everyday life. Northern Egyptians have moved to new Nubia for tourism related work opportunities, integrating both cultures through coexistence and intermarriage. Most Nubians who were born after the relocation speak little to no Nubian language. The only way for young Nubians to learn the Nubian language is verbally through the elderly who volunteer to teach it in schools, since after the relocation to new Nubia, the Arabic language was the official language taught in schools.¹⁵

Hassan BerkiaFikri Abul Qasim, a journalist and researcher in Nubian heritage, accreted that the language faces several threats. There’s no doubt that Nubian language is threatened by globalization as increasingly traditional languages are becoming extinct. At the end, the dominating language would be the language which is widely spoken, said Abul Qasim who has written over 14 books about Nubia. Despite all these difficulties, some organizations fight to maintain the Nubian language and support the traditional community. Many from the Nubia-speaking region, which the UNESCO has described as “a culturally extremely rich area”, are trying

to protect their linguistic legacy. “We will not stop at writing the language -- it must be taught to our children and to serious researchers,” said Abdul Ilah Zamrawi, a Nubian poet.¹⁶



Figure 10. New outfits. (Source: <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/traditions/nubians>)

Several Nubian associations are currently trying to revive Nubian language among the younger generations, creating a method to write and disseminate its literature, defining its grammar and spelling, and creating a digital Nubian dictionary. They aim is to teach the language at specialized language academies.¹⁷ Some good efforts to document and save the language through blogs and mobile-based applications are developing. Their main dream is to create an online platform where all Nubian projects and initiatives to be gathered in one place. The platform will have a separate interactive section for the Nubian Language. This platform can be the start of a physical book teaching the Nubian Language.¹⁷

Music is another remarkable aspect of the Nubian culture that has evolved with modernity. Nubian culture resonates in its music. Nubian music has flourished during the displacement, with aging crooners and school-age children alike performing sorrowful songs about the loss of their homeland. "We sing of the trees, we sing of the river," says Sakory, a former researcher at a feminist studies institute. A troupe called the Nubian Knights have recently built up a sizeable Egyptian fan base with their energetic rapping.¹⁸

Drums and clapping hands dominated the music of old Nubia. Now, musicians are plugging in new instruments. The change has been cheered by the young, and even many old-timers are swaying to the new beat. "Before there were only drums but now there are instruments, and it is much better with instruments," says one fan.¹⁹

Ali Kuban's Nubian band is one of the hottest of the genre, with multiple club dates and recording contracts. The new style Nubian music has a growing number of fans outside the Nubian community, and a culture that some predicted would wash away with the Nile River has instead taken Egypt by storm.¹⁹

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many anthropologists thought the Nubian heritage -- their distinct language and culture -- was doomed after their relocation when the Aswan dam went up. However, Nubians believe that "The Nubian culture has gone from generation to generation, and that their culture will never die".⁴

Nubians who moved to Cairo, brought their colorful heritage with them and adapted to the modern lifestyle, others who remained inland developed new ways of addressing their traditions and worked on reviving and maintaining their culture, reinterpreting their arts and crafts, and managed to highlight the rebirth of their ancestral heritage.

The emergence of cultural tourism in research practice is an object of study that dates back to the beginning of the XX century, it is the form of tourism, which focuses on the cultural environment, values and lifestyle, arts, crafts, traditions and customs of the local population. The key category in that definition is the concept of "cultural heritage" which includes intangible and tangible heritage as "A set of cultural values that are carriers of historical memory, national identity and have scientific or cultural value"¹². With the influx of international cultural tourism into Nubia, new modes of interaction found place, new forms of communication emerged. The acceptance of evolving traditions and the introduction of different ways of addressing heritage in contemporary Nubian society are a way out to ensure the endurance of this timeless culture. Individual initiatives included language preservation, arts and crafts development, music re-interpretation and dissemination through modern technologies.

