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## **Crafts, Consumers and Consumption: Asian Artisanal Crafts and the Marketing of Exotica**

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### **Abstract**

In a globalizing and more integrated world economy, craft goods which are sourced from the developing world are increasingly becoming part of the decorative arrangement in first world households. While there has recently emerged detailed research on artisans and their integration into global markets, and on consumption more generally, there has been relatively little sociological research concerning the advertising and consumption of these artisanal products. In light of studies concerning the marketing of third world crafts, and based on content analysis of a number of web sites and catalogues marketing Asian crafts undertaken in 2004, this paper has two main aims. First, it analyses the various ways “ethnic branding” is an important marketing feature of a craft item and second, it aims to deconstruct the images and texts in terms of notions of “traditional”, “natural” and “authentic”. Underlying the analysis and interpretation is the notion of the commodification of poverty. The paper thus develops our understanding of the relationship between global markets, marketing of third world craft goods, and consumption practices.

### **Introduction**

In light of studies concerning the marketing of third world crafts, and based on content analysis of a number of web sites and catalogues marketing Asian crafts undertaken in 2004, this paper has two main aims. First, following Stephen (1993) it analyses the various ways “ethnic branding” is an important marketing feature of a craft item. “Ethnic branding” is the packaging and marketing of products and services in ways which, more often than not, stereotype cultures of difference to increase market share by attracting and maintaining brand or product loyalty. “Ethnic chic” is the trend in clothing and houseware design which seeks to incorporate ethically different patterns, designs and colours into the dominant cultural fashions. Ethnic branding is essential to the popularity of ethnic chic. Second, following Hendrickson (1996) and Nakatani (2001) it aims to deconstruct the images and texts in terms of notions of “traditional”, “natural” and “authentic”. Underlying the analysis and interpretation is the notion of the commodification of poverty. The paper thus develops our understanding of the relationship between global markets, marketing of

third world craft goods, and consumption practices. As mentioned above, the data reported in this paper is based on a content analysis of several NGO catalogues and web sites that promote and sell “third world” craft goods. For this paper, considering space and word limitations, the data from only three internet sites and mail-order catalogues are analysed below. These are: the Craftsbridge website ([www.craftsbridge.com](http://www.craftsbridge.com)); the Exotic India website ([www.exoticindia.com](http://www.exoticindia.com)); and the OXFAM / Community Aid Abroad mail order catalogue (2003/04). Also note that, as a pilot study, there are no statistically meaningful, quantitative findings as the sample is too small. The rationale for the content analysis study followed the broad aims outlined above (i.e. to explore notions of “ethnic branding”, “primitiveness”, and “authenticity” and “traditionalism” as portrayed in these marketing websites and catalogues). Both text and visual images were analysed.

### **Crafts and Consumption: A Brief Review**

In a globalizing and more integrated world economy, craft goods which are sourced from the developing world are increasingly becoming part of the decorative arrangement in first world households. A wide array of craft items are to be found. These include: wall hangings, calendars, cushion covers, pottery items, floor coverings, furniture and a variety of wooden items. While there is a growing body of research on artisans and their integration into global markets (e.g. Dickie and Frank 1996; Nash 1993), and on consumption more generally (Fine and Leopold 1993; Howes 1996; Miller 1995) there has been relatively little research concerning the advertising and consumption of artisanal products.

Sociological and anthropological research on artisans indicates that they live a precarious, fractured and marginalised existence (Scrase 2003). In India the numbers of artisans have declined by at least 30% over 30 years, with many artisans joining the ranks of casual wage labourers in the informal economy (Seth 1995: 1). Mass produced, standardised and cheap factory items are replacing many of the various goods once produced by artisans (Ganguly-Scrase 2001). Many of the artisans that do survive invariably produce for a world market, and so daily confront the vagaries of that market – tourism trends, changing fashions etc. (Anderson 1992; Balkwell and Dickerson 1994; Nash 1993). The significance of craft production is that it crosses all

