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Appropriated Threads:
The Unpicking and Reweaving Imported Textiles

by
Jessica Hemmings

The Silk Route has become synonymous with the movement of knowledge that accompanies the trade of objects. Many of the textiles discussed here were not traded along the Silk Route, but all are representative of the associations that are made with this artery of cultural exchange. The examples cited arrive from a range of cultures and geographies: Indonesia and Nigeria, the Southwest United States and New Zealand. From these vastly different regions, using a variety of materials, weavers painstakingly unpicked yarns from woven fabrics for use in other weavings.

The term 'raveled yarn' refers to threads that have been unpicked from a piece of woven cloth and rewoven into another. This paper attempts to determine the reasons behind what seems in the twenty-first century to be such a laborious undertaking. Unpicking fabric to remove flaws, examine the structures involved or possibly recycle precious threads is common. But rarely does the contemporary designer work with materials of such inherent value that time is not considered more valuable.

Historically, the reasons for unpicking yarn have been both aesthetic and economic. Penelope's ruse to stall time by unpicking her daily weaving each night may be one of the earliest examples.¹ Certain cities developed reputations for deconstructing fabrics for thread such as the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra along the Silk Road which was devoted to the unpicking and reweaving of silk to local fashions.² On a more intimate level the instinct to recover threads from woven materials appears in an example from the other side of the world where slave women and girls in the southern United States are thought to have unwound threads from their owner's discarded stockings and fabric remnants so that they could use the thread to stylishly wrap around their own hair.³ As early as 1730 a Danish envoy in Africa wrote, "Opoku bought silk taffeta and materials of all colours. The artists unravelled them so that they obtained large quantities of woolen and silk threads which they mixed with their cotton and got many colours."⁴ In 1817 a British envoy wrote of chiefs "in a general blaze of splendor" who "wore Ashantee cloths, of extravagant price from the costly foreign silks which has been unravelled to weave them in all the varieties of colour, as well as pattern."⁵ In *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa* it is written:

Now, the Moors once more make in this land quantities of cotton, much of which is gathered here; they spin it and weave it into white cloth and, since they do not

¹ See Ruth Scheuing, "The Unravelling of History: Penelope and Other Stories", *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*, Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing, eds. (Canada: YYZ Books, 2002) 201-213.

² Mildred Constantine and Laurel Reuter, *The Whole Cloth* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), 24.

³ Judith Wilson, "Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women's Art" *International Review of African American Art* volume II no. 3 (1994): 13.

⁴ Rømer 1965 (1760), 36 quoted in Doran H. Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 151.

⁵ Thomas Bowdich 1966 (1819), 35 quoted in Doran H. Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 152.

know how to dye, or because they do not have dyes, they take blue painted cloths from Cambay, unravel them and gather the thread into a ball and, with their white weave and with the other they make them painted, from which they obtain a great sum of gold.⁶

Finally, the use of raveled yarns is preserved in an Akwete myth from south eastern Nigeria that recounts their use by the group's legendary weaver who was alleged to have designed new textile patterns in her dreams. A version of the legend states:

She brought threads from Europeans and loosened them to use in her cloth. Some of the threads were silk. Dada Nwakwata originated weaving with imported yarn and producing designs. She worked in secret to avoid others from copying.⁷

In many cases value is determined by rarity of fiber or colour. But in other cases a very literal value is at stake, such as the real gold thread brocade (songket) of the Palembang in Sumatra. Due to the economic value of the gold thread it is recycled over and over again. When thread bare weavings are sold by weight, taken apart and incorporated into new pieces. The result of this continuous system of recycling is a dearth of old songkets, for the valuable thread is always being removed and used again.⁸ Across the globe in Virginia of the 1800's it has also been documented that for reasons of economy damaged fabrics were unpicked and rewoven. Gloria Seaman Allen writes of her research in the region, "Fiber was too valuable to be discarded. The only solution was to unravel the web of yarn goods."⁹ Allen's research offers an insight into the monotony of the work at hand. Quoting from the *Forman Diaries* a woman employed to unwind the damaged fabric remarks, "Monday we finished winding the fine piece that Mr. Vace had spoiled for us, a very tedious job, this is the second piece I have wound, and I think it I keep my sense it will be the last, it kept five women a week to wind it."¹⁰

