Technologies of resistance: 
Structural alteration of trade cloth in four societies

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Abstract. This article examines the transformation of trade cloth among the Seminole, Saramaka, Cuna, and Kalabari as examples of non-Western resistance to the dictates of Western regimes of clothing style and as calculated acts of defiance to a world system of fashion hegemony. Because of the unique circumstances of their histories, each of the four societies discussed in this essay has become wholly dependent upon cloth that must be imported from outside yet, at the same time, each society maintains their sense of cultural autonomy and fabricates their own "tradition" by transforming the cloth they receive in trade into garments that are unique expressions of their aesthetic independence and cultural sovereignty.

"The colonial relationship was a relationship between societies, each of which had its own distinctive social institutions and its own internal social differences... Despite the political power of the conqueror, each colony was the product of a dialectic, a synthesis, not just a simple imposition, in which the social institutions and cultural values of the conquered was one of the terms of the dialectic."

Peter Worsley (1984: 4)

The expansion of Western industrial culture has transformed radically many non-Western societies by introducing them to new institutions and new technologies. Missionaries brought new religions, colonial agents brought new systems of government and education, and traders brought new commodities. This article is concerned with the last of these importations to the non-Western world, and focuses primarily on the impact of trade and the introduction of foreign commercial goods.

As part of a more general concern with "culture contact," social anthropologists have long been interested in studying the impact of foreign commerce on indigenous societies. This interest has resulted in a number of studies dealing with the

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1 This article has benefitted from my discussions with Monni Adams, Joanne Eicher, Tonye Erekosima, Margaret Hardin, Jerome Levi, Richard Price, Sally Price, Elisha Renne, Izumi Shimada, Anna Simons, Kathy Skelly and William Sturtevant. My thanks also to Chris Coleman and Richard Meier of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and Denis Nervig and Fran Tabbush of the Fowler Museum of Cultural History for their generous assistance in providing illustrations.
transformation of a particular society brought on by the introduction of an industrial good. Perhaps the best known work of this genre is Lauriston Sharp’s essay “Steel axes for Stone-age Australians.” In this classic study, the author describes the devastating impact of imported steel axes on the religion and social organization of the Yir Yorant aborigines of Australia. The author documents the result of missionaries who, armed with the best of intentions, replaced aboriginal stone axes with those made of imported steel. The missionaries believed that the technological improvement from stone to steel provided a “natural” advantage which would not only increase agricultural productivity but result in major social developments within the culture as a whole. The unanticipated result, however, was that established networks of trade and gift exchange, which revolved around the circulation of stone blades, were upset drastically by the new commodity. Following the introduction of steel axes, the traditional hierarchy between junior and elder, as well as the relationship between men and women, was irrevocably altered (Sharp 1952: 457-64).

Although the present article is about the introduction of a Western trade good to non-Western societies, it is not about the transformation of society itself. Its focus instead is on the resistance of society to transformation, and on the transformation of trade goods by members of different societies. Specifically, using examples from four different cultures, this article describes and analyzes how societies without indigenous weaving traditions alter and adapt for their own use imported cloth. Drawn from diverse regions of the globe, these examples illustrate four different technological innovations that have been used to structurally alter imported cotton fabrics. The groups that I will consider are the North American Seminoles, the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname, the Cuna of Central America, and the Kalabari of coastal West Africa.

While various authors have dealt with the modification of imported fabrics in specific ethnographic contexts, no study has yet attempted to view this phenomenon in cross-cultural perspective. In a review essay on “The anthropology of cloth,” Jane Schneider (1987) briefly discusses some of the literature on indigenously transformed factory cloth. This article expands her discussion of the subject, explores other ethnographic cases, and introduces a theory that accounts for the “naturalization” of foreign goods.3

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3 For a very different view of cross-cultural textile trade, in which European merchants were modifying their own aesthetic canons to suit non-European taste, see Steiner 1985.
Seminole Patchwork Cloth

The living members of the Seminole tribe are descendants of Hitachiti and Muskogee-speaking Native Americans who migrated to northern Florida in the first quarter of the eighteenth century from towns of the Creek Confederacy of Georgia and Alabama (Sturtevant 1967: 161; Downs 1979: 33). Since about 1765, whites have referred to all the Florida Native Americans as Seminoles—a term that is derived from the Spanish word *cimarron*, meaning “wild” or “wild one.”3 As a result of their continuous and successful resistance to Euro-American conquest, throughout their history the Seminoles have retreated deeper and deeper into the Florida Everglades and have become increasingly more isolated (Downs 1979: 33).