Community-building projects adopting new vision and progressive ways to use virtual reality also have intangible aspects to increase the sense of belonging and awareness among residents. These values tend to promote a greater involvement in everyday modern life. One of the results of international efforts made during the UNESCO International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia from the rising waters of Lake Nasser behind the Aswan High Dam, is the Nubia Museum that showcases one of Egypt's many civilizations. It also functions as a community museum for the Nubian people, having an important education program, and raising local, national and international awareness of Nubian history and culture. In 2011, the Nubia Museum hosted an exhibition entitled 'Common History: A Museological and Educational Approach

to the Dialogue of Cultures and Civilizations.’ The Nubia Museum in Aswan hosts a research and documentation center on Nubian archaeology, history and culture. It is surrounded by landscaped grounds that integrate it into the local topography and serve as an outdoor exhibition area on the Nubian environment. This could be an example to demonstrate how communities can look within to preserve, showcase, and interpret the history and heritage.

It was demonstrated through this study that in spite of their dramatic circumstance of relocation, and the fact that the global nature of tourism and the accompanying virtual media created challenges for the Nubian community, their tradition survived where new modes of reinterpreting heritage emerged. Technology is making it ever easier to creatively address heritage landmarks, and generate interest and enthusiasm from locals and visitors alike. Smart devices apps allow heritage sites to speak to visitors, they lead people on customized walking tours of cultural destinations, and allow endless virtual opportunities for creative interaction with heritage and culture. It is argued through this study that there could be no “dichotomy between the virtual and the traditional”. New agents are being invented to transform the very notion of tradition and new modes of communication are used to reinforce heritage.

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THE SHOW AN THE SHOW-HOUSE: LIFESTYLE TRADITIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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THE SHOW AND THE SHOW-HOUSE: LIFESTYLE TRADITIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE



The construction of Italianate palaces in South Africa is a new 'tradition' of architectural hybridity which speaks volumes to changed geographies of possession and access, and the implementation of globalized and neo-liberal societal norms in the country. It is a phenomenon which has siblings internationally: However, the significance of these is lodged as much in the discourse of demonstrable wealth and class mobility, as it is in a rapid post-colonial reaction. Further, it is promoted by, and reinforced with, visual and social media, and thus to large degree, tradition itself is created by access to information by virtue of connectivity.

This paper describes the explosion of new architectural forms in post-apartheid South Africa. They embody a localized and new vernacular 'tradition' which cuts across ethnic and language barriers, breaking into the realms of class and identity. It begins by considering the commonplace, traditions and vernacular, before describing the explosion of the middle class, and the trappings of wealth that accompany it. The paper concludes that the virtual landscape has driven and promoted the new architectures of the middle class, transcending economic, ethnic and geographic boundaries in South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa is notorious for its 20th century oppressive regime known as apartheid, which subjugated local African people, in addition to other citizens of color. This subjugation is reflected in (until relatively recently as evidenced by aerial photography) an historically perpetuated indigenous built environment in rural areas, characterized by natural materials and supported by enduring traditions reinforcing the circle and accommodating ancestors. It is also reflected in the swath of government-constructed housing forming the 'townships' from the 1950s onwards, producing homogenous solutions to multi-faceted housing needs. And ironically, the one-size-fits-all model of housing is continued in the African National Congress Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) housing, initiated shortly after the democratic elections in 1994.

It is only relatively recently, with the emergence and establishment of a strong Black middle class, that homes of complex ancestry – Italianate (and here read 'Tuscan'), Balinese and neo-colonial have begun to dominate the fabric of the suburbs and the rural areas, and areas under traditional authority. These homes, fundamentally underpinned by the South African Broadcasting Corporation lifestyle television program *Top Billing* which aired between 1992 and 2019, are compelling in their extent, complexity and materiality. At the same time, they strongly reflect a firm hand in decolonizing the built environment and creating new, negotiated traditions which transcend ethnic boundaries across South Africa. This paper discusses *Top Billing* houses, stimulated by lifestyle aspirations broadcast through national media, understanding them as the commonplace, the traditional, indigenous vernacular and the vernacular, before considering their promotion and marketing through virtual platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