The presence of raveled yarns in textiles from around the world points to an economic necessity as well as an aesthetic inclination among weavers. In the American Indian context the presence of raveled yarns within woven cloth is termed *bayeta*. Often associated with trade blankets, the term has grown to cover numerous definitions and associations, but in Spanish word refers to coarse wool manufactured in England, traded to Spain and then onto Mexico.¹¹ A recent edition of the television series the Antiques Road Show dated a rare Navajo blanket by the small red square woven from raveled yarn along one edge. It was speculated that the red square could have been a repair patch, but a subsequent conclusion is that the section acted as the weaver's signature. Weaving one's

⁶ *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa 1497-1840 Vol. V (1517-1518)* (Lisboa [Lisbon]: National Archives of Rhodesia: 1966), 359 first cited by John Picton.

⁷ Aronson, Lisa. "Akwete Weaving: Tradition and Change." *Man Does Not Go Naked: Textilien und Handwerk aus afrikanischen und anderen Ländern*. Herausgegeben von Beate Engelbrecht and Bernhard Gardi, ed. (Basel: Ethnologisches Seminar der Universität und Museum für Völkerkunde, Kommission bei Wepf, 1989) 42.

⁸ Personal correspondence on August 3, 2002 with Dr. Fiona Kerlogue, Deputy Keeper of Anthropology, the Horniman Museum, London.

⁹ Gloria Seaman Allen, "Threads of Bondage: Chesapeake Slave Women and Plantation Cloth Production, 1750 – 1850", Columbian School of Arts and Sciences of the George Washington University unpublished dissertation, 301.

¹⁰ *Forman Diaries*, October 19, 1816 quoted by Gloria Seaman Allen, "Threads of Bondage: Chesapeake Slave Women and Plantation Cloth Production, 1750 – 1850", Columbian School of Arts and Sciences of the George Washington University unpublished dissertation, 301.

¹¹ Constantine and Reuter, 23.

signature out of raveled yarn would have proved to those of the time that the weaver was important enough to have such valuable materials at their disposal.¹²

The Bùnù Yoruba weavers of central Nigeria weave a cloth called *Aso Ipo* which literally translates into “cloth from red cloth.”¹³ As early as the sixteenth century trans-Saharan and European coastal trade brought red cloths to the Bùnù that were likely raveled for use in the *Aso Ipo* cloth.¹⁴ Several scholars have noted that by the colonial era the Bùnù unraveled red wool from colonial hospital blankets to acquire the thread needed for their distinctive designs.¹⁵ Picton and Mack write “In Ghana, the difficulties of producing a good read dye, however, lead to the unravelling of imported red cotton cloths by Ashanti and Ewe weaver, and in parts of Nigeria red hospital blankets have been unravelled in order to re-weave the yarn thus obtained.”¹⁶

It is in the hands of the Ashanti, that the use of raveled silk reached some of the greatest and most colorful heights. Before the emergence of inlay work with silk the Ashanti were known for their weaving of blue and white cotton cloth. Many weaving materials have historically been imported by the Ashanti because they do not grow within the forest zone they inhabit.¹⁷ In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the woven cotton cloth was supplemented with silk inlay work. The silks the Ashanti procured for their inlay work came from mills as far away as Italy, India and North Africa.¹⁸ Foreign silks were raveled and used as single colour decorative weft-faced designs. As availability increased silk occasionally also appeared as warp threads.¹⁹ Breaking away from the trend of unpicking red colours from woven cloth, the Ashanti were “freed from the limitations of patterning cloth with blue and white yarns or the reds of trade cloth, and able to select unravelled silken yarns of lighter blue, red, yellow, black and green.”²⁰