There were three Seminole Wars that marked growing disjuncture between Seminoles and other Native Americans as well as Europeans. The Second Seminole War (1835-1842) caused a total break in contact between the Florida Seminole and other Native American groups; it resulted in the deportation of several thousand Seminoles to Indian Territory out west; and it forced the few remaining in Florida deeper into the subtropical southern end of the peninsula. The Third Seminole war (1855-1858) sent more Seminoles west of the Mississippi (mostly to Oklahoma), and forced the remaining two hundred or so even deeper into the Everglades (Sturtevant 1967: 161).

The population of Seminoles in the impenetrably dense swamps and forests of the Everglades increased to 1,000 or so by the 1950s. The Seminoles remained largely isolated from all outside influences and control until well into the present century. William Sturtevant has noted that “Until after World War II the Seminole were by far the most isolated Indians in eastern North America, and among the least acculturated on the continent” (1967: 161).

Before their migration to the south and during their earliest years in Florida, Seminole garments and accoutrements were largely indistinguishable from those of other Southeastern Native American tribes (Goggin 1951: 3). Like their Creek neighbors to the north, the early Seminoles wore both buckskin garments and items that were heavily influenced by European forms and material, such as bandoleer bags (embroidered or beaded shoulder pouches suspended from a broad sash). Not long after their arrival in Florida, the Seminoles began to replace their hide garments with clothing made by Seminole women from imported trade cloth. It is

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3 As used in the New World, *cimarron* originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills in Hispaniola, and soon after to Native American slaves who had escaped from the Spaniards. By the end of the 1530s, it was beginning to be used to refer to African American runaways, and had strong connotations of “fierceness”—i.e., of being “wild” or “unbroken” (see R. Price 1979: 1-30; Levi 1993: 115-142).
both curious and ironic that the most isolated Native Americans in eastern North America should have come to rely for their personal adornment almost entirely on imported cotton fabrics. As the Seminoles continued to forge a culture in the secluded environment of the Everglades, they developed dress styles that were largely independent of borrowings and influences from other groups (Davis 1955: 974). This unique style of Seminole clothing has not been static. Like other fashion systems around the world, Seminole clothing has enjoyed change through time. The major developments in the last two centuries have been in men's shirt styles (Fig. 1) and in patterns of decorative motifs.

In his study of Seminole men's clothing, Sturtevant provides a model of the evolution of Seminole-style shirt types. He identifies four main designs: (1) the plain shirt and (2) the long shirt that were typical of the nineteenth century. (3) the big shirt that appeared about 1900, and (4) the modern shirt that started to be produced around 1940. In some areas, all four styles survived into the 1950s (see Blackard 1990). Throughout this entire period, the shirts were fabricated entirely from European trade cloth (mostly English gingham and calico).
Sometime in the 1890s, hand-operated sewing machines were introduced to the Seminoles by Euro-American traders. Not only did the sewing machines accelerate production, they also resulted in major transformations in design. It has been postulated that the introduction of sewing machines was largely responsible for the shift from the earlier simple, "positive" appliquéd designs to the cut-and-sewn patchwork style which is unique to the Seminoles and typical of designs found among them today (Fig. 2). "Whereas the original crude geometric designs were appliquéd to the garments," explains Hilda Davis, "the newer designs were assembled in a long strip and then inserted into the garment as a separate band. Use of the sewing machine resulted in the designs being made smaller in size and much more complicated in pattern" (1955: 975). Another change that occurred by the 1920s was that the dark, subdued colors of earlier trade cloths were replaced by brighter, livelier ones (Davis 1955: 975).