1.1 THE PRODUCTION OF THE COMMONPLACE

People often forget that the vernacular is the present, with a significant dose of a romanticization of the past, and the veneration of the aesthetically pleasing. It is the buildings which are produced by people and are the commonplace and the everyday. Definitions vary from early work by Fitch and Branch¹ who considered climate, materials and buildings, Rudofsky's visual engagement with architectures of the 'other'² and then the seminal expanded version by Oliver supporting a significant body of work in vernacular studies³. A prior definition by Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach unlike Oliver's quite specific categories, allowed for a more broadcast interpretation of the vernacular-built environment⁴. Engagement with vernacular modernism is also part of the discourse⁵. However, 'vernacular' also suffers from a following which considers it with nostalgia, a belief that it is a truth, and that the vernacular is quintessentially appropriate and correct. For the purposes of the discussion in this paper, Paul Oliver's et al work *Dunroamin*⁶ is useful, given that it robustly addresses the aesthetically unpalatable. The vernacular buildings under consideration are fundamentally unpalatable for the educated elite: Architect Reynard Smit offers comment of the original derivatives of what is locally known as the 'Tuscan' style, that these buildings have, '...radically changed the face of suburbia in the Northern parts of South Africa. For some, it has become the personification of bad taste and an ongoing reference to an architectural trend out of control, for others, a manifestation of luxury and a sign of financial well-being'⁷. Whilst the above comment and the general term 'Tuscan' refers to a phenomenon of mass housing for gated communities typical of the last two decades, what is important is that these building forms and aesthetics have escaped from the northern parts of South Africa and have bled through societies, landscapes and cultures to reinforce Smit's assertion of 'luxury and financial wellbeing'. They have, in the last five years, become a significant vernacular across the country and are no longer restricted to gated estates, suburban areas or formalized cities, they now permeate all landscapes in all provinces.

In South Africa, the 'vernacular' with respect to an appreciation of the material cultures such as clothing and buildings, of indigenous people, is a key feature of the writings of missionaries, magistrates and other settlers, the view from the outside. Further, the region was fertile ground for the growth of ethnographic studies, and descriptions of 'traditions' and 'culture', although often generic, mark many early works of the ethnographers and other writers.⁸ These works all observed the 'other' conveying a level of judgement and opinion, based as they were fundamentally placed in the articulate western gaze. Given this, little effort understanding the indigenous built environments was undertaken, certainly until the 1960s. Perhaps the answer to this lack of interest lies partly in the late Victorian need to 'civilize', and the Union Period (1910-1961) Government's need to 'sanitize' what was perceived as substandard and informal, focusing on 'improvement' rather than purpose and socio-political function.

Certainly, in terms of visual vernacular studies particularly, note should be taken of two specific pioneers, namely extensive studies of traditional and tribal dress by Barbara Tyrrell⁹, and detailed work on many aspects of the vernacular, whether it was documenting indigenous buildings or settler vernacular structures, by James Walton¹⁰. Subsequent studies include the seminal work by Franco Frescura, which took a broadcast approach towards documenting rural dwellings across South Africa as a whole.¹¹ For work on the Zulu, the structuralist approach to the construction of the beehive dwelling by ¹², needs noting together with work by John Argyle and Buthelezi¹³ who considered the socio-spatial aspects of the indigenous dwelling. These all address the mothballed ‘traditional’ as opposed to cultural slippage and developing indigenous vernaculars.

The discussions in this paper emanate from three decades of fieldwork and living in KwaZulu-Natal, in addition to teaching architectural history to students at the Durban University of Technology. The methodological approach is a mixture of extensive visual fieldwork, over time, experiential / participant observation, unstructured interviews and participation in social media pages. The work is scaffolded upon many years of experience in vernacular studies of the region, and builds upon recently published articles on intangibility, authenticity and the re-appropriation of ‘culture’.¹⁴ Furthermore, given that South Africa is significantly digitally connected, the use of digital media is increasingly becoming a platform for discussion, showcasing of, and promotion of, *Top Billing* houses. Thus, participation in publicly accessible Facebook groups (particularly the Independent Thinkers of South Africa) in addition to connection with many alumni from the Durban University of Technology at which the author worked for a decade, has allowed for an emersion in digital ethnography.¹⁵

It is important to note that the author’s understanding of traditional, indigenous vernacular and vernacular is in no way evolutionary. Whilst other authors such as Frescura¹⁶ (1981) considered the movement through form and material as being developmental rather than responsive, the existing landscapes prove that the different categories all exist at the same time. Whilst the ‘traditional’ buildings have largely disappeared in the last few decades, the notion as to what is ‘traditional’ continues to exist, although this ‘memory’ is rather one of intangible space, triggered by form¹⁷. This paper will begin by discussing localized interpretations of tradition, vernacular and indigenous vernacular, before presenting the focus of this paper, namely *Top-Billing* houses, their proliferation and liminal nature and their unique position in the vernacular environment.

