

# Aesthetics and ethics: Upgrading textile production in northern Kerala<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 February 2011  
Received in revised form 26 August 2013  
Available online 13 October 2013

### Keywords:

Upgrading  
Geographical Indication  
Ethical consumption  
Economic anthropology  
Hand-loomed textiles  
Kerala

## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that producers in developing economies aiming to get a better deal may choose upgrading strategies that are highly influenced at the local level by relative positions of power in horizontal networks, and not only approaches aiming to increase value capture along vertical global production chains. Using the case study of a declining handloom industry in northern Kerala, the paper examines why local marketing strategies do not do more to capitalise on the brand value of Kerala's achievements in social development and attempt to engage with ethical consumption initiatives in end markets. Rather, while cooperatives seek to gain more of the labour value of the goods they produce, local merchants focus upon aesthetic qualities and claims to regional authenticity through accreditation with Geographical Indication.

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the district of Kannur (formerly Cannanore) in northern Kerala, small weaving units produce thick cotton furnishing fabrics, hand-woven in bright checks and stripes on wide, wooden Malabar frame-loom. While some eke out a living supplying local markets, a few subcontract orders from local merchant-exporters, producing cloth to designs largely supplied by home furnishing retailers in developed economies. These global production chains have been stretched via the introduction of agents and middlemen, and are increasingly experienced as 'buyer-driven' (Gereffi, 1999, p. 54), prompting local merchants to work hard to develop upgrading strategies and strengthen the global branding of textiles from Kannur.

Larger merchant-manufacturers struggle to maintain handloom<sup>1</sup> as an economically-viable fabric within a range of textile products; having mostly closed down their own local handloom factories, they have largely transferred the risks of direct manufacturing through outsourcing, subcontracting orders to village hand-weaving cooperatives (co-ops), local independent weavers working on piece-rate, and small powerloom units. Many larger merchants are also exporting high volumes of cheaper power-loomed fabrics and 'made-ups' (stitched household items) from Kannur, although much

is sourced from automated factories that they may own or subcontract to across the border in Tamil Nadu, which operate 24 h a day on much lower wages.

The merchants' efforts to upgrade across their product range include promoting the aesthetics of 'Cannanore handloom' as a low-volume, high-quality artisanal fabric, supported by the recent success of obtaining Geographical Indication status. This strategic focus on aesthetics and authenticity to add brand value is preferred over drawing attention to the achievements of the left-wing political movement for Kerala social development that might feed into wider consumer discourses of fair trade and social accountability. For whilst official employment conditions are better than in other Indian states, explicitly building ideas about ethical consumption and social development into the merchants' upgrading strategies risks transferring more power to organised labour and may lead to higher production costs, a greater distribution of profits and reduced competitiveness.

A curious incident during fieldwork highlights how embedded social values and qualities within a product are constructed, negotiated and presented to others within the broader commodity network. Here the local politics of visibility leads to confusion surrounding the construction of the 'aesthetics of ethics'. Traditional weaving sheds have floors of beaten earth, local timber or sometimes the once ubiquitous unglazed terracotta tiles, which soak up moisture and prevent slipping; they are dusty, noisy, and festooned with lint, threads, cobwebs and precarious lighting. But one co-op was working with a large private company that was particularly concerned to be seen to abide by international standards of social accountability (e.g. SA8000) such as providing a clean workplace, access to drinking water and separate changing facilities for women,

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<sup>1</sup> Hand-loomed fabric is commonly referred to as 'handloom' in India, and this usage is adopted here.

as well as improving the hand-woven products it traded in. The company had helped the co-op apply for state subsidies to buy new looms and to tile one half of the old shed floor with new white vitreous tiles to accommodate them.

That end of the shed did indeed look cleaner and the floor dazzled in the sun. However, many of the weavers preferred to work on the beaten earth floor; it absorbs the natural vibration of the heavy looms, and the expensive brass ends of shuttles that fly off the loom tend to break on the hard tiles. But a group of foreign buyers visiting the site had been told in advance that not only were earthen floors traditional, they were ritually pure, a reference to the wider Indian practice of smearing cow dung on floors in rural homes to purify them. Local merchant-exporters promote handloom as a traditional product, while helping to transform weaving sheds into clean and modern environments. In contrast, these foreign buyers also valued the aesthetic elements of the supposedly traditional units, resonating with weavers' own preferences. And while visitors might perceive cooperatives to be equitable production units that adhere to socially-accountable labour standards, in fact the application of changing aesthetic standards to both product and workplace serves to render invisible the essentially exploitative relationship between the merchants and local weavers.

This research contributes to a significantly under-researched aspect of global production networks, namely how vertical paths interconnect with horizontal social and economic relations at the local level. Specifically it examines how local power relations constrain the choice of upgrading strategies available to independent weavers, small producers and workers' cooperatives, leaving them struggling to negotiate for the smallest margins while merchant-exporters nurture international contacts, appropriate state resources and keep wages low. It draws on a year's ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Kannur between summer 2007 and 2008, investigating efforts to revitalize the declining handloom industry following the end of the Multifibre Agreement in 2005. Formal interviews and informal discussions were conducted in English with a wide range of State officials and local government agencies, merchant-exporters, cooperative managers and trade unions officials; these complemented on-going conversations with weavers in Malayalam facilitated by trained research assistants.

### 1.1. Global value chains and upgrading strategies

Value chain analysis provides a tool for understanding the distribution of gains along a global commodity chain, and explaining its production capabilities and structure of governance (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Schmitz, 2006). As Schmitz admits, development economists know that the amount of trade affects development, but less is known about how it is affected by its organization. Gereffi's original work on the garment industry stressed the role of global buyers in organizing trade (Gereffi, 1999), which allows them direct control over product definition and reducing supplier failure while reducing their own capital investment. Significant interest has since focused upon 'upgrading' strategies pursued by suppliers to redistribute the gains in their favour. As Kaplinsky asserts, income growth depends upon identifying and capturing areas of value accretion that are protected from competition; these protected spheres are characterized by economic rents and unequal access to scarce resources (Kaplinsky, 1998). Strategies of upgrading have been characterized as either following the 'low road', with its potential for 'immiserising growth' in its race-to-the bottom approach, or the 'high road', where upgrading is a relative concept associated with competitive innovation (Kaplinsky and Morris, 2001).

