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Turkenburg, Aurora

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Cutout from 'Decking the Bride' by Raja Ravi Varma (1993).

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MA Thesis Religious Studies, Leiden University

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Master thesis for Religious Studies 2021/22 at Leiden University, the Netherlands.

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Front page image: 'Decking the Bride' by Raja Ravi Varma (1893).
Source: Sri Chitra Art Gallery. On Loan to the Raj Bhavan, Thiruvananthapuram. Via Google Arts and Culture. Accessed May 2022. Retrieved from: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/decking-the-bride-raja-ravi-varma/jQGVXlrI6-wrqg.

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I – Introduction

My mother has always had a fascination with *klederdracht*. The Dutch term for folk costume denotes nothing other than 'wearing clothes', hiding within its folds the associations between dress, culture and identity. As a seamstress by means of a hobby, my mother has her one hundred or so dolls wearing folk costumes set up in a small two-tiered cabinet in the middle of our living room. They have been there for as long as I can remember. Every now and again, she will take out one of the dolls to tell me a story about who gave it to her – most of the dolls being gifts from friends overseas – and from which country and region it hails. Wonderous details in handsewn dresses and other costumes tell of gender, religion, history, and social standing. Some dolls wear jewelry, whereas others play instruments or carry plastic baskets filled with painted produce. Other dolls wear regalia from regions and centuries that no longer exist. Dutch dolls, Turkish dolls, Japanese dolls, Indonesian dolls, and Indian dolls share this prominent place in my living room, and yet not one of them is Parsi – I checked.

Research question

The Parsi women of India have worn traditional Indian *sari* embellished with a type of satin embroidery called *gara* since its conception. Its popularity in the British-Indian colonial period of the 17th through mid-20th century has since waned, but the art form remains part of the modern fashion industry of India. Thought to be typical of the Parsis, the richly colorful embellished *saris* have become known as *gara*, *gara saris* and even *Parsi saris.* Beautiful to most eyes, the Parsi *saris* have been dubbed paintings with thread by scholars of Parsi textile studies like Shernaz Cama.

Most of the recent scholarship on *gara* can be attributed to scholars affiliated with the PARZOR Foundation. Recent work on the motifs of *gara* has focused on the multicultural origins of the embroidery (Cama 2014), techniques and motifs. Other Parsi textile studies have focused on an accessory girdle worn by the Parsi called *kusti* (Cama and Lilaowala 2013; ibid. 2014) and its connections to Parsi Zoroastrian religion and rituals. To the reader of these articles, it becomes clear that while these studies focus on *gara* as a means of identity communication there is little reference to how this process works.

Like folk costumes, dress of many kinds fosters associations with culture and other subjects that are undeniably human. Just as dressing up is particular to humans, so are the conceptions of religion, culture, and a sense of identity. Dress and identity are closely associated, with previous scholarship connecting the two through the processes of symbolic interactionism (Roach-Higgins 1992) and identity communication (Reddy-Best 2020; Freitas 1997; Kaiser 2014). This thesis will examine these subjects by looking at one particular *klederdracht* and its connection to identity by answering the following question:

How does *gara* work as a communicative tool of Parsi identity to both non-Parsis and Parsis?

The term *gara,* by referring to three things at once – the embellished *saris*, the embellishment that is a type of embroidery applied to (silk) textile products, as well as the needle-point technique used in their creation – is used in this question to encompass all forms of the embellishment, while placing a focus on *saris* as a form of dress. The following chapters will distinguish between *gara saris*, to refer to the *saris* that have *gara* on them, *gara* to refer to the embroidery itself, and lastly *gara* technique as a type of embroidery technique used in the creation of *gara,* to distinguish between the three definitions of the term where necessary.

Strategy

To answer the question above, the following chapters will contain answers to two sub-questions regarding the communication of dress and identity that is transmitted by *gara*. First, we will look at how dress can communicate an identity to both the wearer and the viewer of garments. Then, by focusing on the social, historical, and religious aspects of *gara*, this thesis will look at what collective Parsi identity is communicated through *gara* exactly.

By focusing on *gara* and *gara sari*, we will see that this combination of dress and embroidery can be used to communicate an essence of Parsi-ness as an identity through a process this thesis calls embellishment. This theory draws from a variety of past theories from textile-, fashion-, Parsi-, philosophy- and identity studies, among which we find paramount concepts like symbolic interactionism, belonging, and ontological categories. The process of embellishment is explained in detail in the following chapter, as part of the discussion on how dress communicates identities. What follows in subsequent chapters are discussions on the dimensions communicated as part of Parsi identity. By focusing on the social, historical, and religious dimensions of *gara* and the Parsi community, a framework of what we might refer to as 'Parsi-ness' or Parsi identity is created. This framework is then applied to the communication of dress in the sixth chapter of this thesis in preparation of answering the research question. Lastly, we will conclude this thesis with a discussion on its results and implications for further research.

This thesis seeks to further the discourse on dress and identity on two levels. On the micro-level, this thesis will seek to prove that *gara* can communicate Parsi identity, an identity which can be reconstructed from *gara* using embellishment theory on three distinct dimensions: social, historical and religious. We shall see that on all three levels, *gara* speaks. Socially, the garment known as *gara* is indicative of gender, wealth and overall social class within India. Historically, the conception *gara* is connected to British-Indian rule, colonial trade, as well as the dual Indian and Chinese origins of its shape, embroidery techniques and motifs. Finally, the garment also dubbed *Parsi sari* has worked as an identity marker of 'Parsi-ness' as both a social and religious community of Zoroastrians in and outside of India, and has functioned as a type of ritual dress up to this day.

On the macro-level, this thesis will seek to explore how dress, as an actor in communication to the world, communicates identity through social, historical and religious dimensions to both the wearer and viewer of what is worn. The explanation of this process, dubbed embellishment, draws its name from the conscious application of embroidery – a type of embellishment – to one's clothes.

It should be made clear that the identity formulated through *gara* encompasses only part of the identity of the collective Parsi community, let alone that of individuals identifying as Parsi. These parts, however, tell us much about the collective identity of the Parsi community of today, as well as how their identity formation process has worked over the course of history. I hope that the answer to the research question asked in this thesis will be applied to further studies on identity formation within the Parsi community, as well as outside of it, by using the processes described in this thesis as a guideline and blueprint of the identity formation and communication process of dress.

Dress and *gara*

The focus of many studies on clothing, dress, and other types of textiles and fashion lies on the body. Examples of body-focused studies include, but are not limited to works on the influence the bodies of fashion designers have on their own designs (Valle-Noronha 2017) and gendering bodies and the role of dress in this process (Longhurst 2005; Balasescu 2003). Studies on body modifications, such as tattoos and piercings serve little purpose where *gara* embroidery is concerned. They remind us, however, that both body modifications and the application of embroidery to *sari*s are embellishments. Likewise, while *gara saris* are exclusively worn by female Parsis, this thesis focuses not on the relation between dress and the female body, but rather on the identity communicated by dress, among which gender is one of the aspects conveyed. The focus thus lies exclusively on what is communicated by *gara*. The body, while displaying the dress, affects this communication between dress and identity so little that it only appears in this thesis as an actor when the identity formed by dress is applied to the person wearing it, as is the case for gender.