2. TRADITION, VERNACULAR AND INDIGENOUS VERNACULAR

Given the particular pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial landscapes of Southern Africa, the concepts of tradition, indigenous vernacular, and vernacular need explaining. For the author, there are subtle differences

in understanding the variances, and these are particularly related to the world views of the builders, and their position in the economy. This section will unpack the ideas in order to foreground the discussion as to why we need a ‘hands-off’ approach, an abandonment of the western gaze, in accepting a new vernacular as a significant marker of process and social change. Whilst it is unclear as to whether this vernacular indeed becomes a permanent feature of the built environment in South Africa and emerges as new, culturally negotiated ‘tradition’, it is important to consider its value in the development of an indigenous architectural identity for South Africans.

2.1 TRADITION

In South Africa, and particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, the area of study, tradition is a bounded, continuous concept which changes, but does not particularly acknowledge the change. Tradition is that as taught by ancestors, handed down in perpetuity, through task related and oral means. The residents comprising the province of KwaZulu-Natal are largely Zulu speakers and consist of a significant number of clans located under the umbrella ethnicity of ‘Zulu’. Traditional buildings are constructed in specific ways, to invite both the ancestors and the living. The spaces within the buildings are strictly demarcated, and besides allowing for the welcome inclusion of the ancestors, also dictate hierarchy and position. Berglund¹⁸ discusses with clarity the physical position that the ancestors occupy in a traditional dwelling, and this normative practice also leads to associated cultural practices and traditions, such as not stepping on the threshold. The ‘tradition’ then delves into much greater subtleties than merely form, function and aesthetics, being embedded into an intimate and intricate relationship between the occupants, space and built fabric.

Ironically, much of the ‘tradition’ of the Zulu homestead or *umuzi*, was inscribed in the *Natal Code of Native Law* (originally conceived of in 1864 but encoded in law in 1891)¹⁹ which sought to control and prescribe elements of ‘Zulu tradition’. Whilst the specific purpose and content of this document is worthy of separate study, what it did was mothball ‘tradition’. Part of this document which considers the role of the chief, the homestead head, marriage and the relationships with land, addresses the ethnographically inscribed *kraal* (homestead) with its circular layout, and its ring of individual dwellings around a central cattle byre.

Traditional buildings are also constructed out of materials that exist directly in the environment – whilst there were regional variations, in KwaZulu-Natal the dominant materials were *Dichrostachys Cineraria* for the frame, which was rapidly replaced by *Acacia Mearnsii* (the Black Wattle). Werner Knüffel²⁰ records the collection and use of as many as 11 different types of grasses, each of which had different, specific purposes. Whilst this pertained to the construction of the *iqhugwane* or domical beehive dwelling (see Figure 1 below), stone, other

forms of timber, cow dung, ox blood and soil were used in buildings, dependent on landscape and resources. Nowadays, for some 'traditional' buildings, material slippage has meant that multiple variations are evident, however the traditionality is bound in the form and the intangible purpose rather than an overt reliance on materiality.



Fig. 1: Iqhwane (Author 2002).

Today, little of significant, mothballed 'tradition' in the built environment continues to exist. Rather, tradition is relegated to memory and its continuous recrafting, through the lens determined by need and purpose.²¹ Importantly, tradition is strongly connected to the ancestors and for most new African homesteads, tradition underpins discussions on indigenous vernaculars and the vernacular.

2.1 INDIGENOUS VERNACULAR

The author considers the indigenous vernacular as those buildings in which experimentation with material and embellishment builds on a basic tradition, a form of skeumorphism. Studies carried out by the author in deeply traditional areas such as Msinga located in the central regions of Kwazulu-Natal province, revealed that an indigenous vernacular mutated from the tradition, driven by landscape as well as a particular social

context in which women were largely left at home, whilst the men worked away in the mines, or in the cities. Decorating buildings, not a particular cultural marker of people from this region, created a dynamic architectural tradition which could be read sequentially, in tandem with other material cultures such as beadwork (See Figure 2).



