

Institution: Nottingham Trent University (NTU)		
Unit of Assessment: D32 – Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Using ethnography to improve the lives of textile artisan communities in rural India and sustain South Asian intangible cultural heritage		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name:	Role:	Period employed by submitting HEI:
Eliuned Edwards	Professor	2009 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 – December 31, 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Edwards' ethnographic research with socio-economically marginalised textile communities in rural India has introduced their craft and artistic practices to new global audiences, helping to sustain South Asia's material heritage and traditions.</p> <p>This has impacted high-profile exhibitions at three world-leading museums and has changed curators' interpretations, enhanced knowledge of South Asian textile collections and their makers. Facilitating relationships between the artisan and curator led to the co-production and display of new contemporary textile pieces. This has raised the domestic and international profile of artisan communities, improving their socio-economic status, strengthening their cultural identity, increasing business revenues that have led to increased jobs. Edwards' research has developed networks in India between artisans, NGOs, and craft and fashion industries, providing greater livelihood opportunities for nomads, as well as educational opportunities for women and girls.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>After attaining independence in 1947, the Indian government's modernisation programme effected widespread socio-economic change that resulted in dramatic shifts in the way of life in rural areas. Through research over the last decade into craft production, textiles and dress in India, Edwards has explored changing cultures and identities in these communities, examining how state-led and global processes have played out locally and been expressed in material culture. Her extensive ethnographic research, in partnership with nomads, hereditary artisans and other stakeholders in the craft sector, has documented these stories through the production and transmission of handmade textiles through photographs, video, drawings, paintings, and the collection of objects, tools and raw materials. Edwards' archival and collections research in India, Thailand, UK, Europe and North America has complemented and consolidated this field data.</p> <p>The Rabari are pastoral nomads who inhabit the desert tract of Kachchh district in the extreme west of Gujarat, where India borders Pakistan. They are renowned throughout northwest India for their textiles and dress; Rabari women are especially recognised for their embroidery skills. Edwards has studied how an emerging pattern of sedentarisation among the Rabari has caused communities to renegotiate their individual and group identity, with textiles and dress a key area in which that identity is contested and reconfigured [R1]. A by-product of this cultural change was the Rabaris' ban on dowry-embroidery. Edwards' research highlighted the transformation of this 'labour of love' into a commercial product and form of labour-work [R1]. Edwards recounted the social life of textiles in Gujarat more widely, tracing the historical journeys of fabrics, woven, dyed, painted and printed cloth, and embroidery. Furthermore, she located their place in culture and trade and explained the role of entrepreneurship in their survival [R2].</p> <p>Ajrakh is a block-printed dyed textile worn as caste dress by cattle herders in the Kachchh district, where it is made by Khatri artisans. With its distinctive geometric and floral designs, Ajrakh has been transformed into a popular fashion fabric. Edwards charted its journey to the catwalks of New Delhi and Mumbai, discussing government initiatives that resulted in the</p>		

introduction of artisan-designer collaborations in the 1970s, and the influence of Indian and overseas entrepreneurs on designs [R3, R4, R5]. Her 2016 monograph [R5], explored the contemporary production and use of Indian block prints. It described the diverse histories of these textiles, shaped by trade, colonisation, technology and entrepreneurship, and how they have been key to the creation of visual identity in India and a significant source of revenue through centuries of trade. In 2018, the British Council commissioned research by Edwards, in partnership with the Craft Revival Trust in New Delhi, that studied the role of artisanal textiles, entrepreneurship and technology in women's empowerment in India. The resulting report [R6] made recommendations that informed the criteria for the scheme that were designed to overcome barriers to women and girls' involvement in artisanal textiles to address skills gaps and labour shortages.

Edwards' outputs represent a multi-faceted research agenda that approaches crafts through individuals, modes of professional practice, production skills, raw materials and equipment, faith, NGOs and the State. A recurring theme is the role of NGOs in shaping the crafts landscape [G1, G2, G3]. This demonstrated that at a 'micro' level, NGOs have challenged (but also in some ways reinforced) gendered ideas of labour and livelihood by using the 'women's craft' of embroidery for rural income-generation, while at a 'macro' level they have mobilised the language of heritage for sales, geographical indications legislation and tourism [R2, R6]. The work [G1, G2, G3] showed how professionalisation transforms all aspects of crafts, from women embroiderers adapting dowry customs for income-generation, to Khatri dyers/printers adapting production to meet deadlines and quality standards of distant clients and the global fashion industry [R3, R4, R5]. The work addressed the understudied problematic role of entrepreneurship in shaping Indian design history, not only where urban, elite designers draw on craft skills, providing artisans with work albeit often reducing them to mere labourers, but also among artisans themselves where the ownership of heritage motifs and techniques is contested [R3 to R5]. The work also illustrated the negative impact of state interventions, for example how overproduction of craft for the state development agency results in poor returns for artisans and diminished quality long-term [R6].