High road strategies include product, process, functional and inter-sectoral upgrading (Schmitz, 2006). However, Ponte and Ewert

challenge the assumption that producers will eventually perform more functions and acquire more skills higher up the chain, following knowledge transmission from buyer to supplier, and claim that taking the 'high road' is not necessarily always the best route (2009). They characterize the literature on upgrading through two strands, that which focuses upon identifying capabilities to access new markets and increase competence (whether knowledge transmission occurs across horizontal clusters or vertically along the chain), and that which considers development more widely, i.e. which conditions lead to a 'better deal' overall for suppliers. The latter involves balancing rewards with risks, and not necessarily going up the value-assessed ladder of upgraded products, processes and functions. Instead suppliers may focus on more efficient management systems, faster lead-times, higher standards and new markets, and may develop a portfolio of products that covers a range of values, where a high quality item creates brand value and market entry for larger volumes of cheaper goods. Alternative strategies include achieving fair trade certification or an indication of geographical origin, neither of which change the intrinsic qualities of a product (Ponte and Ewert, 2009, p. 1639). Since it is becoming harder to compete on price, 'capitalists increasingly seek to trade on values of authenticity, locality, history, culture, collective memories and tradition' (Harvey, 1990, p. 109); 'what is changed is not the means of production but how meaning is produced, or how the relationship between persons and things is constructed and managed' (Foster, 2008, p. 10).

Since the liberalisation of the Indian economy began in the 1990s and the end of the Multifibre Agreement in 2005, Indian textile producers are having to increase competitiveness (DFID, 2006a, 2006b). The industry in northern Kerala includes amongst its strategies: product and process upgrading and downgrading, operating in several chains at once at different levels and 'leveraging competences between them' (Schmitz, 2006, p. 557), acquiring Geographical Indication for premium products, and balancing a mixture of high and low road strategies including taking advantage of poorer working conditions across state borders. The notable exception to capitalising on local value(s) is the failure to mention achievements in labour and social development, what Kerala is perhaps most famous for.

Understanding the complexity of production networks rather than chains allows for the consideration of 'multi-stranded connections between a variety of significant and related actors' (Hughes, 2000, p. 177). Research into networks' cultural environments connects to the literature on clusters and their potential success in responding to global challenges through agglomeration and collaboration (Kennedy, 1999). Kennedy's research on tanneries in Tamil Nadu shows how, when threatened with closure by the Indian Supreme Court for environmental pollution, local firms combined to operate common effluent treatment plants. Cluster cooperation was boosted through shared social, religious and kinship ties, though there were inevitable problems with monitoring and compliance. However, work by Schmitz (1999, 2006) on the hard-pressed Brazilian footwear industry points to a failure of clustering in attempts to upgrade production. A handful of the largest producers put their relationships with lead firms ahead of SME cluster partners; they conclude disintegration was exacerbated by the failure of the State to mediate between (vertical) business alliances and (horizontal) entrepreneurial associations (for example Schmitz, 1999). In Kannur, State efforts to cluster co-operatives have failed to deal with their subordination to merchant-exporters who dominate the export trade and indirectly appropriate State subsidies.

### 1.2. Geographical Indication and value differentiation

As value is created through a network of producers and consumers, different segments may contain their own internal logic for maximising value; the 'follow the thing' literature demonstrates this by using multi-sited fieldwork to make visible the often

hidden connections between the producers, middlemen and consumers of commodities in circulation (Appadurai, 1986; Cook, 2004; Foster, 2006). This is exemplified by Attfield's study of the battle for 'authenticity' in the post-war furniture trade in England (Attfield, 1996, 2000). She charts the historicity of the solid wood reproduction of an 18th century chair manufactured through the craft tradition ('honest copies') which comes to be seen as a mass-produced fake by modernists ('pretending to be old' through a hand-finish). In contrast, the industrially produced modern composite item (in plywood and block-board) becomes an original design classic, described as 'honest' about its machine-made origins. In the good design movement, authenticity lay in modern ideals and rationality, not in original patina. She comments, 'the concept of originality is closely tied to modernism, and the recent idea that it is possible for a designer to produce an entirely new design without reference to a traditional model' (1996, 100), whereas evolutionary design is much more in keeping with a traditional craft practice based on a more organic series of slow change of form over long periods of time. Attfield draws on the example of gentrification (Thompson, 1979) to demonstrate how different qualities of furniture are brought to the fore as being more durable and hence more valuable attributes in alternative regimes of value (1996, 113). The manipulation of contextual information within each segment of a chain allows for it to be ultimately marketed in whatever way each sector believes to be most effective in underpinning its core values.

Geographical Indications (GI) were introduced under the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, 'where a given quality, reputation or other characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographic origin'. GI offers information to customers where there is an information asymmetry, and can have significant commercial potential (Das, 2007). GIs came into force in Indian law in 2003, and by July 2012, 178 GIs had been registered (Intellectual Property India, 2012). As Neilson and Pritchard note, 'the establishment of GIs potentially threatens the capacity of downstream actors to control product marketing and, as a result, can be viewed as confrontational' (Neilson and Pritchard, 2009, p. 220). Operating as a monopoly right, collective marks can be viewed as an under-utilised tool for fostering clustering among SMEs who have to come together to transform intangible wealth into tangible property rights (Ghafele, 2009). However there are clearly issues in India over realising their economic potential, specifically whether applications are assessed by specialists, the ability of GI producers to control quality and certification and market their products effectively, their effect on the relative position of various communities in the supply chain network, and concerns with the cost of registering GIs abroad, funding a watch-dog agency and contesting infringements through the courts (Das, 2007). GIs in India are particularly connected to poor, often rural communities involved in producing agricultural and handicraft goods, but whether the value in the chain may be significantly redistributed and shared equitably with the poorest source producers has yet to be researched.

### 1.3. Ethical consumption and value distribution

The reasons why the majority of Kerala merchant-manufacturers choose not to maximise Kerala's reputation for social development as an upgrading instrument, and why smaller producers also fail to engage with ethical trading initiatives, are closely linked to social and political structures at the regional level. Yet little attention has been paid to the capacity for fair and ethical trading ventures to achieve social and economic justice across the regional level, since the focus is usually on vertical supply chains that reassure a consumer that the particular product they are buying

has been ethically traded with the producer (Neilson and Pritchard, 2010).