Fig 2: Msinga house, ca 2000, with door panel reflecting beadwork traditions (Author 2000)

2.2 VERNACULAR

Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach note that, ‘Vernacular architecture is a phenomenon that many understand intuitively but that few are able to define...Vernacular architecture is non-high style building; it is those structures not designed by professionals; it is not monumental; it is un-sophisticated; it is mere building; according to the distinguished architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, not architecture. Those who take a more positive approach rely on adjectives like ordinary, everyday, and commonplace’.²²

Paul Oliver is more specific in outlining more limiting criteria in defining vernacular as ‘...the dwellings and other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources they are

customarily owner or community-built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of life of the cultures that produce them'.²³ These two definitions need to be conflated in order to understand *Top Billing* houses in the South African social and political landscape, as their production and meaning are significantly loaded.

The vernacular in South Africa is more extensive. Given the variety of aboriginal ethnic groups, in addition to a *mélange* of immigrants from Europe and the Indian subcontinent in particular, the vernacular is usually a continuum of historical hybrids and contemporary interpretations of class and culture.

In KwaZulu-Natal (previously the British Colony of Natal), much of the urban vernacular is founded on the broad base of a Victorian aesthetic, with layers of Edwardian, and then a swath of hybrid forms in the early and mid-twentieth century which to some degree, responded to light and climate. Examples of are a strong, regional Art Deco, in addition to the Union Period style, mixing elements of British and Cape Dutch architecture. The Berea Style (endemic to Durban with a few examples in Pietermaritzburg, the provincial capital) is a clear adoption of elements of Latin forms drawn most likely from the travels of William Murray-Jones and his time spent in Brazil (Jacobs and Kearney 2018)²⁴. Further, incursions of Tudorbethan and other derivatives from Britain in the first part of the century gave a strongly English character to urban areas in KwaZulu-Natal in particular. More recent vernaculars drew directly from Modernism and rational planning; these particularly pepper suburbs from the late 1960s. Added to this, the opening of the previously white suburbs to people of color after the repeal of the Group Areas Acts means that suburbia across the country has evolved to accommodate different cultural aesthetics: a rich mix which some consider as having a deleterious effect on coherent streetscapes with similar character.

However, the vernacular has, in the most recent years, expanded rapidly to include a new breed; a hybrid Italianate-derived house form which has tiled roofs, precast concrete columns, aluminum windows, brushed steel gates and balustrades, and details such as quoining to walls (See Figure 3). These forms are directly drawn from the proliferation of developer-driven gated estates in the last twenty years, many of which drew on external influences such as Neo-Classical (locally known as Tuscan) or Balinese. In addition, a local lifestyle show named *Top Billing* extolled the virtues of homes of the rich and famous. Whilst the houses under discussion have many localized names in South Africa, this paper will refer to them for simplicity's sake, as Top-Billing houses. Their spread has not occurred through *Top Billing* alone – social media plays a large part in connecting people in Southern Africa, and Facebook, particularly, presents wealth and success. Digital fieldwork is thus useful as both images, and conversations captured in posts on social media such as

Facebook blur the position of the author as being one automatically implicated, rather than making assumptions from the outside.



Fig. 3: Suburban homestead, Pietermaritzburg (Author 2018)

Their rapid spread can also be attributed to a significant history and continued practice, of migrant labor underpinning the social history of African people. Migrancy exposes workers to architectural influences of new environments and also provides the cash for them to upgrade their homes in rural areas. Many rural homesteads are literally constructed in this manner: ‘Remittance Villages’ will be discussed more fully in the paper.

Significantly *Top Billing* houses are constructed as new buildings in suburbs, on traditional authority land, on rented land and on freehold land. This is important since they subvert commonly understood principles of investment demonstrating rather, over-capitalization at the expense of long-term security and concentrating rather on the present, and its potential, than a long-term western perception of property tenure and security.