It is unclear where exactly Seminole clothing design originated, or where the Seminoles drew their inspiration for their unique style of clothing. In her research on the history of Seminole fashion, Davis has put forth two hypotheses regarding the origin of modern Seminole clothes. First, she suggests that the present-day Seminole style developed sometime between 1916 and 1918, when print clothing was replaced by Seminole patchwork designs made from pieces of single colored cloth. It was about

Fig. 2. Seminole/Miccosukee patchwork skirt by Annie T. Jim, collected 1985. Lost and Found Traditions Collection, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. The Lost and Found Traditions Collection is a gift of the American Federation of Arts made possible by the generous support of the American Can Corporation, now Primerica. Photograph by Bobby Hansson.
this time, she reports, that print materials went off the market because of World War I, which cut off the imports of dyes from Germany. Using single colored cloth, the modern Seminole patchworks were meant to imitate the printed patterns available to them before the early twentieth century. The second hypothesis, which seems to me less plausible than the first, postulates that “the idea of banded colors was suggested to the Seminole by the liguus snail, a very colorful tree snail which inhabits south Florida and parts of the Caribbean” (Davis 1955: 980).

The appliqué production technique of the Seminoles is a specialized, complicated, and unique process. Though the finished product may resemble old-fashioned Euro-American patchwork quilts, which typically are built up from small individual pieces of cloth, the production of Seminole patchworks is very different. Seminole patchworks are produced in the following manner: Three narrow strips of cloth, each a different pattern or color, are sewn together lengthwise to produce a three-color band of cloth about four inches wide. This band is cut into small sections, which are then resewn in such a manner that like colors do not go back together. The excess fabric resulting from this type of combination is trimmed off, and three compatible colors, each one half to one inch wide, are sewn on both sides of the band, usually two above and one below. The bands are then integrated with garments and sewn into place.

Saramaka Cloth

Between the mid seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, the ancestors of the present-day Saramaka Maroons escaped from the Dutch-owned sugar, timber, and coffee plantations on which they were enslaved. Both individually and in groups, escaped slaves fled into the vast, densely forested interior of Suriname, a Dutch colony in northeastern South America that gained its independence in 1975 (R. Price 1983a; 1983b). After escaping from the plantations, the slaves regrouped into small bands and created societies known by Europeans as Maroon societies. Today, there are six Maroon tribes in the Republic of Suriname: Djuka, Saramaka, Matawai, Aluku, Paramaka, and Kwinti (S. Price 1984). This article will concentrate on the textile arts of the Saramaka who, as a result of careful field and archival research by anthropologists Richard and Sally Price, are the best known and documented Maroon tribe in Suriname.

From the 1670s onward, the Saramaka (who today number approximately 20,000) have been at once fiercely isolated from other societies and heavily dependent on contact with the outside world. Before 1762, the Saramaka were almost continually at war with the Dutch. Large plantation owners financed huge military expeditions into the rain forest in an attempt to exterminate Maroons. The Saramaka retreated further and further, coming out of the forest only occasionally in order to raid plantations for material supplies and to recruit more runaways.
Because the military expeditions were extremely dangerous and too costly for the Dutch planters to continue to finance, the Dutch signed a peace treaty with the Saramaka in 1762 (R. Price 1983b: 5). Following the treaty, the Dutch crown paid the Maroons periodic tribute in the form of cloth, pots, guns, and other European-made goods. Richard Price reports that cloth was one of the primary goods offered to the Saramaka as tribute; he cites, for instance, one of the tribute lists associated with the peace treaty which included thirty pounds of undyed thread, sixty skeins of blue thread and sixty of white, and one thousand bolts of cotton cloth (1983b: 48).

Once the provision for tribute was phased out by the colonial government in the middle of the nineteenth century, Maroon men began spending time on the coast as boatmen, loggers, and laborers. Their employment provided the cash income necessary to purchase the coastal, imported goods needed for their life in the interior. Commercially-manufactured cotton cloth is one of the most important items that a man brings back from the coast for his wives. Sally Price has noted that a typical list of

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 3.** Saramaka man’s shoulder cape, collected 1960s. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles (X72-125). Photograph by Antonia Graeber.