Social science theorizing that posits a rupture between modern dis-embedded economies and preindustrial moral economies tends to project contemporary ethical consumption as 're-moralising' the economy (Jackson, 2010; Trentmann, 2007). As de Neve et al. comment, 'alternative ethical perspectives, however, are rarely systematic or coherent' (de Neve et al., 2008, p. 2). A common starting point of analysis of global ethical trade initiatives is the end consumer and their perceived ability to enact change through caring at a distance. One argument posits that everyday consumption is intrinsically ethical through routine acts of care (drawing on Miller, 1998, 2001), thus providing a bridge between individual agency and collective obligations through the concept of 'moral selving', i.e. creating oneself as more virtuous by practices that acknowledge responsibility to others (Cloke, 2002). However, recent critiques of ethical consumption question whether Western consumers can act autonomously and change their individual behaviour patterns due to the socially embedded nature of consumption and the multiplicity of obligations, duties and expectations around it, and whether individuals do in fact accept responsibility for global problems (Clarke, 2008). At the wider level, ethical consumerism is understood to be essentially political consumption, and is organised through social movements which moralise consumption behaviour within a framework of collective responsibilities rather than individual self-interest, using knowledge about value differentiation and narrative storylines to mobilise social change (Barnett et al., 2005; Clarke et al., 2007).

de Neve et al. suggest that fair trade systems blur the boundaries between trade and charitable giving, seeking to use the ideology of the inalienable gift to connect producers and consumers (de Neve et al., 2008). Drawing on the work of Mauss (1954) and anthropological theories of exchange, de Neve et al. explain that gifts always contain something of their previous owner, and 'embody the intention, energy and meaning invested in them [...] part of the ideological power of the gift is that it is freely given as an expression of selfless love' (de Neve et al., 2008, p. 6). Ethical trade initiatives see commodity exchange as retaining the 'spirit' of the conditions under which it was made; sometimes quite literally the blood and sweat of the producers working under immoral conditions are thought to adhere to it, potentially haunting the consumer who is affected both morally and physically. Ethical value arises, as does value in the Melanesian Kula exchange or the art market, from the accumulated history in the object, through its oral histories, associated imageries and materialities. But ethical value arises out of complex relational networks geographically or socially distant to the end consumer; these narratives that accompany ethically traded goods may in fact mask a complex set of local labour relations involving itinerant wage labour, factory production, and the involvement of the state (Luetchford, 2008).

Foster's critique of value-chain analysis focuses on the assumption that a commodity chain holds a total amount of appropriated surplus value to be distributed, in the form of brand value (Foster, 2008). Brand value, simply put as the extra value accruing to a branded product over and above the value of a similar unbranded product, represents the creative activity of producers and consumers (through their emotional attachment, i.e. love) but belongs to neither; it is appropriated by its owners by charging monopoly rents for its use. Gaps in knowledge about each other from the perspectives of producers and consumers are crucial for the creation of brand value through the management, or politics, of that knowledge. In Foster's view, analyses that seek to address ethical concerns of social inequality could contribute to the replacement of 'love of a consumer for a brand object' with love (or caring at a distance) for fellow participants in a moral economy, or in Mauss'

terms, making commodities more like gifts (Gell, 1992; Mauss, 1954).

Yet for most end consumers, obtaining trustworthy information about conditions of production in distant places requires mediation through a plethora of regulatory agencies, NGOs etc. (for example, see Barrientos and Dolan, 2006). While 'labels and certificates, as standardised markers of value, risk dis-embedding human relationships in similar ways to money' (de Neve et al., 2008, p. 20), for many consumers it is precisely the 'ethical brand' that they have to put trust in when making choices about what to buy. This is clear in the consumption of fashion. A Mintel report suggested that a significant market could develop in the UK for eco-fashion (Mintel Ltd., 2009); although sales in 2008 totalled only 0.4%, its uptake by major high street retailers is predicted to drive up sales exponentially. However in their survey, one in ten has doubts over the veracity of labelling. This gap between the confused fashion consumer and the promotional methodologies of fashion brands reveals how much more complex and less understood ethical fashion is than the food industry from which many of the concerns have been derived (Beard, 2008). Thus it is the brands that consumers attach themselves to through which they gain confidence in a market full of choice and misleading claims, and these are embedded in trust in the passion of their founders.

Do the contemporary discourses surrounding sustainable fashion (Allwood et al., 2006; Beard, 2008; Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2008) have purchase on the soft furnishings market in which textile from Kannur are competing? Leslie and Reimer have studied the horizontal links between commodity chains, showing that their convergence, divergence and 'leakiness' is crucial to understanding issues of governance (Leslie and Reimer, 2003). These textiles lie on the border between furniture and fashion, negotiating a slippery intersection between durability and ephemerality; in emergent 'lifestyle' stores and retailing, leakages are manifest across design, advertising, magazine, retail, manufacturing and consumption nodes' (Leslie and Reimer, 2003, p. 430). At the top end of the market, retailers will buy only the fabric they require for a sofa from an extensive range of swatches, with customers prepared to wait several months for an exclusive fabric; at the bottom end of the market, the opposite is true, with retailers ordering individual items from a very limited choice for delivery within days. There is a trend to market furniture as disposable, and fashion is used to increase the purchase of something that does not need replacing. The impermanence of upholstery is utilized in achieving rapidly changing fashions in colour, texture and pattern, creating new relationships between fabric retailers and furniture manufacturers (2003: 431). Earlier research into the ethical consumption of furniture suggests that its 'relatively distant relationship with the body as well as its comparative longevity have important implications for consumers' ethical decision-making processes' (Reimer and Leslie, 2004, p. 251; see also Shove and Warde, 2002).

In their work on south Indian tea and coffee plantations, Neilson and Pritchard found that conforming to ethical standards rarely exceeds the minimum necessary to enter global markets (2010), while in Tamil Nadu garment factories, auditing mechanisms at the local level may be unreliable and politically complex (de Neve, 2009). But local social relations that effect the implementation of such schemes and their take-up by some actors and not others need to be understood. Neilson and Pritchard are concerned that analyses of the impact of fair and ethical trading initiatives on transforming inequality tend to focus on vertical chains; instead they seek to consider ethical trade from the horizontal perspective of their uneven insertion into regional production systems (2010). They conclude that these trade initiatives tend not to benefit the poorest and most disadvantaged in the region, being adopted largely by private companies with significant resources aiming to sell at the top end of the market. Those firms engaging in the

production of certified fair trade products for Western companies are implicated in an institutional shift towards external regulation by supra-national NGOs, audit firms, consultants monitoring compliance etc., while marginalized producers remain embedded in national and state level regulatory frameworks, such as government departments and trade unions. Moreover, the labour issues addressed by global NGOs may not be those being fought over by local unions, leaving open questions as to who negotiates wage settlements.