sectors of the modern global economy – from pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial (Dickie and Frank 1996). Significantly, with the emergence of a globalized economy, coupled with postmodern consumer sentiments, crafts represent a traditional (or homely) form of consumer goods, which, for some buyers, gives them great appeal. In other words, the consumption of crafts allows for a symbolic (imagined) reconnection back to earlier, (traditional) and more “earthly” forms and designs in a fragmented, fractured and technological world. This is exemplified in Nakatani’s (2001) analysis of the promotion of Southeast Asian handicrafts in Japanese women’s magazines. She finds that the reason for consumption, of especially textiles, amongst middle class Japanese women was because of their search for “authenticity”, a nostalgic desire, and their quest for the exotic and culturally different. Of course, it is a highly selective re-traditionalising that takes place – one that is selective and exoticizes the lives of artisans in the past.

To a large extent, the emergence of “ethic chic”, the hybridisation of fashion, and a return to earthy and natural forms, textures and colours in interior design, has meant that third world craft goods and “traditional” patterns have nowadays become popular. Apart from overseas travel, it is largely by way of catalogues and visits to “fair-trade” stores that enables Western consumers to purchase “authentic” artisanal products. Mail-order catalogues and websites have also become important promoters of third world crafts. Yet this remains a largely under-researched area. In “Selling Guatemala”, Hendrickson analyses the portrayal of Mayan and Guatemalan clothing and handicraft items in a range of mail-order catalogues circulating in the USA. She reveals the various ways these catalogues construct the “natural”, “traditional” and, in some cases, “primitive” images of Guatemalan life that are used to appeal to consumers. Western consumers sometimes ‘...are made more aware of the situation in that country and Maya *do* earn money from these businesses (Hendrickson 1996:118; emphasis in original.).

But, in each case, products have to be tailored to suit the foreign audience, the “horror” stories of certain communities are toned-down, and the fact that the crafts marketed overseas are produced according to strict quality control measures is never revealed (Hendrickson 1996:118).

Johnson critically explores how fair-trade discourse constructs various understandings of development, consumerism, and social justice and what these discourses reveal about issues like over-consumption in the industrialised cores and globalized structural inequality (Johnson 2002:39). She finds that fair trade discourse tends to

...rely on individualistic notions of choice and consumer sovereignty, obscures the structural linkages between core and periphery in a globalized economy, and belies the collective environmental implications of individual free choice in the marketplace. (Johnson 2002:55).

Significantly, she also points-out that fair trade discourse, rather than provide or stimulate any serious discussion of structural inequality, instead supports a more liberal, de-politicised vision of cultural difference. In this context, “ethnic branding”, “traditionalism”, and “authenticity” thereby become important features in the marketing of crafts. To illustrate this trend, Lynn Stephen reports on the integration and “ethnicization” of Mexican rugs in the North American consumer markets, illustrating how the branding of ethnic identity is an important marketing tool despite the (ironic) revelation that, due to the globalization of industrial production, the majority of “Mexican” rugs are now made in India (Stephen, 1993:25-57).

### **Overview of Websites and Catalogues Analyzed**

*Website: Craftsbridge (www.craftsbridge.com)*

The consumer is addressed directly on this website with many of the products being “made especially for you” or are made purely to “enliven your living room space”. The promise of information and the potential to interact with the craftsperson (through the “ask me a question” link) is upheld by the company. However, there is a breadth rather than depth of information available and, as such, the site would function only as a good starting point for those who wanted to find out about a specific region/craft. Unsurprisingly, there are no sources cited for the various claims the company makes about the traditions of a particular area. The consumer has to rely on the assurances of the company’s expertise. Potential customers are defined as a fraternity of “craft lovers” and there is a clear sense of the consumer-as-collector or connoisseur throughout the site. Refinement and sophistication in taste are balanced by the more youthful notion of trendiness to appeal to customers across the age-spectrum. Flattering rhetoric is also put to use in the “crafts facts” section where certain links are labelled “for the probing mind” and so on. “Exclusive”, one-off items are highly

priced and it is not made clear what percentage of the price of an item goes to Craftsbridge although they do insist, in some cases, that the “proceeds” of a purchase “are channelised [sic] to tribal people who have made it”.