* Some of the best information about the Saramaka during their early history comes from the accounts of Captain John Gabriel Stedman, a British military officer who was commissioned from 1772 to 1777 to capture or kill runaway slaves. See Stedman 1796/1988.
items brought back from the coast might include up to three-hundred yards of imported striped cotton cloth (1984: 76).

Throughout their history, the Saramaka Maroons have relied on imported textiles for their clothing. Though some amount of locally grown cotton was woven into a coarse, undecorated cloth, the bulk of cotton textiles and thread came from outside. In the early years of marronage, the Saramaka acquired cloth by raiding plantations. After the peace of 1762, they received cloth as tribute from the metropolitan crown. And in the more recent past, Saramaka men have earned cash on the coast in order to buy cloth themselves (S. Price 1984: 134).

The basic dress of Saramaka women consists of two wrap-around cotton skirts, secured at the waist by a sash or folded kerchief, and a cloth tied over one or both shoulders. The men typically wear a breechcloth and a cape which is also tied over one or both shoulders (Fig. 3). Both male and female clothing is either sewn or embroidered exclusively by women. Although the Saramaka are entirely dependent for their clothing on cotton fabrics brought in from outside, they never use the cloth "as is." Both men and women's dress is created from imported textiles that have been structurally altered or transformed in various ways.

In their exhibition catalogue Afro-American arts of the Suriname rain forest (1980), Richard and Sally Price detail the history of Saramaka clothing. Far from being a static aesthetic medium, Saramaka fashion is continually changing. Some of the main historic styles include the following: From the 1850s to about 1910, women embroidered cloths with shapes defined by lines of linked stitches and filled with areas of embroidered "textures" in contrasting colors. From 1900 to the 1970s, women's embroidery consisted

Fig. 4. Saramaka man's shoulder cape, collected 1960s. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles (X72.116). Photograph by Antonia Graeber.
of purely linear designs, at first predominantly free-form (planned by women) and later more geometric (planned with compasses and other tools by men). Starting around 1890, women began sewing “bits-and-pieces composition” patchwork cloths constructed mainly of squares, rectangles, and triangles of cloth sewn onto a solid background. Beginning in 1910, women started sewing “narrow strip composition” patchwork cloths that were made from predominantly parallel arrangements of narrow strips of colorfully striped cotton (Fig. 4). From the mid 1960s to the present, women, under the influence of mission schools, were creating cross-stitch embroidery with patterns copied mainly from Dutch and American needlework magazines (S. Price and R. Price 1980).

One of the most complex and interesting Saramaka textile compositions is the “narrow strip” cloth. It is produced from striped or solid imported commercial cloth that has been cut into strips and then resewn to produce a new pattern. Women begin a “narrow strip” composition by choosing the center strip, known to them as the “spine”. Planning of the cloth then progresses simultaneously to both sides, alternating between “head” and “side” pieces. “Head” pieces are those cut from the weft of the original cloth; “side” pieces are those cut from the warp. The alternation between these two types of strips gives the finished product added strength.

Once the body of the cape is laid out, the women choose the lower border which consists of one to three side (warp) pieces depending on the wearer’s height. Another piece is laid along the opposite side of the cape, with the selvage (finished edge) at the top. The strips are then sewn together.

The “narrow strip” composition patchwork of the Saramaka Maroons is interesting not only for its intricate production and carefully thought-out construction, but also for its aesthetic rules which are, to a degree, informed by the Saramaka’s African past. Although “narrow strip” compositions are not direct “survivals” passed down generation by generation from African origins – the Prices have taken great pains to show that this style of composition did not originate until the early twentieth century – the compositions are unmistakably reminiscent of West African textiles created on narrow-band looms. The Prices have written the following about the connection between West African and Saramaka textiles:

Maroon narrow-strip textiles – created by carefully planned arrangements of horizontal and vertical strips, each with internal cross- or lengthwise stripes – are strikingly similar to woven narrow-strip cloths from West Africa. Indeed, the parallels in overall form and color contrasts, the “syncopated” effect, in both cases, of subdued modifications to a dominantly symmetrical grid pattern, and the common use of small motifs as occasional accents within the strip construction all suggest, on grounds of formal similarity, that the textiles of the Suriname Maroons could well represent inheritance from their seventeenth-century African ancestors. (S. Price and R. Price 1980: 72)
Therefore, in the absence of looms and dyes the Saramaka Maroons have structurally altered commercially-made textiles in order to recapture an African motif that was originally created by interlacing warp and weft threads on a narrow-band loom, and sewing the woven strips together to create a sizable cloth (cf. Thompson 1983).