Kerala is famous for its high rates of literacy, low rates of infant mortality, land reforms and organized workforce (Ramachandran, 1996), but although social development is high, industrial production in the state remains relatively undeveloped (Thomas, 2003). The relationship between merchant capital and cooperative labour in Kannur is that while both are locally based, the latter are almost exclusively the suppliers to the former in the export market and have little bargaining power to augment profits or pay higher wages. State support such as subsidies to build infrastructure, to boost cooperatives and help independent weavers bring products to market are thus appropriated by merchant-exporters, who have unchallenged access to international markets. This is directly linked to the contemporary issue identified by Heller, of how class-based social movements aimed at redistributive goals using central state apparatus have coped with global capitalism; as Heller points out, 'globalization in its neo-liberal form has significantly reduced the nation state's latitude in using traditional instruments of redistribution' (Heller, 2005, p. 79).

## 2. The Kannur handloom industry

The industry comprises three sectors commonly categorized as: unorganized (independent home weavers), organized (cooperatives), and private companies, including merchant-exporters and manufacturers. Traditional weavers from the Hindu *chaliya* caste continue make up much of the unorganized sector, subcontracting to local companies. Unusually, Kannur also has a long tradition of industrialized handloom production in both co-ops and private factories. This industrial model was started by the Basel Mission in the mid-19th century to provide work for Christian converts weaving for colonial markets, but in the 1920s and 30s, many private Indian companies were established, selling across India.

These manufacturers started exporting fabrics in 1955, building up the international reputation of Kannur. Many more factories opened up in the 1970s to cash in on the Western craze for cheese-cloth and subsequently went bust. Today Kannur merchants are now exporting textiles for the home furnishing market, typically thick, heavy cotton fabrics used for curtains, upholstery and cushions, tablemats, runners and kitchen items, in the bright stripes and checks associated with Kannur since the days of the Mission. Over 90% of the value of exports are now 'made-ups' (stitched household textiles) sewn by women; while male weavers are leaving for better paid work. the increasingly female labour force is less heavily unionized.

During the yarn and textile shortages following World War II and the advent of the world's first democratically elected Communist government in 1957, the parallel growth of co-op handloom societies was also encouraged. Often originally founded in or near *chaliya* villages and formalizing existing social cooperative weaving structures, the system came to include workers from all the lower castes. Other marginal groups established co-ops as a means of earning a livelihood, self-improvement and a vehicle for social change, hence the Muslim Weavers Cooperative Society and the Harijan Weavers Cooperative Society. This enabled them to gain access to grants and developmental assistance, but many had no experience of weaving, designing products or marketing.

With the help of state institutions, some wove cloth for the local and national markets such as shirting, dhotis and floor mats, while others subcontracted more profitable export orders from the merchant-exporters. Many maintain a mix of the two, but very few co-ops have successfully maintained export contracts with retail buyers directly.

The Kerala State emerged as a major shareholder of these co-ops through apex bodies, and indirectly influences them through the co-op banking system. A more direct control is exerted through party politics, trade union activities and the preferential distribution of central and state level development loans and grants. The handloom industry employed approximately 20% of Indian labour in the 1950s, and still supports approximately 6.5 million people nationally (Das, 2009: 35, fn57). But central government policies designed to support poor, independent handloom workers may not always be best suited to the industrialized model of north Kerala production where in fact a shortage of skilled weavers is the problem due to better opportunities in other sectors. Local officials are able to selectively reinterpret the criteria for disbursement, and channel funds to preferred institutions. Whether or not they are overtly politicized, weaving co-ops were set up as a means to earn a living through centralizing production and redistributing returns, with strong links to local communities: this difference underpins the uneasy structural relationship between merchants and makers as they compete and cooperate in overseas markets.

### 2.1. Merchants' upgrading strategies: regional authenticity

In an earlier study of the capacity of Kannur manufacturers to adapt to changes in global fashion and provisioning, Swallow (1982) investigated the boom and bust of the craze for 'Cannanore crepe' (cheesecloth) in the 1970s. She showed how small independent units linked into a chain of production helped to add flexibility and speed to a manufacturing system, spread risk across the production base, and facilitate re-grouping of resources once the boom was over, a characteristic of the wider textile industry in India since pre-colonial times (Roy, 1988, 1996). Efforts by one firm to centralize production, invest in new equipment, construct well-lit airy new buildings and support good conditions of employment were in fact a significant cause for failure, resulting in a lack of competitiveness and flexibility for the manufacturer.

An analysis of handloom in Kannur by the Textile Committee (Textiles Committee, 2003a, 2003b) confirmed that most of the textile units were SMEs with low overheads and a high degree of flexibility, but were very isolated and found it hard to improve their technology and access new markets. The report suggested that the SMEs needed to develop a regional umbrella brand, capitalizing on their strengths and researching niche markets abroad. These strengths were identified as being able to produce low runs due to cottage-style manufacture, compete in the eco-friendly market due to the use of vat dyes, market themselves under the social justice agenda due to the strength of the handloom workers' union in 'Cannanore' (deemed to be the strongest in all India), and the fact that they were eligible for a range of government subsidies. Despite the good reputation of 'Cannanore' abroad and the resources of land, labour, capital and organisation in existence, none of these elements had been marketed in any systematic way. The report also cited weaknesses including low productivity (only 60–70% of that in Tamil Nadu), relatively high cost of production (fewer working hours and an 'unscientific way of working'), inadequate finishing machines, inadequate associative activity, the lack of a design centre, and the need for proper effluent treatment plants due to the increasing use of more polluting reactive dyes.