Products are also promoted through titles which stress their “exotic” or “ethnic” charm. For instance, a cushion cover makes use of “traditional oriental motifs” and “pattu weaving” in order to “cast a magical spell in your interiors”. The small “sling purses” are described as “striking” and useful as they “combine beautifully with colored or black and white ensembles”. The evening bag is similarly described as “a very cute and trendy accessory” that “completes the feminine look” as it is “guaranteed to look great with many outfits”.

The use of the term “ethnic”, in relation to certain products and to the “ethnic art” section, is seemingly flexible. It is applied to products made by NGOs and individuals who profess to use craft processes based on a particular regional tradition and also to indicate a type of styling. The product description of a pendant assures the customer that it is a “cute”, “unique” item that will go well with both “casual and ethnic wear”. In this sense, ethnic branding does not simply relate to the promotion of the warli tribe’s specific style of painting, for example, but to the consumer’s ability to pick and choose between, or combine, different “ethnic” products. The term “folk art” is used to describe the craft of “tribal” groups. The emphasis here is on renditions of daily life or mythological interpretations through the use of “ancient techniques” on “traditional” materials.

In summary, ethnic branding is clearly an important marketing feature, as are notions of tradition and authenticity. This is not as true of the terms used to describe products made by designers, where innovation of tradition is praised.

*Website: Exotic India ([www.exoticindia.com](http://www.exoticindia.com))*

The site frequently employs descriptors such as “antiquated”, “handmade”, “traditional”, and “unique” and particularly draws attention to the religious or ritual features of the craft. This framing of the products provide them with an aura of authenticity which offers the potential buyer some kind of connection to an Indian

historio-social past. In keeping with this presumed intention, the site highlights both the originality (in terms of inspired rather than mass produced art-forms) and the inherently traditional nature and value of the crafts. The company claims it is able to offer original artworks at low prices because they are “sourced directly from Indian villages”. This suggests that the company does not work through established, large co-operatives that demand equitable pay for the piece-work produced.

Satisfied customers have submitted their comments to a Testimonials page. As expected all the comments are positive and praise the quality of the product and service. This company does not have any philanthropic objectives and as such it does not employ a discourse of charity or self-help. Instead, it is customer focused and product based, with all information centred on the craft, rather than the artisan. The use of a newsletter, the extensive (albeit incomplete) product information and the site’s interactive elements suggest an educative agenda which is based on learning and knowing “Indian” traditions. However, this sense of knowing does not include finding out much about the artisan, the community, or region in which the craft was produced. Even in the dedicated section on “Folk Art” the folk are curiously absent, unless they happen to be an award winning artist of national repute. Folk Art is defined in seemingly contradictory terms, as simplistic yet distinctive, as spontaneous yet rooted in an age-old tradition. Most of the articles and the product information do not comment on contemporary folk traditions, or on changes in the process of craft-making, rather they reference “high” art, mythology and philosophy. The site promotes conspicuous consumption as a form of cultural enrichment and offers its customers the opportunity to buy back, or buy into mythological, textual Indian traditions, whilst bypassing the living traditions (and conditions) under which the craftsmanship takes place.

*Catalogue: Oxfam / Community Aid Abroad (2003/04)*

The company repeatedly makes use of terms and phrases such as “traditional”, “in the ancient way”, “age-old”, and “for centuries” when describing the origins of a craft, or the processes, designs and materials used by artisans. The concept of tradition is used in a relatively simplistic and elastic manner, with anything made by an “impoverished” artisan becoming part of this narrative. In a couple of instances the

catalogue explains that the crafts are “stunning new interpretations of traditional” designs or that the designs used are not always created by the artisan but provided by the co-operative (Oxfam/CAA catalogue 2003/04: 22-3). However, the notion of development seems very limited. For one item — a Jaipur urn — the catalogue states:

New advances in technique mean their famous pottery can now be made food-safe and waterproof, while retaining the characteristic glaze and remarkably clear colours (Oxfam/CAA catalogue 2003/04: 10).