Cuna *Molas*

The Cuna (also spelled Kuna) are a tribe of Indians living in the San Blas Archipelago, a chain of about 370 small islands off the Atlantic coast of Panama in Central America. Although they have had contact with foreigners for at least the past four hundred years, throughout their history the Cuna resisted occupation by Europeans (Salvador 1976: 167). In the mid 1500s, the Cuna helped escaped slaves live in the interior along the Bayano River and the coast off Colon. Between 1675 and 1725, the Cuna had their greatest contact with outsiders, as they joined forces with pirates fighting their common enemy, the Spanish. In the eighteenth century, the Cuna sporadically attacked Spanish towns. A peace treaty was signed in 1741, but there were other rebellions until New Spain granted the unconquered Cuna independence in 1831. In the early 1900s, the Panamanian Government pursued a policy of forced assimilation. Finally, in 1925, the Cuna rebelled after which time Panama recognized Cuna autonomy in the San Blas region (Salvador 1976: 168).

The Cuna (who today number about 23,000) migrated from the Panamanian coast to the San Blas Islands around 1850 (Parker and Neal 1977: 26). The reasons given for this migration include: (1) unfriendly relations with blacks and with the Spanish both in the interior and along the Pacific coast, (2) Cuna desire to get away from the jungle’s insects, vampire bats, and other environmental hazards, and (3) increased opportunities for coastal trade in coconuts and tortoise shells, both of which the San Blas islands are rich in (Salvador 1976: 168).

The Cuna make their clothing out of commercially-woven cloth which they receive either in exchange for coconuts with Colombian merchant traders or from tourist art dealers who exchange bolts of new cloth for old *molas*. In the Cuna language, the term *mola* means “blouse,” however it is also commonly used to refer simply to the appliquéd panels (Fig. 5) which are sewn to the front and back of a blouse (Salvador 1976: 171; Patera 1984: vii).

Before the introduction of cotton cloth, Cuna men and women wore barkcloth clothing which may or may not have been painted (Helms 1981: 71). From the time trade cloth was introduced until about 1900, the Cuna wore cotton garments which they painted with geometric designs. Sometime after 1900, the Cuna discontinued the practice of painting designs on cloth, and began instead to decorate their garments with “reverse” appliqués which are still produced and worn today.
The appliqués are decorated with designs probably derived from those used in body painting (Salvador 1978: 12; Helms 1981: 71). The motifs may also be associated with men's oratory which gradually reveals secret meanings through layers of hidden knowledge (Hirschfeld 1977: 147-66). Although the designs on the *mola* appliqué panels are infinitely variable, the structure of the Cuna outfit itself is relatively unchanging. The costume consists of a skirt and scarf cut from rectangular cloth, a blouse with two *mola* appliqué panels (one in front and one in back) sewn together with a yoke at the top and puffed sleeves; the scarf is always red and yellow, while the skirt is usually dark blue with green or yellow (Salvador 1976: 172).

*Mola*-making is a specialized women's craft consisting of two different appliqué techniques whereby a multi-colored design is created from several pieces of commercially-made cloth which have been stacked one above the other. Some designs are formed by placing smaller pieces of fabric on top of larger ones in such a way that a portion of the underlying fabric appears along the edges of the superimposed piece. Other designs are created through a much more unique and unusual process known as "reverse" appliqué (Fig. 6). This technique consists of cutting open outer cloth layers along the lines of the desired design to reveal the various colors of underlying fabric.
thus creating a pattern or motif. Both appliqué techniques are often combined in the production of a single *mola*.