Another African tribe, the nearby Ewe, have been accused of imitating the celebrated Ashanti inlay weavings.²¹ Both cultures are believed to have begun their weaving histories of weaving blue and white cloth. But the Ewe, in less favorable economic position than their wealthy neighbors turned to the raveling of trade cloth, often cotton, from Europe and India in red and yellow colours.²² Densely woven cotton blankets are believed to have been woven from imported and raveled European cotton.²³ The conclusion that Adler and Bernard make is that the “Ewe desired to mimic the colour

¹² http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/roadshow/series/highlights/2002/tuscon_follow1.html

¹³ Elisha P. Renne, “*Aso Ipo: Red Cloth from Bùnù*”, *African Arts* 25, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 66 and Elisha Renne, *Cloth That Does Not Die: the meaning of cloth in Bùnù social life* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995) 110-111.

¹⁶ John Picton and John Mack, *African Textiles: Looms, Weaving and Design* (London: published for the Trustees of the British Museum by the British Museum, 1989) 32.

¹⁷ Peter Adler and Nicholas Bernard, *African Majesty: The Textile Art of the Ashante and Ewe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 53.

¹⁸ Picton & Mack, 29.

¹⁹ Ross, 78.

²⁰ Adler & Bernard, 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²² *Ibid.*, 102.

²³ *Ibid.*, 108.

of their court, and without the means to import silks, developed a sophisticated expression with cotton.²⁴

Today, the Ewe and Ashanti weavings, like the Navajo before them have fallen prey to the expensive and poor quality silk thread and synthetics that now saturate the market. This contemporary supply of poor quality yarns and the increasing pressure to live a fast paced life has bled many of these hotbeds of innovation dry. Ironically, in some cultures this withering of skill and artistry was actually encouraged by the import and use of raveled yarns. Extensive trading in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries with Europeans and Indians as well as other African cultures meant that the Akwete amassed numerous examples of weaving, dyeing and spinning from other cultures. But in this particular case the influx of imported cloth eventually damaged traditional skills and resources.²⁵ Lisa Aronson writes:

All Akwete cloths predating 1900 are woven of imported threads suggesting a total rejection of hand spinning, a practice once known in the Akwete area. Indigenous dyeing was also affected. Indigo dyeing of imported threads is evident in only one or two examples of the late nineteenth century cloths; the majority are woven with factory-dyed threads.²⁶

In Africa cotton and rayon now arrive from Hong Kong via traders. Ironically the imported rayon is still called silk by the weavers offering further evidence that general knowledge has been lost.²⁷

The Navajo example of trade blankets and the red hospital blankets of Nigeria are both symbols of imperial and later colonial invasion and rule. Another example that follows this theme comes from the Maori of New Zealand. In a short article published in the *Archaeological Textiles Newsletter* analysis of a dried Maori head complete with woven headband suggests that the fabric was not indigenous to the region. The author surmises from time period and fiber content and twist, that the thread of the head bands may in fact have been unpicked from the Union Jacks (British National Flag) Captain Cook in known to have left on the island when exploring the region.²⁸

Constantine and Reuters' conclusion that "unravelling was done for reasons of taste" applies to many of the examples explored here.²⁹ But the influence of post-colonial theory to this research also recognizes an evocative image in the indigenous weavers methodically unpicking the foreign flags and blankets of the colonizers, appropriating these threads into their own indigenous weaving styles. The flag, colonial hospital and trade blankets are all evocative symbols of cultural imperialism. In these cases they are carefully deconstructed and woven back into the traditional patterns; eloquent, if hard earned, examples of ingenuity and adaptation.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁵ Aronson, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁸ M.L. Ryder, *Archaeological Newsletter* November 1994, 14-15.

²⁹ Constantine & Reuter, 24.

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Ebra Masquerade incorporating Bunu
Aso Ipo Cloth. Acquired 1903. Courtesy
of Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh.



Songket weaving in Palembang,
Sumatra Courtesy of Dr. Fiona
Kerlogue, Deputy Keeper of
Anthropology, The Horniman Museum,
London



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