It should also be made clear that the body is not exclusively needed in the communication of identity by dress. The identity communicative power of *gara* is not lost when the garment is displayed on something other than the body of a Parsi woman. The Parsi identity of *gara* continues to broadcast even if we find the item in a museum, a shop, a household display case or simply thrown over the back of a chair. A product of its history, like the Parsis themselves, *gara* does not need to be worn to communicate Parsi identity as long as it is visible to others. Just as *kimono* can be recognized as a symbol of Japaneseness even when on display in a textile museum or hung outside a shop by the side of the road in Kyoto, the *gara sari* can be recognized as a symbol of Parsi-ness in much the same manner.

By using the term *dress*, rather than clothing, fashion or garment, this thesis reminds its readers that the *gara's* original function is to be worn rather than displayed. To wear *gara* is to be identifiable as Parsi. As a type of dress that is fashioned of a long piece of silk decorated with embroidery, meant to be draped around the body and tied at the waist, *gara* is best recognized as something to be worn when it is. If it is not worn, after all, it becomes, to untrained eyes, a long piece of silk textile that is embroidered. Hence the term dress used in this thesis is aptly chosen in the discussion of identity communication as a whole, but especially where *gara* is concerned.

Identity and the essence of Parsi-ness

Religion can be defined as a system of actions and beliefs, tied closely to a worldview that positions one against others and one or more supernatural agents (based in part on Durkheim 1915). It can scarcely be pulled apart from culture, ethnicity, and the communities humans form. Within the grey

area that remains between these terms, most of these communities can be called both social groups and religious groups at the same time.

One might suggest that Parsis fit only the first of these options. A product of trade, *gara* is tied to colonialism and social standing, topics that only skirt around religion. Studies that emphasize Parsis as a social unit rather than a religious one include work on Parsi theatre and its cultural developments (Gupt 2001). The opposite might also be emphasized. Dress, and especially folk dress has, through ritualization, religious roots as the work by Arweck and Keenan (2006) suggests. *Gara,* then, touches on religious elements as a ritualized dress worn to Zoroastrian lifecycle rituals like weddings and new year's celebrations.

This thesis will focus not on whether to be Parsi means to be exclusively religious or otherwise. Like many works that deal with religious types of dress do, such as Alexandru Balasescu (2003) in his work on Islamic face coverings for women, we must keep in mind what the wearers believe the dress represents. The Parsis themselves deal with *gara* as an identifier of Parsi-ness. This might be Parsi-ness from a social or cultural perspective, as well as a religious perspective (Cama 2014). Taking into account these different opinions regarding the Parsi identity, I would gesture that *gara* is both tied to a social heritage and a religious heritage because of the reasons laid out above. We must thus take a middle road and focus on a wide framework of Parsi identity. This middle road is represented in this thesis by focusing on both social and historical, as well as religious dimensions of *gara*, so that together they might paint a more complete image of what it means to wear *gara* and what it means to be Parsi.

To communicate one's Parsi-ness is to communicate identity. Identity is used here as a term to underpin a temporarily fixed essence of Parsi-ness, based on past social, historical, and religious dimensions. This identity is underpinned by choosing to wear *gara*, at which point only one part of the essence of its wearer is communicated – Parsi-ness. This identity is then fixed through the wearing of *gara*. As the process of embellishment continues by another viewing the dress, the identity of the wearer of *gara* is again fixed in the mind of the viewer when their gaze falls upon it using their past experiences. Continued interaction with the dress, and its wearer, will indeed change this identity by providing new input. This continued change in identity might be seen as fluid, as the identity of the wearer and viewer is continuously refreshed with every passing gaze. Yet each passing gaze again fixes a new identity. The process of embellishment thus contains both fluid and fixed (parts of) identities, but the latter appears more often in this process than the first. It is for this reason I have chosen to use identity as a term rather than alternative terms that underpin the fluidity of one's essence.

II – Embellishment

Before turning to the dimensions of identity communicated by *gara* in the following chapters, this second chapter will discuss how identity is communicated by dress. This process, dubbed embellishment, hinges on prominent theories of identity, fashion, textile, and ritual studies. By creating a framework for identity communication through dress, the analysis in this chapter explains why the following chapters will focus on the social, historical and religious dimensions of *gara*. We will return to this process in the sixth chapter of this thesis when it is fitted to the Parsi identity communicated by *gara* itself.

Theorizing identities

The concept of identity, an organized set of characteristics that express various aspects of who we are (Reddy-Best 2020, 11), has been of interest to philosophers, scholars of social studies, religion, and most of the humanities we know today. Early references to identity go as far as 1600 CE if we take Shakespeare's Hamlet into account as a viable source of the ponderings of humankind. In the 20th century, identity was the subject of famous scholars like philosopher Foucault and psychoanalyst Freud. Defining the term, above all else, seemed paramount, and not everyone would agree with the definition we see above. It is for this reason that related concepts, such as being, becoming, and belonging were called into being to theorize identities.

Being, becoming, and belonging

Several alternative terms come to mind when discussing identity as a concept. Let us first focus on three alternatives prevalent in scholarship of the 20th and 21st centuries. We shall see that while earlier terms relating to identity focus on it being a static essence of individuals, most of the recent scholarship on identity theories emphasize that one's identity is fluid, and sometimes even underscore it as everchanging.

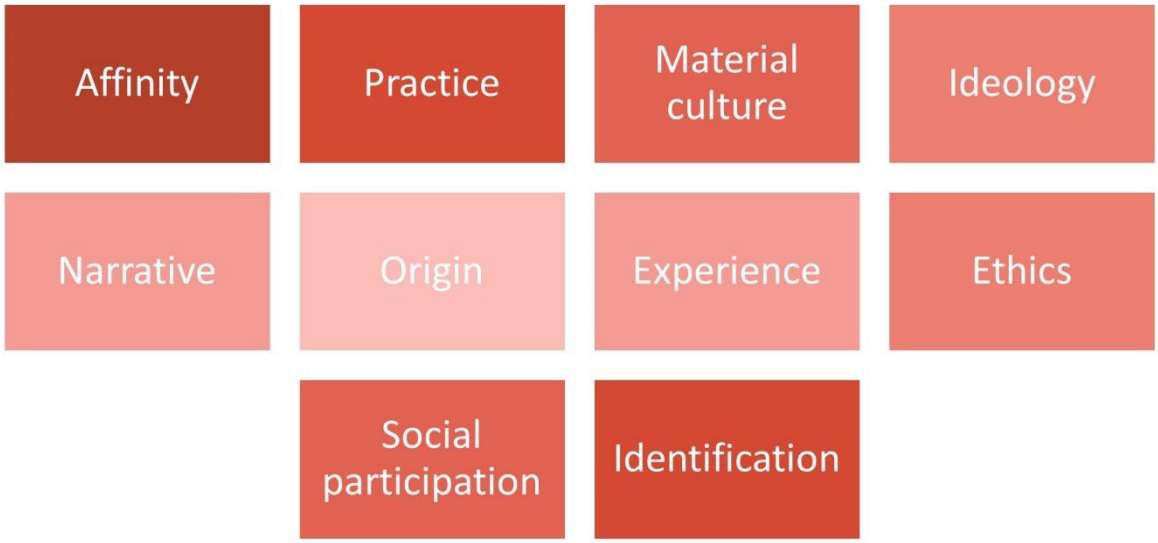
We might call our identity a static, unchanging force, for it might be called *being*. This concept was already prevalent in Europe in Shakespeare's famous Hamlet (1600), as the equally well-known lines "to be or not to be" suggest. However, while many scholars would agree that identity is anything but static, language does not provide such a distinction. To identify oneself as Parsi, whether by words or through the act of wearing dress, is to temporarily fix Parsi-ness as one's entire essence.