In 2005, the local merchant exporters' organization successfully lobbied for Kannur to become the fifth designated Centre for

Export Excellence in India.<sup>2</sup> They also coordinated lobbying for a local airport, container port and bids for infrastructure grants, working with leading co-ops and government agencies, and hosting seminars on the future of the handloom industry and the potential for mechanization. In 2008 they changed their name from the Kannur Handloom Export Organization (KHEO) to the Kannur Textile Export Organization (KTEO), although the reputation of Kannur dates from the days of the Basel Mission and is largely built upon the quality of handloom cloth, knowledge and skills of the weavers and the use of azo-free vat dyes.<sup>3</sup> In early 2008, various representatives of the industry and government officials worked together to submit an application for GI status, and in 2009 certain items were successfully identified and protected as 'Cannanore Home Furnishings', significantly choosing the colonial place name over its modern replacement.

The unique qualities are described as being the fabric and made-ups' compact structure and texture, colour combinations, wide width, skilled craftsmanship and colour-fastness. The 'products are distinctly recognizable due to the richness and the feel of life in it' produced by the 'hefty [Malabar] loom', (Government of India, 2009, p. 155) and the weavers' special beating techniques (ibid.: 148). Despite historic references to hand-weaving techniques, it is not stipulated that a fabric *must* be hand-loomed, and 'handloom' does not feature in the title. Social development is mentioned but not quantified: 'high social awareness and better wages in this region give Cannanore hand loom textiles a special status' (ibid.: 149). The justification refers to the naturally soft local water and small-scale vat dyeing methods, but these are being phased out by many of the bigger producers.

The criteria for qualification are thus ambiguous, and how subjectively they may be interpreted will likely depend upon the composition of overseeing committees. The GI is expected to boost recognition of 'Cannanore' products abroad, should prevent other producers from exporting similar goods under this brand name, and help access federal and state development initiatives. The GI constructs another block of the narrative of success being performed on the national and international stage. The town's tourist literature describes Kannur as 'the Manchester of Kerala' and the 'Land of Looms and Lores' (referring to the famous local Hindu ritual dances, *theyyam*, as well as cloth production). However, this lyrical description has little resonance with local consumers. Handloom is not a fashionable choice, and locals only buy handloom in any quantity at the State-run fairs, which offer a 30% subsidy on all sales of clothing and household textiles; the latter are often export rejects or made-up from recycled leftovers.

### 2.2. Short supply chains: niche marketing ethical values

The 2003 development report recommended capitalizing on the use of azo-free dyes and the social justice agenda in Kannur (Textiles Committee, 2003b), but how 'fair' or 'ethical' is local production, and is there a sustainable consumer market for socially- and environmentally-friendly soft furnishings? Discussing food, Barrientos and Dolan state: 'Fair trade focuses on equity in trading relations, and particularly for small producers and farmers. Ethical trade covers employment conditions of workers through the implementation of codes of labour practice in the supply chains of large food corporations and retailers' (2006: 5).

<sup>2</sup> Towns of Export Excellence in the Handloom, Handicraft, Agriculture and Fisheries sector are those who have achieved a threshold of Rs. 150 crore (Rs. 1500 million) export value, and are thus eligible for financial assistance under various federal schemes.

<sup>3</sup> Some Azo dyes contain amines that are known to be carcinogens, and these were banned by Germany in 1994 and thereafter in the EU.

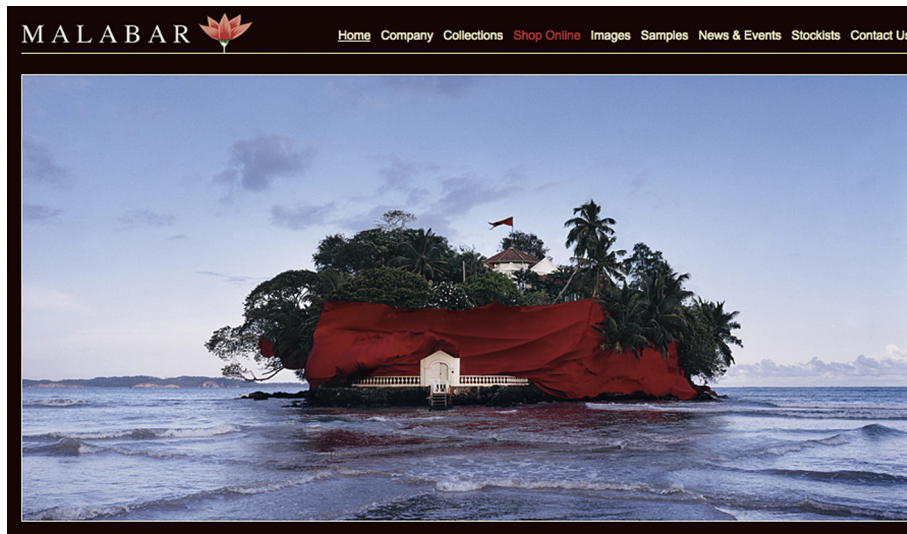


Fig. 1. Malabar's homepage.

In the global fashion industry, the labour value on average is only 0.5% of a garment's retail price (Lee, 2007, p. 20). Keralan co-ops have historically strong trade unions, but state minimum wage levels for weavers have not risen for many years. In 2007–8, the mostly female co-op weavers in Kannur took home an average of Rs100 a day including benefits (c. £1.40) for producing from 5 to 8 m, less than 1% of a textile retailed at £25 per metre. Despite the successes of political mass movements in Kerala obtaining significant wage increases in the informal sector, handloom weavers are relatively underpaid by Keralan standards yet are uncompetitive nationally. Merchant-manufacturers are bringing pre- and post-loom production stages under their control and are often the more visible local actors to foreign buyers. But claims for the 'fair' or 'ethical' nature of the wider trade should take into account the conditions of labour in both the weaving co-ops and the dyeing, stitching and packing units run by the merchant-exporters, and the economic relationships between them.

The following case study provides an example of how a range of fabrics produced by one Indian merchant-exporter is marketed in different ways by a group of inter-linked UK retailers. The key intermediary is *Kerala Handloom*,<sup>4</sup> an Indian family firm established in the 1930s. They no longer own their own weaving factories, and now subcontract all their orders to local handloom cooperatives. *Kerala Handloom* is not accredited as a fair trade producer, but the company is certified as conforming to the international SA8000 (socially accountable) standard.