3. NEW TRADITIONS, VERNACULARS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

In addition to subverting formal economic ideals, the new vernacular architecture reflects a variety of significant departures from normative interpretation. *Top-Billing* houses upset broad assumptions from an economic perspective, a development perspective, a political perspective and an aesthetic perspective whilst, in the opinion of the author, act as powerful agents of decolonization. At the same time, some also reflect a phenomenon which reinforces a retribalization process, in which people applying for land in traditional authority areas re-engage with the historically practiced tribute paying, also known as *ukukhonzza*. This ironically raises what author JM Coetzee referred to as a ‘double bound’ situation²⁵, in which people building these formal, fancy houses on traditional authority land respond simultaneously to dual worlds of understanding – the western and the traditional. This section discusses the resultant interpretive norms, which

reinforce the ‘double-bound’ situation. These subvert assumption and overtly present the economic, developmental, philosophical, social, and professional impacts which position *Top Billing* houses as powerful agents of identity creation and decolonization.

3.1 OVERCAPITALIZATION

General investment principles suggest that investment in property is only worthwhile if there is the potential for a demonstrable swap-out or profit. However, a significant number of *Top-Billing* houses are constructed on land which is not freehold, and which potentially has uncertain tenure. Outside Pietermaritzburg lies a group of houses which are all built or in the process of construction, on rented land: the nature of the tenancy agreement and their access to services is unknown. However, oral sources suggest that this land is rented from a ‘Mr Singh’ and that the nature of the electrical and water connections is *laissez-faire* to say the least. The investment in these homes is substantial, suggesting that western ideas of property ownership and secure tenure are potentially less important than the need to demonstrate success. Such agreements with respect to investment on rented land in which the capital outlay of the construction of the homesteads is compromised by the security of tenure and the possible loss of access, makes these significantly risky investments.

However, there is a more compelling, sinister angle. In South Africa, the *Financial Irregularity Control Act* (FICA)²⁶ ensures that with all formally registered properties (i.e., those within the boundaries of cities and suburbs, or farmland), purchasers need to disclose the origin of their funds, particularly if any cash payment is required. Properties constructed on traditional authority land are currently not subject to the same scrutiny, thus the opportunity for substantial cash investment through money laundering and burying cash in property, exists. Reliable oral sources indicate that such processes are increasingly a feature of financial irregularities.

Either way, formal perceptions of wealth and value are totally subverted. Estate Agent Bruce Campbell voices a concern that,

The lack of title deeds means people can’t have their properties valued for resale nor could they become a means of future security should the owners require collateral to raise loans. It also means these properties are being built either for cash or via personal loans where the interest rates were substantially higher than that for mortgages.²⁷

Significantly, these homesteads are providing accommodation for people upgrading homes, and fit into a trajectory of gentrification. At the same time, the investment in them, and their sheer proliferation, reflects a vital contribution to understandings of social and economic transformation.

3.2 SUBVERTING THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

The *National Development Plan* (2014) is a keystone political gainsay of economic development. It calls *for Reversing the spatial effects of apartheid* noting that, “Apartheid left a terrible spatial legacy.” While about 3.2 million households have benefited from new housing, and services and infrastructure have been provided to many communities, limited progress has been made in reversing entrenched spatial inequities...Rural areas present particular challenges. Over one-third of South Africa’s population live in the former “homelands”, and a large proportion of this group is economically marginalized. Policies are required to bring households in these areas into the mainstream economy’ (NDP 2012: 36,37)²⁸.

Fieldwork has shown that in rural areas in the Eastern Cape, one of these former “economically marginalized” homelands, villages which a decade ago were a collection of modest, vernacular circular or orthogonal buildings under corrugated sheeting, or thatch, have been replaced by extensive homesteads of *Top-Billing* houses, with double and triple garages. The Eastern Cape is one of the poorest and most remote provinces in the contemporary South Africa, and its development is hampered by problematic connectivity by road, rail and air, in addition to rampant corruption. Lack of economic opportunity locally means that for generations, young men in particular, have travelled to the big cities such as Johannesburg or Durban, in order to find work. They have sent cash income back to the rural areas, which is often used in incremental betterment of their family homesteads. ‘Remittance villages’ such as those in the Eastern Cape are increasingly subverting the long terms strategy for rural areas, as they are increasingly upgraded: Gentrification of rural homesteads, and indeed, rural villages is occurring from the ground up, in a silent fashion in a purely cash-based economy. Significantly, given that South Africa has not conducted a formal census since 2011, these homesteads do not form part of either the developmental record or the socio-political voice. Rather, their construction represents a significant aspect of self-determination and identity creation.