**Kalabari Cloth**

The Kalabari are a riverine people inhabiting the inner Delta of the Niger at the southern tip of Nigeria, West Africa. As a riverine people, their traditional life has centered on trading and fishing. Historically, Kalabari (or, as the British called it, New Calabar) was a commercial state specializing in palm oil that served as a port of trade, rather than a source, for the Atlantic slave trade (Curtin 1969; Ajayi and Espie 1972). Beginning at least in the seventeenth century, the Kalabari were in contact with Europeans. Unlike many African peoples, however, their contact with Europeans did not result in their exploitation as human chattel. They enjoyed the benefits of trade with Europeans, while at the same time remaining largely autonomous.

Though living in a region with a rich tradition in narrow-band and other handloom weaving (e.g., the neighboring Yoruba weavers of Ijebu-Ode and the Igbo weavers of Akwete), the Kalabari have no indigenous weaving tradition (Aronson 1982). The
Fig. 7. Kalabari pelete bize cloth. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles (X83-15). Photograph by Richard Todd.

Fig. 8. Kalabari pelete bize cloth. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles (X83-18a). Photograph by Richard Todd.
clothing material of the Kalabari come from imported cloth some of which is structurally altered by women and renamed pelete bise and fimate bise. Wrappers made from such cloth are generally worn by men and women on ceremonial or ritual occasions, especially funerals (Renne 1985). Today, some women also wear the cloths as secular fashionable attire.

Both pelete bise and fimate bise are created by women on imported fabrics by a hand technique that consists of cutting threads with either a razor or penknife blade and then pulling away the cut threads. The production of pelete bise and fimate bise begins with the selection of the imported cloth. Only certain striped, plaid, and checked textiles made in England and India are considered as appropriate for cutting. In their research on Kalabari cloth, Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima (1982) have identified the following as important criteria in the selection of imported cloth: (1) high thread count or dense weave enabling threads to be removed without substantially weakening the fabric, (2) small-scale stripes, checks, and plaids are necessary so that removal of only a few threads will permit design by subtraction to be achieved, (3) color sequencing of the warp threads is important since only the lighter, brighter colors are removed which leaves the darker areas more prominent. After the appropriate cloth has been selected, threads are cut and removed in order to reveal a new design. Pelete bise motifs have both warp and weft-threads removed. Fimate bise cloths result in only striped designs for, while no warp threads are removed, the weft threads are cut and then pulled out completely. In contrast to the original material which is firm and compact, the transformed fabrics are lacy and supple.

The precise origins of pelete bise and fimate bise are unclear, however it is possible that the source of the “cut-thread” and “pulled-thread” techniques may be owed to the introduction of Iberian lace-making by Portuguese sailors and merchants in coastal West Africa (Renne 1985). The sources of the designs are said to derive from decorative shapes and forms that were once created on Kalabari women’s hair and bodies. Traditionally, women’s hair was shaved to form patterns on the scalp, and their bodies were decorated with designs painted with camwood and other dyes (Erekosima and Eicher 1981: 49).

Whatever the origins of either the production or the designs, a brief comparative survey of the region reveals that the aesthetic effect of pelete bise is strikingly similar to that of textiles created by the Igbo, Yoruba, and other neighboring ethnic groups who weave cotton thread on looms. Represented in both Kalabari cloth and the hand-woven cloth of their neighbors are geometric patternings of lines, triangles, and zigzags. Having no weaving or dyeing tradition, the Kalabari have developed the “cut-and-pulled-thread” technique as a means of transforming imported cloth into fabrics which find aesthetic parallels with the Kalabari’s neighbors in the Niger Delta who produce occasional cloth on indigenous hand-operated looms.
Discussion

The societies described in this article are related in the sense that all four import foreign cloth, transform the cloth into new patterns or designs, and create garments that are wholly unique to their culture. Throughout their histories, all four societies successfully resisted European conquest and exploitation. The Kalabari avoided enslavement in Africa, the Saramaka fled from slavery in the New World, and the Cuna and Seminoles escaped extermination (cf. Schneider 1987: 426).

