

Proof of published work: Norris, L (2005). 'Cast(e)-off Clothing: A Response to Karen Tranberg Hansen (AT 20[4]) in *Anthropology Today* Vol.21 (3) p24.

Cast(e)-off clothing: A response to Karen Tranberg Hansen (AT 20[4])

Karen Tranberg Hansen's contribution addressed pertinent issues concerning the global trade in second-hand clothing. Overwhelmingly conceived of as a flow of goods from the developed to the developing world, Hansen's research into this trade has largely been concerned with questioning widespread perceptions of the negative effects of the so-called 'dumping' of (our) 'rubbish' upon developing economies. By analysing the cultural construction of demand at the local level, she aims to refute some of the more protectionist claims that such trade threatens the survival and growth of indigenous textile industries and reinforces patterns of national economic dependency. For those with the lowest incomes, she argues, buying affordable second-hand clothes opens up a democratized space for self-fashioning otherwise unavailable because of the higher costs of locally produced clothing.

Whilst my own research into the recycling of clothing in India indeed supports these conclusions, the study of the complex trajectories of clothing there from acquisition, discarding to total recycling suggests that this topic also impinges upon several wider anthropological concerns, for example how we formulate and project our self-image and the social construction of belonging, the relationship between exchange, dirt and boundaries, and cultural constructions of value (and waste) in the context of global material flows.

That cloth is a basic unit of exchange within and between families and networks of kin is an anthropological commonplace, and despite the ever increasing numbers of middle-class urban Indian women going out to work and earning salaries, it remains a definitive means of acquiring one's wardrobe and placing one within a network of intimate sociality in India. At the opposite end of the scale, the global production and trade in textiles links the factory weavers and garment makers in India to end consumers abroad through negotiation of the ever changing demands of fashion and the market, among many other factors. If cloth both embodies and constitutes relationships marking gender, status and identity between bride and groom, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, then equally its presence and translation across such international networks in the global economy makes those wider power relations manifest, and problematizes essentialist notions of cultural boundaries and material exchange. The study of the second-hand clothing trade enables us to bring both perspectives into focus at the same time through the cross-cultural classification and recuperation of once-intimate rubbish.

By tracing initial processes of consumption, circulation and discarding through the management of Indian family wardrobes, it emerges that the dynamic construction of self relies not so much upon 'keeping-while-giving' as in the propensity for gifts to be made in anticipation of the impermanence of the bought or gifted cloth. During the year wardrobes are constantly replenished as new gifts are given and old ones are handed on to younger relatives and servants. But at periodic intervals, unwanted clothing is got rid of, stripped of its particularity and commodified, whether through barter or gift. Entering the marketplace, it is bought up by entrepreneurial dealers who recombine elements, creating new looks and products by cutting up and restitching, changing cut, form and

Proof of published work: Norris, L (2005). 'Cast(e)-off Clothing: A Response to Karen Tranberg Hansen (AT 20[4]) in *Anthropology Today* Vol.21 (3) p24.

ornament according to fashion, retaining some features whilst obliterating others. Whether sold on to the poor, refashioned for export to ethnic boutiques in the West, or marketed as an antique to the Indian élite consumer, clothing is first turned back into cloth and then once more becomes clothing, materially reconstituting the consumer within a new framework of relationships. For example, the élite Indian shopper in a fashionable south Delhi boutique would not normally dream of wearing the cast-off sari from another woman outside her immediate family, and such an exchange would be inconceivable in terms of potential pollution. But the invisibility of the market sanitizes, and designers refashion saris into smart *salwar kamiz* (tunics and trousers), managing to sell them within a new moral framework by marketing them as positively conforming to both contemporary 'modern' ideas of environmental recycling and 'traditional' (Indian) beliefs in reincarnation.

But the breakdown of clothing into fibres, its fundamental constituent parts, takes this process one step further, revealing with startling clarity the importance of breaking images for recycling and recuperation. This recombination of elements can be found in the Indian shoddy industry (where clothing is completely destroyed in order to permit the reclamation of its constituent fibres). It depends upon importing mountains of slashed cast-off woollens from the West, called 'mutilated hosiery', and enables the fibres to be reclaimed and spun for weaving into new products such as blankets and suiting. As our once-treasured jumpers from Calvin Klein, Gap or Marks and Spencer are chopped up by women squatting on vegetable cutters, one of the by-products of the process are piles of labels following this brand destruction; the global name-tags which could triple or quadruple the price of a plain blue sweater.

At no point in the process are the garments, wool or blankets washed, and the end products are thick with grime and grit to the touch, often smelling of the motor oil added during the pulping stage. Having removed all visible traces of their origins, the manufacturers successfully reclaim and 'Indianize' the fibres through the choice of designs woven into the fabric of the blankets themselves (see the baby blanket pictured in Hansen's article, for example). Overwhelmingly the blankets feature 'traditional' Indo-Persian motifs such as vases of flowers, which have their roots in both classical Hindu and Buddhist architectural art from at least the first century AD. Your blue Gap jumper has been transformed into a carpet of flowers on a blanket lying across the bed of an Indian family. The trade between India and the developed world reveals that these material flows can run in unexpected directions, with Western cultures importing used Indian saris in the form of halter-neck tops and skirts, and Indian businesses producing cloth adorned with traditional Asian motifs from once branded Western goods. It is in the materiality of fibre, cloth and image, and its continuous transformation through destruction and reassembly, that the second-hand clothing trade reveals ongoing processes of cultural translation, re-presenting graphic new images of cultural difference in the transitional here and now.

Lucy Norris
University College London
ucsakln@ucl.ac.uk