3.3 DEFYING CALLS FOR INDIGENIZATION AND DECOLONIZATION

Whilst instead of the pastiche building form that they are, *Top-Billing* houses had the potential to create a real local vernacular. As such, they ignore all partisan calls for indigenization and decolonization. Whilst this particular aspect of these dwellings is discussed elsewhere,²⁹ it is important to note that contemporary South Africa is under pressure to decolonize, and decolonization of the built environment is no exception. Given that the formal building frameworks in South Africa are fundamentally based on a Western material and structural tradition, options for decolonization are limited. Thus, the requirement for decolonization is self-

determination and choice in the reuse of objects, rather than a trite reduction of structure and material to indigenous forms. Alessandro Petti suggests that “the difficult task of Decolonizing Architecture, therefore, is to reimagine new uses that will not be trapped by structures of power.” Petti considers that through ‘profanation’, visual forms can minimize domination, rather than convey ‘a messianic promise of a more just future that never arrives’. He cites Giorgio Agamben who points out that ‘to profane does not simply mean to abolish or cancel separations, but to learn to make new uses of them’. The demystification process of making the profane ‘...restore(s) the common use of these things. ...colonial architecture, therefore, does not only mean to dislocate power but to use its destructive potential to reverse its operation by subverting its uses... profanation...manages to deactivate the power devices and restore the common use of the space that the power had confiscated’.³⁰ In January 2017, an Independent Thinkers of South Africa Facebook post noted, ‘The property developments taking place there (Limpopo Province) are amazing. There are literally scores of mansions atop hills at the back of beyond. People come to Joburg and big cities to work, but instead of making all their money only circulate here, they build exceptional homes in rural areas challenging apartheid spatiality that sought to keep rural areas undeveloped and impoverished. It is a beautiful thing that you are doing, people of the north’ (Figure 4).³¹ This act of normalizing visual forms, being embraced by a previously marginalized realm, places *Top-Billing* houses as significant elements of socially-negotiated decolonization.

3.4 PRODUCTION OF A SOCIALLY-NEGOTIATED VERNACULAR

Whilst *Top-Billing* houses may not be the expected vernacular to have necessarily emerged given the calls for decolonization, neo-traditionalism and relevance, what is important is that these buildings have proliferated in recent years, spurred on by influence through digital media. Whilst the original *Top-Billing* television program is most likely the original kernel of the ‘taste making’,³² social media such as Instagram and Facebook have significant contribution in the social negotiation of these homesteads. Not only is Facebook used as a tool to market the designs, but it also hosts discussion sessions largely engaged with a form of socially negotiated development of the vernacular. Public Facebook page ‘Independent thinkers of South Africa’ lauds the recolonization of traditional authority lands with buildings which celebrate wealth and status and promote the notion of ‘we have arrived’.



Fig. 4: Facebook post, traditional authority land in Venda (Independent Thinkers of South Africa, April 4 2017)³³

3.5 RETRIBALISATION

Informants relate of an increasing desire to relocate from formal housing in suburbs which is subject to formal rates and taxes, to traditional authority land. They relate that they have to approach the Chief, who requires that they are related to the clan over which he rules in some way. It appears that people claim tenuous relationships with respect to lineage in order to gain access to land as it is noted that they do not necessarily move to areas to which they may ancestrally be related. The Chief gives access to land in a ‘traditional’ way, once the applicant has paid the required fee (usually beer and hard spirits). They are allocated a plot on which to build. This action ties the applicant to the Chief, and to the land, in a traditional form of

tribute, effectively the built environment acting as an agent of retribalization. This forms part of the discourse: A post on Independent Thinkers of South Africa in April 2017 noted that,

I like it when our own people build their empires like this, the issue of taking Ingonyama Trust (traditional authority land) is something is wrong cos they want to put us on Rates Payments, just take a look at Durban's Adams Mission and Folweni, the houses there are so beautiful cos people can afford to build houses but the main problem / hindrance is having a site, sites are expensive under municipalities, the rates are horrible, the Chief there has been fighting Ethekewini Municipality... He had succeeded in resistance of that manipulation, now people have sites and houses better than before'.³⁴

Significantly, the settlers transfer 'allegiance' and tithe-paying from a generic municipality to a traditional authority chief.