Resistance, in all cases, resulted in some form of cultural isolation. As migrant traders, the Kalabari were isolated from the weaving arts of their sedentary neighbors. As runaway slaves, the Saramaka were isolated from the weaving traditions of their African ancestors. And as fugitives, the Cuna and Seminoles were isolated from the weaving technology of other Native American groups living under less difficult conditions and in less harsh environments. It is paradoxical that the isolation which resulted from their quest for independence should have led all four of these societies to near-total dependence on outsiders for clothing in the form of imported trade cloth. Although they lack self-sufficiency in the raw materials necessary for their dress, the sense of dependency in all these societies is diminished by the fact that they alter or transform the fabrics they receive in trade. In all four cases, I would argue, the spirit of resistance is directly reflected in the clothes people wear.

As a means of visual communication the language of personal adornment is powerful and conveys a wealth of information. Among other things, clothing can symbolize status, gender, social role, and political or ethnic affiliation (see Cordwell and Schwarz 1979; Weiner and Schneider 1989). In many non-Western societies, the use of unaltered Western cloth or clothing is indicative of cultural assimilation. Those educated and groomed in Western missions or schools, for example, are generally clothed in the attire of Western culture (see Hay 1989). By contrast, one could argue that the use of

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3 An interesting situation which parallels the process of trade good alteration that is being discussed here can be found in England - well beyond the marginalized realm of the non-Western world. When local resources in England inadequately supplied certain materials needed for subsistence and industry, the country was faced with a serious threat to one of the guiding principles of mercantilism, namely the stress on economic self-sufficiency. “Upon finding herself depending upon alien sources for crucial needs,” notes James Bunn, “England began to stress the importance of colonies. For colonies afforded the means by which foreign commodities could become ‘native’ to the realm.... Thus, in harmony with the fundamental principles of mercantilism, the conception of a self-supporting country eventually broadened into a self-supporting empire” (1980: 306). At the perimeters of the world capitalist system, societies underscore their sense of self-sufficiency by socially transforming the goods upon which they are dependent from external trade. At the same time, those at the center of the system mitigate their sense of dependence by transforming the very definition of society so as to include in their conception of self the peripheries of empire upon whom they are so very dependent for certain materials.
structurally altered Western cloth in a non-Western society is a sign of cultural autonomy. The foreign qualities of the garments are hidden by an indigenous technology that reworks the fabric into something new.\(^6\)

In “Kalabari cut-thread and pulled-thread cloth” (1981), Tonye Erekosima and Joanne Eicher use the term “cultural authentication”\(^7\) to refer to the transforming of a selectively borrowed cultural object by the receiving culture into four differing possible levels of adaptation. These levels include: (1) the selective borrowing and using of an artifact, (2) the “naming” of an artifact to make it distinctive, (3) the desire for a particular artifact to be exclusively owned by a specific group, and (4) a selected artifact with an additional design applied to make it distinctive from the original artifact. The Erekosima and Eicher model is applicable to all four cases analyzed in the present article.

The first level of cultural authentication can be illustrated among the Seminole, who demonstrated a marked preference for bright colors over dark ones. Similarly, the selectivity of the Saramaka influenced the supplies of cloth made available to them by foreign merchants. Sally Price reports.

Saramakas were not passive recipients of cloth supplies. From the first, they both expressed their preference, in terms of colors and types of fabrics, and supplemented government supplies with selective purchases made on the coast. Once men began earning significant amounts of money [on the coast] they were in an even better position to influence Saramaka cloth supplies according to their own aesthetic preferences. (1984: 133)

The Cuna also influenced the supply of available cloth by their color preferences: red, yellow, dark blue, and black (Salvador 1976: 170). The Kalabari considered only certain stripes, plaids, and checks to be appropriate for cut-and-pulled-thread subtraction.

Data to support the second level of cultural authentication are provided in the literature for both the Saramaka and Kalabari. Among the Kalabari, “cloths have specific names; frequently they are named for the first Kalabari trader (traditionally a man) who introduced the cloths into the Kalabari market... some names are epigrammatic: such as ngerisubo (an only child) [and] gobminji (gold-flecked, literally gold water)”

\(^6\) The use of Western and indigenous dress styles may also signal differences in gender identity. Michael Taussig notes in *Mimesis and Alterity* that “While Cuna men, particularly in their high status and sacred roles, adorn themselves in Western attire with felt hat, shirt, tie, and pants. Cuna women bedeck themselves as magnificently Other. It is they who provide the shimmering appearance of Indianess. In so doing they fulfill a role common to many Third and Fourth World women as bearers of the appearance of tradition as the embodiment of the Nation” (1993: 177; see also Babcock 1993).