The UK retailers are linked to each other by family ties and friendship, and visit *Kerala Handloom* regularly to manage orders. The furnishing company *Malabar* was founded by designer Peter Sterck, who visited north Kerala over twenty years ago. He sells textiles through mid- to up-market retail stores in the UK such as Heals, Liberty's and John Lewis, as well as specialist shops across the country. One of their fabrics, "Zaika", won the *Home & Gardens Fabric Award 2007* 'Best Fabric under £25'; the magazine stressed the good value and aesthetics of the fabric without mentioning handloom. *Kerala Handloom's* director told me that Peter Sterck 'cares for the weavers, he wants to give them work, and spends hours with them and the dyers on every visit'. His 'handloom design skills are unequalled, they come straight from his brain onto

the loom'. *Malabar's* website mentions the company's long association with the co-ops in the region and their admiration for the weavers' traditional craft skills, imaginatively connecting the consumer directly to the artisan through images of tropical paradise (Fig. 1). The website does not mention the social credentials of producers, but states that handloom weaving is by its very nature ecologically friendly in a discussion about organic fibres.

Peter Sterck's brother John now runs a separate company, 'Sterck & Co.', selling aprons, table linens and oven gloves stitched by *Kerala Handloom* (Fig. 2) and mainly using *Malabar* fabrics. John Sterck's wife Alexandra runs *Turquaz*, selling children's nightwear sourced from *Kerala Handloom* (Fig. 3). The companies have similar ethical approaches but different marketing emphases. Both refer to their products as 'fair trade' made in India, explain *Kerala Handloom's* SA8000 certification as meaning there is no child or indentured labour involved, and support the SOS children's charity near Cochin. As a producer of made-ups, the page features a photo of Indian seamstresses in a clean, light and airy workshop; there is no reference to handloom or the weavers. *Turquaz's* website in addition emphasizes the fact that garments are 'pure cotton' (for children's clothing worn next to the skin).

Sterck's 'About us' page also says 'We hope that you like what we sell and the way we go about doing it'. The kitchen products come with a glossy card attached that says they are a 'fair trade' product, and Alexandra Sterck explained that she would rather give a percentage of the profits to the SOS charity than pay for official 'Fair-trade' accreditation (they are careful not to use that spelling and thereby suggest that they are accredited). But John Sterck suspects that buyers are drawn to the designs first, since they are not making a regular commodity purchase such as coffee. John claims that the firm could pay 50% less for fabric sourced from Tamil Nadu, but then they would have no knowledge of the conditions of manufacture. He has no contact with the weavers who make the cloth; it is primarily his long-standing relationship of 'trust and dealing at a distance' with *Kerala Handloom's* director that underpins his business success, 'each allowing the other to do their bit', and he feels that they have gained from the relationship too. The fact that the goods are ethically traded is of particular importance to the couple, but they acknowledge that although the back-story to the production process might help a boutique owner to sell their goods, larger stores are not interested. In fact John explained that he had refused requests from Japanese and Korean wholesale buyers to remove all mention of the Indian producers in order for his goods to be marketed as English.

<sup>4</sup> I have given the firm the pseudonym 'Kerala Handloom' in order to protect the commercial interests of the UK firms who source from them. All other names are real unless otherwise stated.



Fig. 2. Items from 'Coastal Collection' by Sterck & Co.

	children's pyjamas	children's clothing	nursery & bedroom	material things & gifts	adult pyjamas	
<p>pure cotton</p> <p>fair trade</p> <p>supporting our community</p>						<p>ordering information</p> <p>links</p> <p>contact</p>
<p><b>Pure Cotton</b> Everything is made from 100% pure cotton that is either brushed or left in its natural woven state before being cut and sewn.</p> <p><b>Fair Trade</b> Turquaz is a Fair Trade Company. Our factory in South-West India is SA8000 accredited, this means amongst other things that the workers are treated fairly and with respect and that the use of children as workers is absolutely prohibited. Our workforce comprises highly skilled weavers, embroiderers and seamstresses and their working conditions are reflected in the quality of output.</p> <p><b>Supporting our Community</b> We also support the local SOS charity, which provides loving homes for orphaned and abandoned children and a group of schools for underprivileged children.</p> <p>These pictures on the right tell the story of the design process. Firstly, an idea for both product and decoration is drawn on paper and then this is translated onto fabric by a highly skilled embroiderer and seamstress. After endless amending of samples we end up with the perfect product.</p>						

Fig. 3. Turquaz' ethical credentials.

In the last example, Bill Brown began using leftover Malabar fabrics for a range of bags aimed at the middle of the travel market. On his website there are photos of

children playing and women sewing in the workshop, and both the social and environmental information is thoroughly explained:

The textiles have Skal International Certificates for the delivery of sustainable textile products. The colours/dyes used are Azo free and we have a very efficient pollution treatment plant. The treated effluent is used for watering the coconut farm. We do our utmost to look after our local environment as best we can. . . . Our factory is an SA 8000 certified company . . . , which prohibits child and forced labour and guarantees the workers the right to bargain, making sure that they will be paid the wages as per government rules. Working hours are restricted to 8 h in a day and maximum 48 h in a week. All workers are covered under a Health Insurance scheme. <http://www.bill-brown.com/2013-moreinfo.asp>, accessed 23-9-2013.

Bill says that they do not have any fair trade 'badges', they just show people how things are done. For example, everything they use in Kerala is locally sourced; although the cotton is not grown or spun in Kerala, he knows how his products are made at each stage. Although his company make no claims to fair trade or organic standards, some of the retailers to whom they sell label items 'fair trade'. In response, he says he sends them a registered letter declaring that if they write this it is not on based on a claim made by him, but he 'cannot stop other people doing what they do'. Having worked for more than ten years with Kerala Handloom, he says they are 'like family', and that this 'reality is more important than spin'.

Collectively, their websites promote a Western holiday lifestyle aesthetic. The furnishing companies feature pared down, colour-themed collections with Indian names in the light and airy context of outdoor summer dining and beaches with shady palm trees, and describe the means of production as 'fair', 'natural', 'pure' and/or 'environmentally friendly'. But *Kerala Handloom's* own website makes no mention of their SA8000 accreditation, stressing instead the timelessness of handloom and the hand of the Indian craftsman in a 'fleeting machine world'. These messages are more closely tied to their fellow Indian merchants' concerns with regional authenticity and the aesthetics of handloom fabric. The web design reflects the sensibilities of a certain middle-class Indian aesthetic, with pile upon pile of multicoloured textiles with clashing patterns draped over ornate heavy furniture, semi-anglicised product names, and no images of people, neither weavers, seamstresses or potential users. As John Sterck commented, the partners need each other, for *Kerala Handloom* will not attract foreign business this way.