Recent scholarship replaces identity with terms that underscore its fluidity. An early example of this alternative describes one's identity as a changing force, in which a person is forever in transit to *becoming* other. It is this definition that the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925 - 1995) describes in his influential work on identity. Pitched against *being*, the concept of *becoming* is the process of change as well as repetitions with a change (Deleuze 1994 [1968] in Rocamora eds. 2019, 20; 176), among which we can find the action of putting on clothes. Becoming is a verb, as Deleuze and his co-author and psychoanalyst Guaratti emphasize in their 1994 work, and the process of becoming adapts to what one wants to become. If we are to believe Deleuze and Guaratti, to wear the dress of the Parsi

community is to become-Parsi. That is to say that one self-confirms one's identity as Parsi, despite this being only a smaller fixed part of one's fluid identity. Those who don the dress of the Parsi community, for example, can be understood as 'becoming-Parsi' according to this prominent theory.

Similar to Deleuze, the Dutch scholar of modern spirituality Joantine Berghuijs (2017) sees identity as fluid. In her treatise on the hybridity of religion in The Netherlands, Berghuijs uses the term *belonging* to underpin the affiliation of people and their religion(s). Apart from defining religious belonging as something more than being registered to one's local religious community, Berghuijs gives us an overview of nine ways to *belong* to a religion. While this list was originally meant to inspire questions regarding the religiosity of Dutch citizens in a rapidly secularizing country, the concepts used by Berghuijs are useful for discussing the Parsi community of today as both a social and religious unit in relation to dress. The list of ways to *belong* contains, in order: affinity with one or more religions, the repeating of practices and owning of religious material culture, as well as the sharing of ideologies, of origins through upbringing, experiences, and ethics related to one or more religions, next to social participation and the self-identification with one of more religions. As physical actions and the ownership of objects are distinct expressions, note that in the image below, practice and material culture, originally seen as one (2017, 22), have been separated, making for ten ways to belong.

1: Ten ways to 'belong', a list of modalities of religious belonging by Berghuijs (2017)



These ways or modalities of belonging, as Berghuijs denotes them, contain physical acts of *belonging* (practice and social participation), and mental forms of *belonging* (affinity, ideology, origin, memories of experiences, ethics, and identification) as well as tangible forms of expressing *belonging* (narrative and material culture).

If we apply these concepts to dress, we see that in the context of *gara* both mental and tangible forms of expressing *belonging* are applied. Not only is *gara* part of the Parsi material culture as an object, it is also linked to the concept of practice as an object to be worn. As a symbol of Parsi-ness, *gara* can also function as part of the concept of narrative by reminding of its historical connection to

the Parsi. Finally, Berghuijs' concept of identification can be applied to *gara* as an object and symbol of Parsi-ness in a way similar to the concept of becoming-Parsi described above.

Another way to group the modalities of *belonging* above is by attributing them to the dimensions of one's belonging they discuss. Identity does not form in a vacuum. It is informed both over time and by time, intertwining the present, the social and religious context as well as the history of any particular person. Therefore, we might look at social, historical, and religious dimensions of identity.

These dimensions of *belonging* can thus be grouped into a social dimension (affinity, origin, social participation, and identification), a historical dimension (narrative and experience), and a religious dimension (practice, material culture, ideology, and ethics) of identity. Wearing dress is not explicitly mentioned in the article by Berghuijs, but to wear *gara* must call into action at least the modalities of experience, material culture, and identification. Material culture, as any object with a "personal religious meaning" (Berghuijs 2014, 22) might very well include *gara* as an expression of Parsi Zoroastrianism, as well as a religious experience when worn during religious rituals. Likewise, identification is called for when choosing one's dress to represent Parsi-ness. We can thus conclude that social dimensions, historical dimensions as well as religious dimensions are connected with the wearing of *gara.* To wear *gara* is to belong to the Parsi community.

Theorizing dress

How then, does dress interact with identity? If we understand that identity can be communicated through mental and tangible forms of belonging (Berghuijs 2014), it is not surprising that dress can communicate identity as well. Likewise, we might view dressing up as a type of performance or as a (religious) ritual in which one's dress functions as a prop. This section will discuss several theories in which dress functions as the communicator of identity.

The relationship between dress and identity has widely interested scholars of philosophy, cultural studies, and textile studies, and has gained attention from scholars of religion as well. Most scholars agree on the function of dress in communicating identity (Roach-Higgins 1992; Reddy-Best 2020; Freitas 1997 and Kaiser 2014) In the context of this thesis, it would be helpful to highlight two theories that discuss this relationship on the level both of the individual wearer and of the collective wearers.

Social interactionism

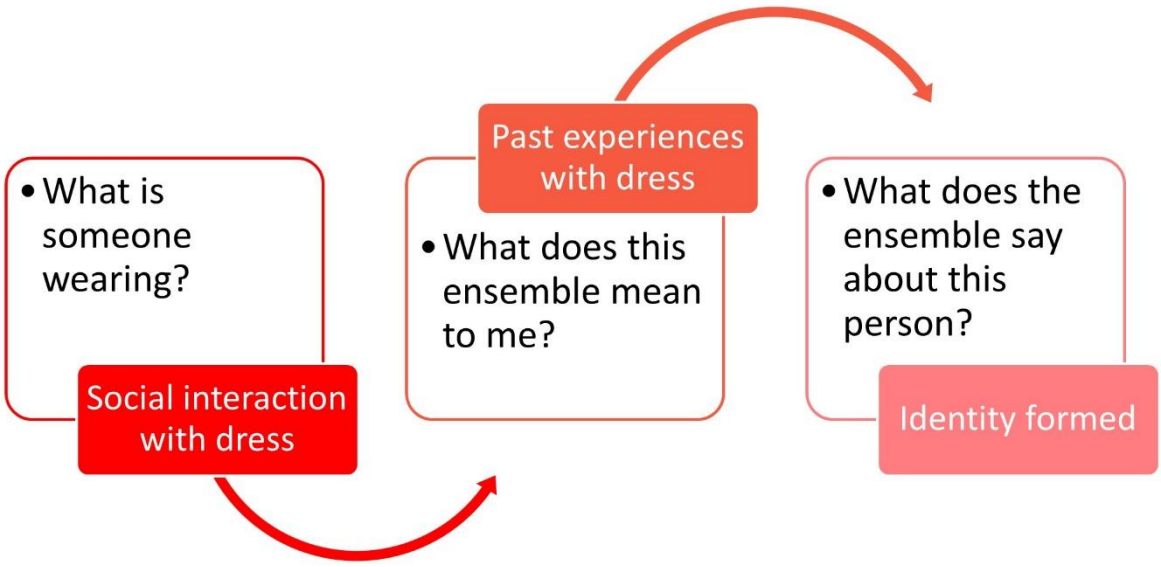
One such theory derives itself from symbolic interactionism, taking dress as a means of identity communication to others. In response to research on the social significance of dress, identity communication is connected to this theory in the highly influential "Dress and Identity" by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher (1992), both prominent scholars of textile studies. Based on earlier sociological work on identification through an appearance by Stryker (1980), symbolic interactionism of dress can be summarized as a process we might call *identity at first* sight. Symbolic interactionism of dress proposes that dress, or one's appearance in general, informs the observers of the wearer's identity. The process by which identity is formed in the mind of others is described by Roach-Higgins and Eicher in a fashion we might describe as a three-step process from first sight to identity formation through the rehash of past experiences with the dress (see image 2). According to this theory, one's identity is derived from interaction with the social, physical, and biological sense (Roach-Higgins 1992,