3. References to the research

The quality of the underpinning research has been evidenced by externally peer reviewed outputs and grants.

R1 Edwards, E.M., 2010. 'Textiles and Dress Among the Rabaris of Kutch'. In: E. Simpson and A. Kapadia, eds., *The Idea of Gujarat: History, Ethnography and Text*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, pp. 184-206. ISBN 9788125041139.

R2 Edwards, E.M., 2011. *Textiles and Dress of Gujarat*. London: V&A Publishing in association with Mapin Publishing. ISBN 9781851776450.

R3 Edwards, E.M., 2016. 'Ajraakh: From caste dress to catwalk.' In *Textile History*, 47, 2, pp.146-170. DOI:10.1080/00404969.2016.1211436.

R4 Edwards, E.M. with I.M. Khatri, 2016. 'The Work of the Khatri of Kachchh: Ajraakh and Block-Printed Textiles.' In C. Branfoot, ed., *Traditional arts of South Asia: continuity in contemporary practice & patronage*. London: Saffron Press, pp. 96-109. ISBN: 9781872843322.

R5 Edwards, E.M., 2016. *Block Printed Textiles of India: Imprints of Culture*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. ISBN 9789385285035. Received Textile Society of America's R.L. Shep Award for best book in the field of ethnographic study of textiles.

R6 Edwards, E.M., 2018. *Crafting Futures India: The Empowerment of Women and Girls through Artisanal Textiles, Digital Technology and Entrepreneurship in India*. British Council.

Key underpinning grants and commissions

G1 Leverhulme Research Fellowship 2012-2014, £45,000. Research focused on craft, development, and entrepreneurship: the revival of Indian block prints since 1947.

G2 British Academy International Partnerships and Mobility Scheme. 2014-2017, £30,000. Research involved artisans in Gujarat, Craft Revival Trust and Ambedkar University to investigate cultural sustainability in local economies through the lens of the Indian craft sector.

G3 British Council 2018, £10,000. Commission to produce a baseline report for the Craft Futures India Programme. £5,000 allocated to research partner Craft Revival Trust, New Delhi.

4. Details of the impact

Edwards' ethnographic research with marginalised artisan communities in rural India has had impact in three key areas. It has enhanced curatorial practice by creating new links between artisans and curators, enabling the latter to better understand their collections and present richer, decolonised stories about South Asian textiles through major exhibitions and permanent exhibits. It has promoted Indian artisans to international audiences, improving economic sustainability. It has facilitated the forging of support networks within India that increased access to education and other livelihood opportunities for rural communities.

Influencing and enhancing curatorial practice for the benefit of cultural institutions, public audiences and South Asian artisan communities

Edwards' research has enhanced curators' interpretations and knowledge of South Asian textile collections and their makers and has facilitated the co-production and display of new pieces for international exhibitions. The Victoria and Albert Museum staged *The Fabric of India* exhibition from October 2015 to January 2016 to show the skills, variety and adaptability of Indian textile makers. Edwards' research into Ajrakh made possible the display, for the first time, of a set of samples (from the workshop of artisan Ismail Mohammed Khatri) and videos that explained the Ajrakh process [S1]. The V&A's senior curator (South Asia) wrote: '*One of the strongest parts of that exhibition was the materials and techniques section, people spent hours in that room because they wanted to learn about processes and when you have a piece like that showing the Ajrakh process on display, it immediately conveys the message visually without needing to use too many words*' [S1]. This special exhibition (with a standard entrance fee of £16), attracted 110,000 people [S1]; it toured in 2019 to Cincinnati Art Museum and The Ringling, Florida, reaching a further 90,000 people [S2]. Edwards gave a talk at a symposium held during the exhibition, where she presented data collected through her research with the Khatri community to 300 members of the public. She wrote about her Ajrakh research in an accompanying book published and sold by the V&A, which sold out twice and is now on its third run [S1]. The V&A curator concluded: '*The exhibition had a lasting impact on many people in terms of enhancing an understanding of the Ajrakh process*' [S1].