3.6 THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSIONAL

Whilst Paul Oliver's seminal definition of vernacular specifically ignores any formal design process, what is significant in the phenomenon of the *Top-Billing* houses is that they are, often designed. However, unlike formal building processes in which architects may design and lead on the implementation of the building, for many of these structures this is not the case: the appointment of a person to draw the plans is important but given that most of the houses are incrementally built, the role of the architectural professional in a formally appointed fashion is limited. Legislation in South Africa³⁵ requires all buildings to have plans prepared by registered architectural professionals. These plans have to be submitted to and passed by local authorities. Whilst this requirement only recently included areas under traditional authority control, the more recently promulgated *Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act* (SPLUMA)³⁶ means that local authorities are now compelled by law to monitor construction and development on traditional authority land: Compellingly, this requirement challenges the security of tenure for the Top-Billing houses, placing them in a precarious situation should local authorities manage to audit the properties as legislated. Given that many of those on rented and traditional authority land represent significant investment, SPLUMA audits are likely to negatively impact those homes constructed with insecure property tenure.

4. SO WHERE ARE THE ANCESTORS – RECONNECTING TRADITIONAL AND VERNACULAR

In the opening section, the central role of ancestors in traditional house construction was mentioned. This noted that the ancestors form a role in tradition creation, and also that the ancestors were allocated space in the traditional homestead. The continuity of the ancestors does not stop with the movement from buildings

constructed in traditional frameworks: they continue to be housed in appropriate, clear manner. Hylton White notes that the importance of the proximity of the ancestors and their reinforcement for luck and fortune.³⁷ Significantly, whilst *Top-Billing* houses may present a clear, Western, ‘modern’ façade, a ‘double bound’ relationship with the ancestors continues to exist. Many of the homesteads have a single external *rondavel* (round house) which represents the house of the ancestors (Figure 5). This is where the homestead venerates its predecessors, and where problems and other issues are mitigated. This is a significant link with the traditional, and the bridge between the contemporary homestead and the ancestral realm is a critical way of including the past. At the same time, transition between the indigenous homestead and houses constructed in the western tradition does not at any point minimize the position of the ancestors. The author has, in another article³⁸, noted that the ancestors are endemic, yet may be present in different forms in different types of homes: in ‘informal settlements’ the ancestors are generally absent, as informers note, living in close proximity to others makes the environment ‘too noisy’ for the ancestors. Rational settlement, stasis and stability, allows for residents of *Top-Billing* houses to acknowledge and provide for, the ancestors.



Figure 5: Sidweba ama House Plans (We draw house plans). The thatched *rondavel* on the left accommodates ancestors (Author 2017)

5. CONCLUSION

Assuming authority for understanding vernacular in South Africa is impossible, perhaps largely and quite cynically, because vernacular is the product of a non-academic, non-authoritarian process. It is mitigated by

continuously competing discourses, out of which the unexpected arises. For architects a continuing lack of self-reflection means that the understanding of changes in the built environment and the manner in which it is produced, serves to reinforce the divide between the designed and the made. For the economist, the land speculator, and the estate agent, all common understandings of land and property with respect to economics and guidelines, no longer apply. For the government, a key part of housing provision, is in large part, already in place given the unconscious development agenda implemented through an informal cash economy: the lack of national census in the last few years bears testimony.

Top Billing houses are physical vestiges of a decolonization process. Ironically some may point out, the buildings are directly derived from western structural and architectural idioms and focus on choosing materials derived out of a western capitalist production process, but at the same time they are the product of a community negotiated aesthetic, providing for the wants and needs of the black middle class in South Africa, at this point in time. They largely comply with the tenets of Oliver's definition,³⁹ and embrace the more broadcast understanding of Upton and Valach: however, fundamentally they also fulfil the requirements of the decolonization process: the negotiation of identity, through agency, means that *Top-Billing* homes unseat the immigrant perceptions of building, identity, economics, space and material, and reinterpret it in a substantive manner through profanation. It is a process that cannot be controlled, or judged, but embraced with a knowledge that change is happening, and continues to occur. Significantly, these homes, reflecting an aspirant achievement, are promoted by media, marketed through social media, and are in effect, decolonized and of socially negotiated dwellings.

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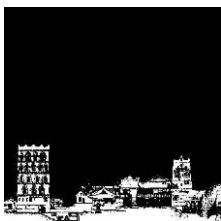
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