5) of the wearer of a particular dress ensemble. The identity formed in the minds of others is considered fluid (ibid. 5; 7) by Roach-Higgins and Eicher.

While Roach-Higgins and Eicher view the identity formed through the process of social interactionism as fluid, the fact that a precise identity is formed of a person through dress at the precise moment of contact one might suggest that this identity is actually fixed. While different identities can be formed through further interaction with the dress and wearer, each of these is again fixed, if only for a moment, in the mind of the viewer of the dress.

The identity that is formed within the mind of others, social interactionism explains, bases itself on the viewer's past experiences of specific social structures and the available material and technology with which to produce dress. Social structures on which identity might be based include the tangible kinship, economic, political, and religious structures (ibid. 5-6), but also include world view, belief systems of entire societies, and finally morality (ibid. 6). These social structures form rules by which a person is ultimately identified within seconds of being seen or otherwise interacted with.

2 - Simplified diagram of the process of identity formation according to the theory of social interactionism of dress (Roach-Higgins 1992)



Again, we might group these past experiences and rules into social, historical, and religious dimensions of dress and identity. Kinship, belief systems, and morality might be attributed to the social rules of dress. Historical rules include the available materials and technology, as well as economic and political structures influencing the past experiences of any one person. Finally, religious experiences are covered under religious structures and world views.

Identity as boundary

While social interactionism relies on a subconscious process in which past experiences influence present identities, dress is more often than not chosen with an intention in mind. Identity communication through dress thus functions both outwards, to the other, and inwards, to the self, while situating the self against others. In the case of *gara*, as embroidery added to what would

otherwise be a *sari* – with its connection to Hinduism intact – the adaption of *gara sari* would function as a boundary between Parsi and Hinduist women.

One influential work on the process behind choosing an ensemble takes that dress can function to communicate an identity to others by employing dress as a boundary (Freitas et al. 1997, 324) between one's genders, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and cultural identity. Drawing on works by philosopher Michel Foucault (1988) and Gregory Stone (1962) the operationalization of social interactionism by Freitas focuses not on what dress means or does not mean, but rather on how it is used to generate boundaries between oneself and others, thereby situating oneself as 'not belonging' to specific social groups. Reminding us that dress is often chosen with identity, or rather an 'identity not' in mind, the work by Freitas helps us understand that dress communicates both inwards and outwards to the wearer and the viewer alike.

These influential works on the social interactionism of dress discuss personal identity formation. They leave out the formation of group- and collective identities that are only implicated in the past experiences of others. Foucault's concept of biopolitics (Foucault 2010) can, however, through this conscious process of situating oneself against others described by Freitas, explain why dress can function to both unify and divide collective identities across social classes (Rocamora 2019, 20). Biopolitics, a theory of power by Foucault that describes the relations between governments and their people based on virtue by perceived social class shows how dress can form such a physical (what is worn) and mental (what does what is worn communicate) boundary.

Dress as props to a performance

A final work discussed in this chapter on dress as a means of communication also holds that dress is chosen with an identity in mind. Rather than focusing on what the identity communicated entails, Canadian sociologist Ervin Goffman's (1959) work explains how dress is a prop to the performance of one's identity. Should we look at dress as props of the performance of identity, a process that reminds us of ritual, we might use the theory of props to explain how specific religious identities might influence dress ensembles chosen by their wearers.

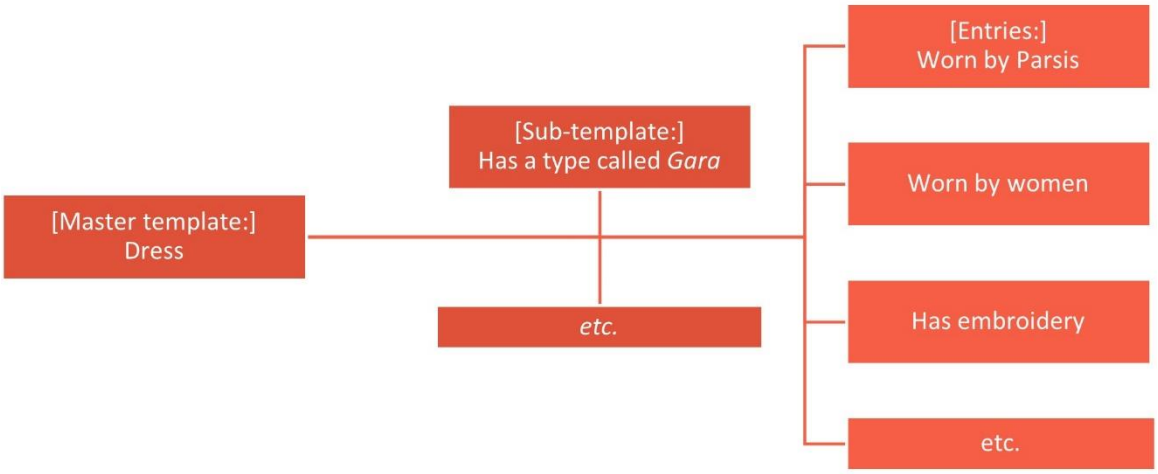
Ontological categories

To form an identity of any one person through dress it is not necessary to know the wearer as social interactionism theory reminds us. Instead, past experiences that include the dress are drawn upon to formulate an identity of the other. How these past experiences are formed and are called upon when encountering dress, however, is not discussed in detail by Roach-Higgins, Freitas, or Goffman.