In 2018, the British Museum opened a new permanent gallery, the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic world. The Museum's former curator for the Modern Middle East attended one of Edwards' research talks on Ajrakh in 2016, which she said '*opened (her) eyes to new understanding*'. She said [S3]: '*I had no idea that there were Muslim artisans in India, Gujarat. I thought they were all in Pakistan. But here I am hearing that there are clans, and families, called Khatri who do this beautiful block printing.*' Edwards was asked to advise and help choose a selection of historical and contemporary Ajrakh textiles for the South Asia [display] case based on her research expertise and knowledge of the stories that lay behind the items. She also arranged the purchase of a contemporary Ajrakh centrepiece and advised on how to communicate the complexity of the wooden print block process to museum visitors. This permanent display, which represents a non-western perspective has been hugely popular with Islamic communities. The curator said: '*The whole point of the gallery is to show that the Islamic world is diverse in nature ... Eiluned's contribution was to expand our displays and interpretation of the Islamic world*' [S3].

Also, in 2018, Edwards was awarded a five-year Research Associateship at Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Canada. ROM had decided to create the exhibition *The Cloth that Changed the World: India's Painted and Printed Cottons*; previous exhibitions of its Indian textiles had focused on 1500 to 1800 but this time the museum wanted to show what happened in the 19th century through to the present day. According to the ROM senior curator [S4], this is '*what made this exhibition really distinctive*' and Edwards' research contribution was '*crucial*' in telling a '*much bigger story*'. She said: '*Professor Edwards' knowledge was particularly important because we wanted to present artisans' work as a living art, a living story and one that is flourishing.*'

Edwards shared her knowledge to shape the exhibition content and introduced the ROM to artisan networks in Gujarat and designers in Delhi, which *'allowed ROM to present a contemporary story within the exhibition which we would not have otherwise been able to tell'* [S4]. Edwards' Khatri collaborators worked directly with ROM, creating a contemporary Ajrakh masterpiece, videos of production processes and traditional pieces for sale. She also authored an original essay for the exhibition book and the concluding chapter because ROM *'wanted people to understand her message that readers can support the renaissance in block printing through being educated consumers'*. The exhibition opened on 12 September 2020 and will run until 6 September 2021, with an attendance of 17,001, limited by Covid-19 closures [S4].

The research gave the curators direct access to artisans' voices and artisan communities, furthering decolonisation of Western curatorial practice. The British Museum curator [S3] explained that the research *'enabled us to be aware of and understand this living tradition and incorporate that within our South Asia displays'*. Edwards' research directly informed the reinterpretation of existing collections from a non-western perspective, giving audiences access to new understanding through selecting and contextualising objects. Again, the British Museum curator said: *'...there was no one to turn to at the BM with the knowledge to help me'* and Edwards *'help[ed] me construct what stories would be shown'*. The ROM curator [S4] said Edwards *'helped us to think of these artists in new ways, helping me appreciate the cloth makers, who are perceived as low status'*. We were able to *'educate consumers about what they're buying, especially for clothing and fast fashion, so we're better able to challenge people to think about what they're buying'* [S4].

Edwards' research has educated museum professionals in South Asian textiles through symposia, presentations, workshops and the Islamic Art and Material Culture Specialist Subject Network [S4, S5]; this has helped curators at regional and national museums heighten the visitor experience by demonstrating the economic, environmental and social challenges impacting rural block printers' traditional livelihoods in north-west India [S1, S3, S4, S5]. Edwards' work has connected curators with rural artisans. This led to commissioned artefacts, conveying the complex print process [S4], harnessing makers' experiential insights to educate curators and visitors at the V&A, BM and ROM on production processes. This enabled curators to access major fashion brands/retailers Péro, Anokhi, Fabindia in India and Maiwa in Canada, capturing in print the craft input into contemporary fashion trends [S4, S6 and S7].

Raising the international profile of artisan communities in rural India, supporting their socio-economic development and strengthening their sense of identity