Yet even in this case the design qualities remain the same while the use value is improved.

There is often an interesting set of contradictions in the description of how a craft is made and the way it could be used. When speaking of the former, the focus is on hardship, tradition and generational continuity, whereas leisure, innovation and originality are attributed to the latter. For example, the back page of the catalogue describes Rasai Bells as “an ancient tribal craft going back thousands of years in northern India” and gives a lengthy description of the process involved; originally used as a cow bell, the catalogue suggests “it makes a distinctive doorbell”. In a similar manner, Sari Wine Bags, made from “colourful offcuts” and fashioned into generic bags “are a unique way to carry your BYO wine” (Oxfam/CAA catalogue 2003/04: 14).

Both the website and catalogue make use of personal stories to promote the co-operatives and their products. As expected, these narratives combine all or some of the following elements: hardship or exploitation, struggle against the odds, eventual success and philanthropy towards others less fortunate. For women there is also a focus on societal restrictions, abuse and the goal of financial independence. This is an extract from information on the Association of Craft People (ACP), a co-operative that formed around a few leather workers in Calcutta:

26 year old Monica Paul had a tough start to life, marrying early and having a son at 14. When her husband died, she had to leave her in-law’s home, while they kept her son. Desperate and with no prospects, she learnt about ACP, and joined them to get training. 5 years later, she has married again and is well settled in life. Her new husband also works with ACP and her boy is back with her...(Oxfam/CAA catalogue 2003/04: 9).



The provision of information on trade, together with personal accounts, is a key element to raising awareness and they require consumers to appreciate the conditions under which artisans and small-scale farmers work. Ethnic branding is, as expected, integral to Oxfam's promotion of craft goods and ethnicity is framed within the notion of "developing countries". Oxfam occasionally falls back on stereotypes; Indian crafts come from villages; they are unique but traditional and not innovative. There is the familiar contradiction between past glory and present poverty which is so often associated with South Asia, summed up in the following statement:

...though at least 98% of the women come from nil to low income families, they are rich in appreciating the beauty of their tradition. (Oxfam/CAA catalogue 2003/04: 23).

### **Summary**

The research set-out to test whether "ethnic branding" is an important marketing feature of Asian crafts and whether the images and texts employ notions of "traditional", "natural" and "authentic". This was significant in that we supposedly live in a more globalized, "politically correct" and "aware consumer" world. By and large, in the three websites and catalogues analysed, Asian peoples are essentialized and homogenized and their unique cultures commercialized and commodified for the sake of increased sales. The catalogues also promote artisanal or craft bricolage, whereby the artisanal product becomes an assemblage of popular patterns and designs, often used out of context, and with the finished good a mere resemblance of its former self. This is exemplified in "traditional" crafts that are redesigned to meet "modern" consumer tastes and demands. Catalogues and websites also engage in selective traditionalising, effectively condemning a vast array of craft styles, and peoples, to the economic margins. There is a strong sense that consumers are the saviours of poor Asian peoples, even in the more politically-correct Oxfam/CAA catalogue.<sup>1</sup> Finally, my analysis strongly indicates that "ethnic chic" is based on an essentially stereotypical, selective and exploitative process that essentializes marginal cultures for largely market driven, consumer tastes and desires.

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**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> However, the foregrounding of Oxfam's history and reputation also means that much what they say they are currently doing is taken on trust. I would argue that there is certainly a need for greater transparency in their commercial relationships with "producer partners" and in the partners' dealings with individual artisans. Often the potential customer is simply told that purchasing from Oxfam makes a "real difference" to "our producers' lives" (Oxfam/CAA catalogue 2003/04: 20). Here is "consumerism with a conscience" writ large.