In understanding this process in its entirety it is helpful to call upon the concept of ontological categories to explain how past experiences are obtained and stored in the mind. In a treatise on the creation of religious concepts, Pascal Boyer (2001), a French anthropologist of religion, explains how the mind obtains and stores all incoming information in ontological categories. Like templates in an archive cabinet, these categories function to both process – by means of adding new information to older information (2001, 58) – and store incoming information into ontological entries. Taking into account that templates for all kinds of information exist, so too must a template for dress. One can imagine that the category for dress contains a sub-template for *gara*, a type of dress attributed to

female Parsi wearers of this *sari* with embroidery, and this sub-category must have entries for at least those three pieces of information attached (see image 3 below).

1 - A simplified example of the application of ontological categories to dress and gara.
Based on the concept of ontological categories by Boyer (2001).



The example in the image above tells us what happens when one encounters dress and draws upon the past experiences within their mind. Upon encountering an ensemble, the mind will use the master template of dress, skip to the sub-template of *gara,* and use older information to identify the wearer, at the same time adding to the master- and sub-templates new entries were needed to add to the past experiences.

Embellishment

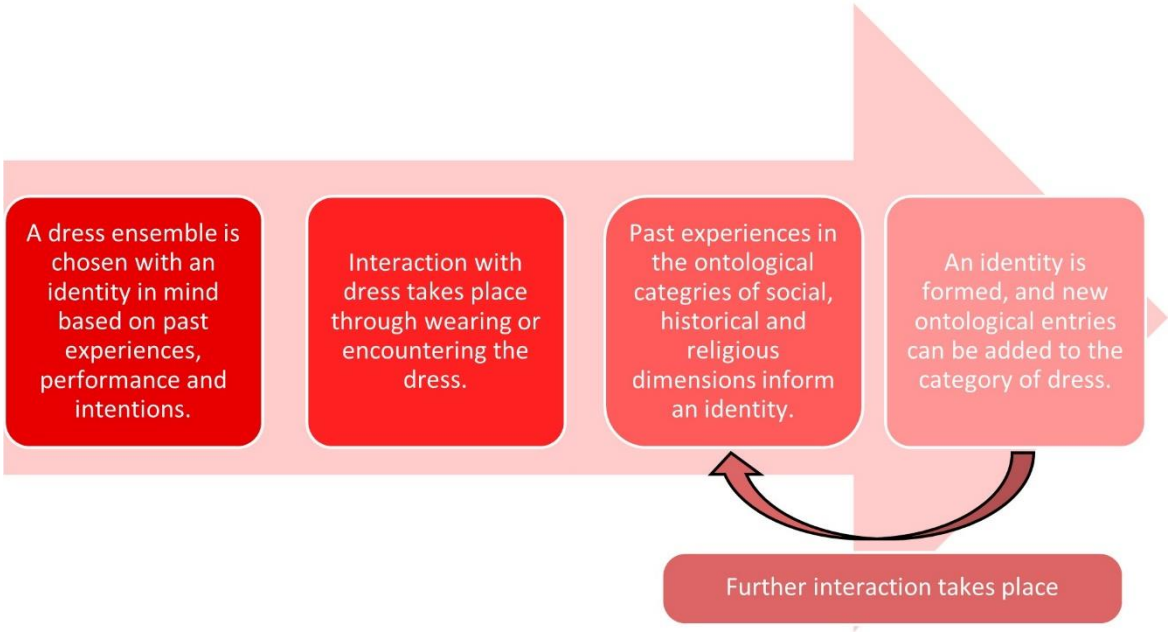
Having discussed both identities and the ways dress interacts with these by means of communication, boundary creation, and performance, it is possible to explain in full detail how dress communicated identity (see image 4). As a process that continuously attributes identity upon dress through the communication of the dress ensemble itself, I would suggest to call this process embellishment, with the added benefit of reminding the reader that *gara*, as a type of embroidery on *sari*, is a type of embellishment as well.

Making use of the theories by Deleuze, Berghuijs, Goffman, Freitag, and Boyer, the first two steps of this process make one choose a dress ensemble with an identity in mind based on one's wish to (not) become or belong to a specific social group. This choice, being informed by past experiences, makes use of Boyer's concept of ontological categories. As a conscious choice, this step might include the concept of performance by Goffman, in which the consciously chosen ensemble is meant to function as a communicative tool.

It is after these first two steps that further interaction with dress takes place, either through the wearing of or encountering of a dress ensemble worn or displayed. Here starts the process of social interactionism of dress as described by Roach-Higgins and Eicher, in which past experiences of social, historical and religious dimensions, again based on ontological categories inform an identity of the wearer or owner of the dress ensemble. The dress communicates the identity indirectly and unconsciously, making use of categories and entries in the mind of the other that they may very well

not know exist. In the final step of this process a temporarily fixed identity is formed, and a new entry can be added to the ontological category of dress when needed. Extra steps come about in this process of communication should further interaction with the dress take place, repeating steps four and five as many times as needed.

4: The process of embellishment through interaction with dress.
Based on the processes of social interactionism by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) belonging (Berghuijs, 2017), and performance (Goffmans 1959) of dress, and in part by the concepts of ontological categories (Boyer 2001), becoming (Deleuze 1994), belonging (Berghuijs 2017), biopolitics (Foucault in Rocamora 2019) and dress as boundary (Freitas 1997).



III – The social dimensions of *gara*

The first of three chapters focusing on the dimensions of identity communicated by *gara*, this chapter will discuss the embroidered *sari*'s social dimensions. To wear *gara* is to communicate the distinct social attributes of Parsi-ness as a social minority, of being a woman, and, as we shall see, of wealth. Working our way up to colonial rule and trade, both of which will be discussed in the next chapter as part of the historical dimension of Parsi identity, this chapter concludes that to wear *gara* is to be a wealthy woman within the Indian social minority called Parsi. By creating a framework of the social dimensions of *gara,* this chapter seeks to answer how *gara* communicates a distinctly social Parsi identity to both Parsis and non-Parsis. The following two chapters will discuss the historical and religious connotations of the identity communicated by *gara*.

Milk and sugar

The Parsi wearers of *gara* have always belonged to a minority in India. Having reportedly landed on the West coast of India sometime during the 7th century CE (Marashi 2020; Cama 2014), following the Arab conquest of Iran, the Parsi community integrated into a nation that did not follow the same customs, had little connection to Iran ethnically, or adhered to Zoroastrianism as a religion. A 1966 story written down by the Hindu-nationalist Hindutva movement's Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar details the arrival and acceptance of the Parsis into India:

> *"We had always been hospitable. Anyone was welcome to stay here. But all of them were required to act up to our national codes and conventions. Several centuries ago, when barbaric hordes of Arabs and Turks invaded Persia, some Parsis left their motherland and sailed forth with their Holy Fire and Holy Book and landed at Surat. King Yadava Rana welcomed them with open arms and consulted the Shankarachrya of Dwaraka Math as to how to accept them. They* [the Parsis] *were asked to give up beef-eating, respect mother-cow as an object of national faith and live here in peace. These followers of Zaratushtra have kept up their promise even to this day."* (Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar, in Buck 2017)

The story above echoes a Parsi oral myth that states that upon arriving on the West Coast of India, at Gujarat, the Parsis were presented with a country too full to accept them (Cama 2014). In this myth, India, symbolically presented to the Parsis as a bowl filled to the brim with milk, accepts the Parsis when they demonstrate how a spoonful of sugar dissolves into the milk without overflowing the bowl. The rules the Parsis must adhere to are simple – all Parsis must adopt the local language, and the women must take up Indian dress, the *sari* (Cama 2014, 263).