\(^7\) The term was developed by Tonye Erekosima who first introduced the word in 1979. See also Eicher 1980.
(Eicher and Erekosima 1982: 4). Among the Saramaka, Sally Price has observed that of “all the various Western manufactures that are imported into Maroon villages, trade cloth is the focus for one of the most extensive creative systems of individualizing names” (1984: 147). Saramaka cloth names generally commemorate people and events, for example, *Ameika go a gadu* (“America goes to God”) in commemoration of the first successful moon-landing and *Agbago singi a mote* (“Agbago sank with a motor”) which commemorates Chief Agbago’s first trip to Paramaribo by motor, when his canoe sank in the rapids (S. Price and R. Price 1980: 82-83).

The third element in the Erekosima and Eicher model is characteristic of all the groups described in this article. That is to say, in all four societies the motifs and designs incorporated on trade cloths are meant to identify that style of cloth with a specific cultural group. To take one example, the Seminoles today express their ethnic identity by wearing their distinctive Seminole clothing, rather than wearing feather headdresses or bonnets which would indicate Pan-Indianess. Sturtevant remarks on this phenomenon by noting that “beginning about 1954, instead of the Pan Indian dress which is worn to emphasize Indianess nearly everywhere else, what Seminole men have worn on such occasions is a reconstructed older-style Seminole costume. This is symptomatic of the distance of the Seminole from other United States Indians, physically and in attitude. What is important to them is to be specifically Seminole, rather than merely ‘Indian’” (1967: 173).

Finally, the last category in the Erekosima and Eicher model refers to the various techniques for structurally altering cloth. This article has documented four different techniques that range from additive appliqués in which patterns are constructed by stacking different colored cloths on top of one another, to subtractive embroidery where designs are created by pulling threads out of imported fabrics. In a sense, all the other factors in the model are secondary to this fundamental technological form of cultural authentication.

Although, as it stands, the Erekosima and Eicher model is very useful in providing a framework within which to place the four cases described in this essay, the model lacks one important level of cultural authentication, namely the establishment of an object’s link to a culture-historical past. In *The invention of tradition* (1983), a volume edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, the authors analyze the ways in which societies invent their own “traditions” in order to represent continuity with the past - whether it be real or mythical (see also Lowenthal 1985).

Having lost their traditions in migration or flight, I would argue that in the four societies presented in this article the transformation of trade cloth into culturally distinctive attire is a form of “invented tradition.” Like the examples discussed in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s volume, the sources of these “invented traditions” are said by the members of the “inventing” society to be grounded in historical truths with deeply rooted cultural pedigrees. Cuna designs, for example, are reported to come from traditional body painting; Kalabari designs are thought to derive from traditional
hair styles and personal adornment; and Saramaka "narrow-strip" compositions are, at least in part, inspired by the narrow-band textile designs of the African ancestors from whom the Suriname Maroons are descended. This added feature to the notion of "cultural authentication" gives the model some "historical" depth which links the transformation of cloth to a people's vision of their own history and their construction of the past.

In his introduction to an edited volume entitled *The social life of things*, Arjun Appadurai argues that the analysis of trade ought to focus on the very "things" that are exchanged. "We have to follow the things themselves," he writes, "for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven them" (Appadurai 1986: 5).

This article has attempted to track the "social life" of commercially-made and imported cloth from production to consumption. In so doing, the method has revealed how imported textiles follow similar trajectories in four different cultures – none of which have indigenous weaving traditions. Rather than use imported cloth whole, as it is received in trade, each culture gives the cloth new value and meaning by structurally transforming and reworking it into a unique pattern or textile genre that distinguishes an entire community of trade cloth consumers as a separate cultural group. The study of the structural alteration of imported cloth throws light not only on the various methods of textile modification, but also reveals a complex repertoire for the technology of resistance through which people, as social actors, express their sense of independence and their opposition to cultural assimilation.

References


Lowenthal, David 1985: *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