### 2.3. Long supply chains: communicating ethics through aesthetics

The relationship between private companies and the co-ops they work with reveals the politically complex, often ambiguous negotiations of value systems throughout the chain of production, and differing visions for what makes for success. The following example is taken from the perspective of the Kannur branch of a large Indian home textiles company, working within a long global supply chain.

Ambadi is a national company and one of the largest textile 'manufacturers' in the area. In 2007 they made £2.5–3 m worth of yardage in Kannur. Their manager Balan is from a local weaving family, and he works with an international agent, Ajitkumar, who is also locally born but based in London. They supply some of the top retailers in the UK with hand-loomed fabrics, and are proud that their fabrics have been used in Buckingham Palace and the White House. They pay all the statutory corporate obligations to their own professionally trained workers, claim to be the first in the industry awarded SA8000 accreditation (in 1994), and are 'introducing modern management systems to a very tradition-bound industry'.

Ambadi operate all stages of the manufacturing process except actually weaving the fabric, which is outsourced to co-ops. Ajit and

Balan work together to develop fabrics, train weavers and dyers and manage the relationships with the co-ops they have selected. But Ajit could see problems with taking the investment he is making in people forward and marketing the fabrics as a fairly traded product, worrying that an Indian company claiming this would not be taken seriously in London. In particular, the textile and furnishings industry has been tarnished with the image of child labour, exploitation and high rates of poverty, and it is very hard to convince others that these textiles are produced fairly.

The fact that most of their fabric is made in co-ops is not mentioned publically, but behind the scenes they work with people they have known for decades, and the local workforce is behind each co-op's development. Ambadi have helped them apply for government grants to improve facilities and invest in equipment – it was one of these that was featured in the opening example of the factory floors. Textile factories are by their nature dusty places, and keeping them clean in a tropical climate is difficult. Balan had bought the same co-op a vacuum cleaner, but it sat unused in the corner. Facing apparent indifference to issues surrounding workplace facilities, Balan admitted that he had a difficult time persuading co-ops how important installing 'proper working conditions' were – they just did not seem to be bothered. Ajit has to charm his visitors: visits to the co-op constitute an 'authentic' experience and demonstrate socially accountable standards set by external agencies; they have to 'look' right as well as 'be' right.

Ajit has to judge how to make this link back into the fabric itself so that its aesthetic materializes the ethics of its production, demonstrating the impossibility of the perfect handmade product while striving to remove imperfections such as physical traces of the weaver's body. He also has to influence his buyers' sensibilities to the difficulties of production in developing economies through providing just the right amount of information alongside his exclusive products. Finding the means to communicate the weaving process and the people behind the product in a meaningful, trustworthy manner remains a challenge, while romanticizing the individual weaver through simple images ignores the wider socio-political context of production.

### 3. Horizontal networks: structural change and state support

While the merchant's export orders are rising annually, the local handloom industry is in decline, undercut by powerloom production and uncompetitive wages. The number of handloom weavers and associated workers has fallen by a third to 12,000; only two private companies still maintain their own handloom factories from around 30 merchant-exporters, and most of the 39 working state-subsidised co-ops are only semi-functioning and deep in debt, with only 4 large enough to export directly; the industry is in danger of collapsing completely.

Both handloom and powerloom weaving have operated side-by-side since the early 20th century, allowing for a degree of flexibility. Gandhi's struggles for self-rule created a special place for handloom in national development (e.g. Bayly, 1986; Cohn, 1989), support for which has been maintained by Indian governments since independence. Although controversial at times, over the past half a century national policies have included government purchase schemes, subsidies, quotas and reserving items for handloom in order to protect the most vulnerable weavers (Niranjana et al., 2006; Niranjana and Vinayan, 2001). International support for the development of the poorest sectors of the Indian economy was implemented through reduced tariffs – buying handloom had moral value; yet handloom was also sold as textile art and artisanal pieces to foreign buyers at the top end of the market. Changes in tariffs, policy and subsidies led to constant shifts between the mechanised and non-mechanised sectors, with local manufactur-



ers looking to developing markets and restructuring to take advantage of the support on offer. In the 1980s handloom was a potentially more profitable product than powerloom fabric, and several factories in Kannur sold off their old powerlooms to small family units in the unorganized sector, and re-developed production of handloom furnishings following the cheesecloth slump.

While successful local manufacturers push the unit price they pay to handloom weavers down as low as they can and integrate power-loomed textiles into the mix, powerloom is invisible in their marketing strategy. According to the president of the KTEO, Jaychandran, ‘powerloom prices are the norm in India, everything is measured against them.’ He says that his father’s older foreign buyers are more open to handloom as a concept and used to paying Kannur handloom prices, but ‘once they are out of your net it’s very hard to get a new buyer to swim into it’. Most international high street buyers now appear to care little for the aesthetics of ‘hand of the weaver’; until 2005 there was a flourishing business in Kannur illegally stamping ‘handloom’ certificates onto fabric made on powerlooms, but now there is little point. A new national ‘Handloom Mark’ scheme has so far proved irrelevant; powerlooms can be adjusted to replicate the characteristic ‘flaws’ found in handloom, and many buyers cannot tell handloom and powerloom apart, simply wanting a ‘textile’ at the best price.

Local union leaders claimed that of the £50 million (350 crore Rupees) annual textile exports in 2006, there was only a capacity to provide 20% of this on local handlooms. In fact, the rest of the fabric is woven on powerlooms in Tamil Nadu and trucked into Kannur for stitching and packing by local young women for export as a Kannur product. The image of success as a Centre of Export Excellence generated by the merchant-exporters is therefore at variance with the multitude of ruined factories and numbers of weavers leaving to work in the construction industry or the remittance economies in the Gulf. The outsourcing of work to Tamil Nadu is a constant source of tension in the town, where unions perceive handloom orders to be diverted to powerlooms for local businessmen’s profit. Local handloom workers lose jobs and unions commonly call marches and strikes. One textile exporter admitted the strategy of exporting powerloom fabric from Tamil Nadu under the general description of Cannanore Handloom had directly contributed to the collapse of the local handloom industry and the skills associated with it. Some merchant-exporters would like union cooperation to open larger powerloom factories in Kerala, keeping handloom as a niche product, but entrenched fears of mechanisation were hard to allay and the handloom union is politically the strongest of all.