Despite being written up in a fashion that can be questioned on its accuracy, the Parsi community did indeed seem to fit in well, despite being a minority. It would take until the mid-nineteenth century and the anti-colonial movements of that period, according to Marashi (2020, 10)

for the community of socio-ethnic Parsis to self-identify as a diaspora people displaced from an 'ancestral Iran'.

Today, the Parsis remain a minority in India, with the 2011 national census detailing a total of 57264 self-identified Parsis (The Hindu newspaper, 2011), mostly concentrated around the city of Mumbai. Of these, 28115 were male and 29149 female. These numbers continue to be in decline, with the 2011 census showing a 22% decline since 2001 (ibid.).

Gendered dress

The item of dress closely related to these views of self-identification as a (diaspora) minority is also very much gendered. According to PARZOR Foundation textile researcher Shernaz Cama it was Parsi women who initially conceived and wore *gara* (Cama 2014). Where other Indian women wore cotton and Indian silk *saris* that had little embellishments (Cama 2014, 269), the invention of the much more extensively embroidered Parsi women's *gara* through embroidery-crafts of Zoroastrian Persia, trade with China and later with Great Britain in the 19th century can be traced back to a multi-explanatory origin further discussed in the following chapter. All things considered, it was the Parsi women that manufactured *gara*, and the Parsi women that initially wore them as a means to distinguish themselves from non-Parsis (Cama 2014, 264). Next to embroidery, the *gara sari* is also worn over the right shoulder as opposed to the left, and is longer, covering the feet. As a gendered dress, it is important to briefly sketch the position of women within the Parsi-Indian household and society as a social unit of both Parsi Zoroastrianism and Indian society.

Within ancient variants of Zoroastrianism, as one of the sources of Parsi Zoroastrian religion, the role of the woman is ambivalent. Perhaps caused by a lack of sources about Zoroastrianism in its entirety, legal historical primary sources from Iran did not mention women often. While translated versions of these original sources exist, they mostly discuss legal cases and legislation. Where the Zoroastrian religious primary source of *Avesta* is concerned, a division is seen between the religious roles attributed to women and the purity rules by which Zoroastrian women must abide. Whereas the position of women in Zoroastrianism has been called 'ahead of its time' (Goldman 2012) and (male) researchers of the source text see an egalitarian view of male-female relationships, this might not be true if we look at the discrepancies between purity rules for women and men (Boyce 1972 in Goldman 2012). The focus of researchers on gender stereotypes in Zoroastrianism (De Jong 1995 in Strausberg 2008) does indeed suggest a more negative connotation when it comes to women. Alas, a complete picture of the traditional status and lives of Zoroastrian women cannot be sketched using Iranian Zoroastrian sources alone. To produce a more complete picture, one must look at the position of the woman in Parsi context, a context that is also influenced by Indian standards.

In Parsi-Indian society, the position of the woman is traditionally below that of men. Deemed a patriarchal society (Johnson and Johnson 2001, 1052), as in many societies around the world throughout time, India experiences a distinct set of gender stereotypes already examined by scholars of Zoroastrianism. Among these stereotypical patriarchal rules, women have limited agency as they are considered the property of males in their households, are financially dependent on their fathers and husbands, and have a limited range of occupational choices (ibid. 1054) because of this. The law enforces these stereotypes (ibid. 1064), as does one's community (ibid. 1054). Reasons for the difference in social status are attributed to both regional and social class, as well as the Indian caste system which favored wealthy Hindu men over women (Miller 1992 in Johnson and Johnson 2001, 1054), whichever caste they belonged to.

Caste and the integration of the Parsi community

Minorites within India have been subjected to assimilation, or rather, Indianization. It has been argued that while some Indianization of the Parsis has taken place, no true assimilation has taken place convincingly (Writer 1989, 129). Instead we can speak of integration in the case of the Parsi community, which has kept most of its "original" culture. One reason for this is the general complexity of Indian society, which has used social hierarchies and boundaries between Hindus and others, such as the systems of castes. While not technically belonging to a caste, by not being Hindu, the Parsi community was still treated as a stand-alone socio-ethnic unit very similar to that of a caste. Within this system of thinking in a hierarchy, which was not outwardly adopted by the Parsi community (ibid. 130), the Parsi minority generally occupied a distinctly favorable position starting with the direct colonial exploitation of India by the British (Writer 1989, 130; Guha 1984, 117) as opposed to other non-Hindu minorities. Instead, starting in the 19th century, the Parsi were viewed as a community of bourgeoise traders. It is here that we see why *gara* might not have as many negative connotations as a gendered dresses of other women. By being connected to a favorable non-caste of Parsis and through a position of favor in trade, women could manage more freedom than traditional Indian laws demanded.

Gara and wealth

Next to a connotation of belonging to a minority, caste and gender, *gara* has an undeniable connection to wealth. This connection is best communicated through the dress' lavish designs, using expensive base materials like silk and extensive handcrafting. The technique of silk embroidery with at least six different types of stitches in practice (Cama 2014, 266) can be applied not just to *saris*, but also to handheld objects such as purses and accessories like shawls (see Cama 2014, 265 for photographs), and other items of clothes like blouses, trousers, and petticoats worn under *sari*. Most examples of *gara* today display colorful borders, *kor*, sewn to *sari* upon completion (see image 5) to make a less expensive variety to fully embroidered *sari*. All of these were incredibly expensive to make, making use of non-native silk for the textile upon which to work, and richly colored threads for the designs.

5 - Gara kor (border) with floral, butterfly and rooster motifs (2018).
Source: Parzor Foundation via Google Arts and Culture

Images of *gara* from the Ravi Varma Press

A product of favorable standing and wealth, it is by no means surprising that we find evidence of *gara* in artworks. Notable for his connection to Parsi benefactors during the heydays of British-Colonial rule in India, Raja Ravi Varma (1848 – 1906) has created several paintings of Parsis wearing *gara* that have been digitalized and printed.

Two artworks that stand out in the extensive oeuvre of Raja Ravi Varma are the incomplete and undated painting *Parsi Lady* (119 cm x 88 cm) and the 1893 oil painting *Decking the Bride* (117 cm x 74 cm). The following page displays both paintings side by side. Both paintings likely feature women from the Parsi community of Mumbai (Bombay), where the Raja Varma Press was originally located and a large community of Parsis resided during the British-Indian colonial period.

Both paintings, furthermore, feature instances of *gara*. Whereas *Parsi Lady* features blue and white stiched embroidery in floral motifs on both the sleeves and bodice of the blouse, the women in *Decking the Bride* all wear *saris* with a decorative *kor* border such as the one seen in image 5 on the previous page. The *kors* in *Decking the Bride* are black and have flowers stitched on in white or gold thread with colored centers or pistils.