Edwards' research has provided artisan communities with an international platform on which to further their design experience and access new commercial opportunities. Responding to Edwards' insights into international fashion/textiles trends, a family of Ajrakh block-printers in Kachchh headed by Abduljabbar M. Khatri redesigned their textiles to meet demand within high-end overseas markets. The business grew its revenues ten-fold (since 2016) to £100,000 per annum, opened eight new workshops and created 185 new jobs [S8], with more women entering the workforce [S9]. Facilitated by Edwards' research, artisans have adapted traditional designs to contemporary styles, using sustainably sourced materials (cotton) and natural dyes (indigo) sold at high-end fashion stores like Fabindia [S7 and S10]. This has given them access to 'high-end' markets (e.g., UK, Canada) [S7, S8, S10], encouraging tourism, product sales and benefiting the Khatri economy. Abduljabbar M. Khatri's pieces were included in the ROM exhibition catalogue which benefitted from the sale of items in the ROM gift shop. Edwards' research has promoted block-printers' work through residencies, exhibition workshops and symposia, boosting their economic and social status by sharing insights into their skills. Abduljabbar M. Khatri said long-term partnerships created through the research had raised their international profile and allowed him to speak as an equal and on behalf of his community to promote understanding of block-printing practices [S4, S8]. In their 'The Fabric of India' exhibition, the V&A deliberately moved away *'from the concept of the anonymous crafts person'* and *'put artisans' names and identities on the display labels to give them authorship over their work'* [S1]. The director of the clothing store Maiwa Handprints [S7] said of the impact of

international exposure on artisan communities: *'It means that their tradition not only survives but flourishes'* and *'It is invaluable for the community and key to sustaining the Ajrakh tradition.'*

Facilitating the development of networks in India for the benefit of artisan communities

Powerful advocates of rural craft-production emerged from the community networks developed through Edwards' research, such as high-profile social activist Ishmail Khatri [S11]. He said the collaborations had raised his international profile as an advocate and activist for his craft and community, leading to direct engagement by the President of India who Khatri met in 2020 to discuss artisans' needs, socio-economic issues and strategies to promote rural regeneration. Community engagement with fashion and cultural institutions has encouraged younger Khatri to enter the craft, seeing the community gain status, international recognition and increased prosperity [S6 and S7]. Edwards' research partnership with Abduljabbar Khatri examined design in craft and heritage management [G2]. Consequently, Khatri and his son spoke in Delhi to 300 policymakers, fashion retailers, designers and NGOs. An account of their business was entered in the Delhi-based Craft Revival Trust's *Encyclopaedia of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the largest online encyclopaedia for traditional arts and crafts, (six million hits per year [S6]).

Edwards' research involved collaborations with Indian NGOs Shrujan and Qasab, which both work with craftswomen in Kachchh district to revitalise the craft of hand embroidery and sell to domestic and overseas markets. Her research process facilitated the deepening of links between both NGOs and the Rabari community. Shrujan established its Living and Learning Design Centre in Ajrakhpur, Kachchh in 2016; Edwards released her published research on Rabaris [R1] to them for inclusion in their archives and Shrujan involved Rabari communities in the opening exhibition. Edwards also introduced Qasab to Rabari communities, which resulted in several Rabari women being recruited to the NGO's artisan cooperative. Through her interactions with Rabari communities during the course of her studies, Edwards persuaded community leaders to place greater importance on education for Rabari girls. This led directly to an increase in the number of Rabari girls in formal education (300 out of 600 in 2019 were girls at the Rabari school) and resulted in the employment of more women in the block-printing industry supply chain within Gujarat [S9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 Corroborating statement from the Senior Curator (South Asia), Victoria and Albert Museum.

S2 Email correspondence from Associate Registrar of Exhibitions, Ringling Museum of Art, US.

S3 Corroborating transcript of an interview with the former curator of the Modern Middle East, British Museum.

S4 Corroborating transcript of an interview with the Senior Curator of Eastern Hemisphere Fashion and Textiles, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.

S5 Statement from Curator of World Cultures, New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, corroborating how the research enabled the museum to better interpret their collections through symposia, workshops and the Islamic Art and Material Culture Specialist Subject Network.

S6 Statement from the Director of the Craft Revival Trust NGO, New Delhi corroborating how the research partnerships, workshops and engagement promoted understanding of the Ajrakh tradition and craft practices, resulting in artisans' improved economic wellbeing.

S7 Statement from the Directors of clothing store Maiwa Handprints, Vancouver, Canada corroborating how Edwards' research enhanced block-printers global recognition as skilful artists, which has enabled the craft to thrive and grow through increased income.

S8 Corroborating statement from Ajrakh block-print artisan, Kachchh.

S9 Statement from the Principal of Rabari School corroborating how Edwards' research led directly to an increase in the number of Rabari girls in formal education and resulted in the employment of more women in the block-printing industry within Gujarat.

S10 Statement from global textiles expert, corroborating how Edwards' long-term engagement with communities has improved their economic standing and raised their international profile as skilled artists.

S11 Corroborating statement from Ajrakh block-print artisan, Kachchh.