A raft of grants supports cooperatives, with loans and subsidies to keep handloom workers employed and encourage product, process and functional upgrading. Many are deeply indebted to the banks, partly due to the delayed repayment of government rebates, accumulation of unpaid interest and the lack of working capital. Several are vehicles for local left-wing political power struggles, subject to competing priorities and corrupt practices that siphon off grants. Recent central government strategies have included shifting from supporting co-ops to developing clusters of independent weavers to increase their competitiveness, trying to improve support for equipment, training, design and marketing. These are designed to support existing impoverished weavers often indebted to local traders and Master Weavers in less developed regions of India.<sup>5</sup> In Kannur, one such program was “Krittikha”, whereby hundreds of unskilled rural women living below the poverty line (BPL) were paid Rs100 per day to undergo training in handloom weaving, then offered loans if they formed into groups of 10 to buy looms and

develop products with government help, but take-up was initially low. Women were happy to be paid during training, but many did not actually want to become weavers. Weaving is low-paid labour in an often unreliable market; it is a skill to fall back on, but if they have a choice weavers will take better-paid work (c.f. Venkatesan, 2010). Organised production has provided a route to social mobility in the past for low-caste groups, and today BLP women weavers may provide a second household income; but attitudes to personally investing in risky development strategies were ambivalent.

Co-ops struggle to keep open, and many of their factories lie abandoned in outlying villages with existing looms rotting (Norris, 2011). Those run by experienced managers try to negotiate orders with local merchants, but claim they have little room for manoeuvre. The private sector uses the co-ops’ loom capacity and indirectly benefit from state subsidies to them, complaining that they cannot trust the co-ops not to copy designs or start working with a competitor for a better price. The co-ops complain that their margins are squeezed to nothing, they carry the risk of rejected fabric and they have no chance of successfully upgrading; they are often in debt to the private firms as well and forced to take their pre-dyed yarn, removing yet another avenue of value capture.

Consortia of private companies are taking over all the profitable steps of production except weaving, monopolising public grants for new dye-houses and waste treatment plants, and regularly travel internationally. Cooperative managers need direct contacts with foreign buyers and understand their markets first-hand to prosper, but the costs of attending international trade fairs are prohibitive and local private firms chaperone their visitors to Kannur carefully. One well-established handloom co-op had been exporting directly to a high street futon firm in the UK, but the contract was suddenly stopped in 2007, and it was later discovered that a rival merchant-exporter had undercut them by having the fabric made on powerlooms in Tamil Nadu. Private firms want to be able to mechanize and mass-produce simple fabrics, but face strong resistance from some parts of the union movement. While companies acknowledge that paying statutory wages and benefits helps them to achieve the international labour standards required by their foreign buyers to enter the market, they complain that the Indian handloom industry has no national wage structure and Kerala is uncompetitive.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research shows not only how value is differentiated along a global production chain, but also how strategies of upgrading are shaped by horizontal power structures. There are a number of major processes taking place in Kannur. Firstly, many private merchants have taken a high-road strategy over the manufacture of ‘made-ups’ for Western high street retailers, some using cloth produced more cheaply in Tamil Nadu. At the same time a raft of low-road strategies are being pursued. Details of national and state schemes such as cluster development for cooperatives and group loans to BPL weavers, and the strengthening of private export consortia, all point to local actors at various levels acknowledging the importance of cooperation as an upgrading tool, and which is promoted in the academic literature on economic development. Yet this study reveals how this cooperation is only developed within sectors, and shows the relative strengths and weaknesses of each.

A changing process is national and state-level financial support and policy initiatives for handloom workers, and how this is enacted in the region. Kerala officials have been successful in capturing their share of significant national resources allocated to upgrading handloom, but although local party, union and state officials benefit from disbursing grants to co-ops and independent groups at the lower levels, only private companies maintain export contracts with foreign buyers. Merchants have *de facto* captured

<sup>5</sup> On development policies for Indian handloom, see (Das, 2009; Dev et al., 2008; Niranjana, 2004; Niranjana and Vinayan, 2001; Rajagopalan, 1986).

the value of a relatively weak state's subsidies to the public sector and used them to promote their own strategies of upgrading through promoting regional aesthetics (i.e. the GI), echoing the findings of Neilson and Pritchard in south Indian plantations (Neilson and Pritchard, 2010).

This leads us to consider the suggestion that local textile manufacturers could do more to market Kerala's achievements in social development to those foreign buyers for whom ethical standards are becoming more important. The case study of *Kerala Handloom* demonstrates that some UK wholesalers to whom ethical trading is important may find there is not a demand for it, and that the focus upon their own personal relationships with accredited suppliers may mask the impact of local power politics on an inequitable distribution of gains in the wider production network. In the case of Ambadi, Indian managers worked hard with local weaving communities through personal ties of trust and kinship, and were proud of their international SA8000 accreditation, but felt they could not market their business abroad as 'fair' given local economics and the political arena in which they operated. The underlying assumption that ethical trading (and by implication, GI status) would improve the livelihood prospects of weavers in Kannur depends in part upon their visibility, and has to be viewed in conjunction with the wider political and economic contexts. These range from global textile production networks, federal and state-level political ideologies and development policy, and relative local labour costs but also local economic and political factors that impinge upon wage negotiations, labour conditions, terms of business and the shifting relationship between the state and private capital.

The dynamic relationship between aesthetics and ethics was chosen as a means to highlight the multiplicity of these manipulated values and the complex local political arena in which producers compete. In this case, it is often the hard-pressed weavers themselves that have become largely invisible; a fuller assessment of the impact of particular types of trade upon their livelihoods cannot be made without the inclusivity that such an embedded local perspective brings. The strength of focussing upon horizontal networks at the level of local production is that it has the potential to incorporate those invisible actors and influences that have been eclipsed in the vertical studies that have come to dominate economic geography, development and consumption studies in the wake of contemporary globalisation.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the constructive comments of both external reviewers and for editorial guidance. During the period of fieldwork I was affiliated with the Centre for Developing Studies in Trivandrum, Kerala. Shibin E.M. and Venu Gopalan provided invaluable research assistance in Kannur. The research was funded by the ESRC *Waste of the World* project (RES 000-23-0007), and comments on earlier drafts have been gratefully received from Danny Miller, Mike Crang and Nicky Gregson. Thanks to copyright holders Malabar, Sterck & Co. and Turquaz for permission to reproduce their online images here.

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