The sheer amount of jewelry and richly colored fabric shown in both pictures underpins the wealth displayed. *Parsi Lady* wears what most likely is a white silk blouse. Its translucent sleeves are puffed and tied a few centimeters above their rims, cascading the leftover fabric into a delicately embroidered waterfall edge over the arms of the woman staring directly at the viewer of the painting. While *kor* are relatively inexpensive to make when compared to fully embellished *gara saris*, which could be sold by weight alone (Cama 2014, 271), the four women in *Decking the Bride* all wear multicolored *gara* stitched *kor.* Next to their *gara* they wear what appear to be pearl and gold bracelets and earrings. The woman to the center-right, tending to the orange *sari* of the bride is seen wearing a green *sari* with *gara kor* and even wears a set of gold rimmed glasses.

Taking into account these examples, it is not difficult to imagine that to wear *gara* is to communicate wealth, even if next to a minority status and gender.

RAJA RAVI VARMA

Raja Ravi Varma (1848- 1906), born the 29th of April in Kilimanoor (Karala district), is best known for the infusion of European art techniques and traditionally Indian subjects of mythology and religion. Subjects mostly included goddesses from the Hindu pantheon, which he captured with a nearly life-like countenance.

Part of the erstwile royal family of Parrapanad through his father's line, Raja Ravi Varma's mother was Uma Ambabayi Thampuratty, who belonged to a baronial family of the region. One of his first paintings was finished when he was just 13 years old.

Raja Ravi Varma received international praise at both the Vienna exhibition of 1873 and the World's Columbian Exhibition in 1983.

Raja Ravi Varma is best known for the launch of the Raja Ravi Varma Press in 1894. Here multi-colored lithograps of his paintings were printed to be sold relatively inexpensively. These oleographs were so popular they continued to be printed after his death in 1906 (Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation 2022).

6 - 'Decking the Bride' by Raja Ravi Varma (1893). Source: Sri Chitra Art Gallery. On Loan to the Raj Bhavan, Thiruvananthapuram. Via Google Arts and Culture.

Note that the *saris* of all four women in the painting contain decorative black *kor* banners, complete with *gara* stitching of flowers.

7 - 'Parsi Lady' by Raja Ravi Varma.
Source: Kilimanoor Palace Trust, Kilimanoor via Google Arts and Culture

Note that the blouse (term) worn by the woman contains embroidered floral motifs, or gara, in blue and white stitching thread.

IV – The historical dimensions of *gara*

The second of three chapters focusing on the dimensions of identity communicated by *gara*, this chapter will discuss the embroidered *sari*'s historical dimensions. To wear *gara* is to communicate the narrative histories of both the Parsi communities of India and that of *gara* itself. Preparing for a discussion on the religious connotations of wearing *gara* as a Parsi, a subject which will be discussed in the next chapter as part of the religious dimensions of *gara*, this chapter concludes that to wear *gara* is to reference dually to the master narrative of the Parsis as continuing the original Zoroastrian tradition to this day, as well as to colonial and international trade with Great Britain and China. By creating a framework of the historical dimensions of *gara,* this chapter seeks to answer how *gara* communicates a distinctly historical Parsi identity to both Parsis and non-Parsis. The following chapter will discuss the religious connotations of this identity communicated by *gara*.

The everlasting flame and unbroken thread

When discussing a community, it is important to look at its history. Histories, however, are rarely historical. Like all historical narratives of communities throughout the world, the historical narrative of the Parsi community of India is woven together through a collective master narrative of which the historical accuracy is less than exact. Grand and master narratives, after all, are the subject of debate as much as any story.

The base of the collective historical identity of the Parsi community is that of an everlasting flame and an unbroken thread with their ancestors of ancient Iran, the presumed birthplace of the Zoroastrian communities. Should we start with an overview of the Parsi community in India, we might start here with what is essentially the charter myth of *gara*.

The charter myth of *gara*

This approach is the 2014 *Parsi Embroidery: An intercultural amalgam* by textile researcher Shernaz Cama, and retraces the motifs of Parsi *gara* we see today to Achaemenian Iran and the 'original' Zoroastrians (263). The motifs containing flower and animal patterns were transported via the silk routes to China, where they were added to with Chinese motifs such as Daoist and Buddhist protective fungi[1] (268) and cranes. As the Chinese textile industry had already influenced and been influenced by Europe, certain Chinese motifs gained a distinct Western shape. Traveling even further, the motifs of *gara* were influenced by India and its connections to Europe, only to land back into embroidery cabinets of the Parsi community to form the *gara* we know today.

This master narrative of *gara*'s origins echoes in part the grand narrative of an unbroken thread, tracing the lineage of the Parsi community on both historical and religious treads to pre-Islamic Zoroastrian Iran (pre 651 CE). It takes that all Parsis are the direct descendants of the Iranian Zoroastrians who

[1] Referring to a type of Ganoderma mushroom, 靈芝 *lingzhi,* functioning as a motif of Chinese traditional medicine.

migrated to India is search of a safe place to preserve their religion, and have done so ever since. Persecution at the hand of the Muslim communities in Iran plays an important role in this master narrative. The flame, central to temple worship in Zoroastrianism and brought to India from Iran, had never been extinguished. This is the base for the collective grand narrative of Parsi community, a base that is used mostly in the context of preserving a collective identity of Parsi-ness. As a publication by a researcher for the Parzor Foundation, an institute whose focus lies on the preservation of Parsi identity through crafts, it is understandable why such a historical link is made in the 2014 and similar works. It is not an uncommon link either, as a comparable connection between the Parsis and this charter myth was made in the accompanying website text for the 2013 exhibition on Zoroastrian history and imagination at the Brunei Gallery in London (Meer 2013). What stands, however, is that the charter myth is of great importance to modern Parsi identity (Williams 2009, 2).

Because the master narrative of the Parsi community is difficult to verify today due to a lack of sources apart from the *Qesse-ye Sanjān* text (Williams 2009), researchers have tried to avoid making use of it in their works. Such works on the Parsi community, in an attempt to avoid working from but still mentioning this grand narrative, often start their historical overview of the Parsi community in 8th century Bombay (Palsetia 2001, 3; Williams 2009, 206) or later, focusing on the more easily verifiable economic sources that mention the community in the British-India colonial era (Guha 1984; Writer 1989). It is here that Jesse Palsetia, in his 2001 *The Parsis of India* notes three distinct sources of Parsi identity formation and preservation in a historical sense: trade, British-Indian colonial rule, and more recently, legislation and politics.

Trade from the colonies (1757 – 1947)

Trade between India, China, and the Zoroastrians living in Iran existed long before the Parsi community in India was formed (Wink 1990 in Williams 2009, 205). Archeological evidence of tradable items found at Sanjan off the Gujarat Coat[2], such as glass beads and ceramics, suggests that the Zoroastrian settlers started their lives in India as a trading, rather than an agricultural community (Nanji 2007 in Williams 2009, 188). It is for this reason that Alan Williams takes that rather than persecution, trade was the main reason for the Zoroastrian community to move from Iran to India in the 8th century (Williams 2009, 205).

Colonialism and colonial trade (1858 – 1947)

To write on the Parsi identity is to write about the British-Indian colonial period (1858 – 1947). Often referred to as the British Raj, this denotes a period of direct rule of the British crown over the colonized regions coinciding with today's India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The period followed a much longer period of colonialization by several European countries, including Portugal and the Netherlands, through in none of these instances the India region was governed by a European crown directly. The direct rule of India was preceded by the Company Rule of India in the 18th century, during which the trading company of East India (EIC) had been responsible for ruling India and the surrounding territories. The British Raj would be followed by the decolonization and independence of India in 1947.

[2] A town believed to have been founded by the first Zoroastrians who made for the Indian coastline in the 8th century.

The earliest dates of which records mention *Parsi saris* or *Gara* are 1852, locked within the archives of the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 (Cama 2014, 273) as 'Parsi women's embroidery'. These are *gara* obtained through trade with Europe, and they were shipped with written records of sale. But the trade of *gara* most likely existed long before records of their sales were recorded in writing. Indicative of this is the competitive trade of raw cotton and woven cloth by the Parsi brokers as early as 1800 CE (Rose 2019, 78). The Parsi community did well under British colonial rule, at least where economics were concerned. Indicative of the wealth communicated by *gara*, the Parsi community was a minority of highly sought-after tradesmen and handcrafters.

The raising of temples and burial sites (*dakhma*) in Bombay in the 17th and 18th centuries (Palsetia 2001, 38-39) and buying up of land (ibid. 40) using trade-earned funds would mean large numbers of Parsis were settled in the area by the time the British-Indian colonial period began a mere century later. Several Parsi families had been trading goods with China and within India during the Company Rule, which prohibited direct trade with European countries (ibid. 53). Trade with China included the exchange of textiles used for *gara,* as well as the retail of highly profitable opium (ibid.) for tea desired in Europe during the 18th century. It was Parsi families in these profitable trading businesses that often used part of their funds to provide Parsi settlements, like in Surat, with amenities (ibid. 39) and land for Parsis to live on. Increasing not only the wealth of an elite but the entire community through actions like these benefitted the position and image of the Parsi community as wealthy and charitable. By the late 18th century, some Parsi private traders were wealthy enough to be able to afford ships for the China trade, sailing from the British-Indian ports in Calcutta, Bombay, and Canton, increasing the volume of traded goods and adding to their inventories timber and silk (ibid. 53).

The direct rule of India had further benefits for the Parsi community. Not only did the sale of opium increase during the first half of the 19th century before the direct rule period, but it could also be freely traded from India (Palsetia 2001, 56), unlike other countries, by having its own opium farms. Following increased competition from other minority trading communities in India and discussions on the ethics of manufacturing and trading a drug like opium, most Parsi traders diversified their businesses (ibid. 56) by the direct rule period, while most private traders likely continued to profit off the ongoing opium trade until the end of the Opium War in 1842. At any rate, the Parsi community would continue to flourish as traders and industrialists during the British-Indian colonial rule until at least the early 20th century (Patel 2020, 2).

Legislation and Politics (1947 – 2000)

The wealth and profitable position within the Bombay area gained through trade opened up political avenues for the Parsi community as a whole, starting the construction of not just an economic, but also a political identity. The 20th century saw the rise of anti-colonial and nationalist thought following the devastating Second World War and its mostly negative effects on Asia as a whole, affecting India as well. This turmoil brewing in India frames the Parsi community as both seen as pro-nationalists (Buck 2017) initially and later anti-nationalist (Yo*gara*j and Phil 2021, 355; Patel 2020, 5). A troublesome relation to the (Hindu) nationalist movements of India followed, in which the overall legal attitude towards the Parsi community quickly soured (Patel 2020, 5). This change in the narrative can be explained against the backdrop of the changes in the Parsi attitude towards nationalism as a whole.

The Iran League of Bombay, founded in 1922 by a group of wealthy Parsi families, can be seen as an example at the heart of this change in attitude (Patel 2020). The organization was focused on philanthropic community interest in Iran, seen as the home of the Parsi ancestors. Building on earlier work by Parsi Bombay families starting in the mid-19th century, the Iran League frequently made visits and donations in hopes of rebuilding the Zoroastrian community of Iran after centuries of experiencing pressure to convert to Islam (Patel 2020, 3).

Soon, the philanthropic actions of the Iran League extended beyond the waning Zoroastrian communities in Iran to encompass relationship building between Iran and India and between Muslims and Zoroastrians at home and abroad (bid. 5). But as the hold of the British-Indian colonial rule over India weakened and (Hindu-)nationalist movements grew in power, the pro-Muslim ties of the Parsi community through the Iran League created tension. The Iran League changed its narrative of the Indian Muslims, who, like the Zoroastrians of Iran, had been pressured to the point of having to leave their home country. A far cry from the idea of Muslims as the big bad that forced the Parsi community to leave Iran, this shift in the narrative created tension within the (Hindu-)nationalist view of Parsis as perfect outsiders – a view exhibited early in the milk and sugar myth described in a previous chapter. At the same time, the League's quarterly newspaper exhibited a romanticized version of Iran as the ancestral home of all Zoroastrians, ready to welcome back the Parsi community. It is not surprising that during this period some within the Parsi community considered returning to an overromanticized Iran (ibid.).

Gara today (after 2000)

The creating and wearing of *gara* had its heydays between the 1850s and 1920s (Dastur 2017), mirroring for the most part its connection to colonialism and colonial trade. Having left the cabinets and sewing tables of the modern Parsi community (Cama 2014, 273) as a way of life, the *gara* has become a way to recall the past. Showing similarities to many folk costumes today, the *sari* bearing the marks of Parsi identity as a mix of religious motifs stitched in an expensive thread, have been serving a purpose as both heirlooms (Dastur 2017) within the Parsi community, and more recently, as items of fashion.

Gara as fashion

Considered a forgotten artform, *gara* is kept alive by businesses like that of the duo Kainaz and Firoza of Jophiel Fashion and fashion designer and Parzor scholar Ashdeen Lilaowala owning an online shop, called Ashdeen, selling *gara* embroidered items like clutches, shawls and *saris*. Despite working in different price ranges, with Jophiel Fashion selling *gara* clutches for 4,000 Indian rupees (approx. 50 euros) and Ashdeen selling a similar item for 13,500 rupees (approx. 170 euros), both stores retain the expensive connotation of the handcrafted *gara*. Next to selling four seasonal collections online to this day, Ashdeen Lilaowala was interviewed by Vogue (Vaidya 2019 newspaper article) in 2019 and his designs have appeared on the runway of the Lakmé Fashion Week in various years, including 2013 and 2020 (Outook Traveler 2020).

As recent developments in the history of *gara*, keeping track of the changes incurred at this stage in both identity communication and motifs is not possible. What can be said, however, is that both stores emphasize both the Persian and Chinese roots of their designs, as well as an image of Parsi-ness. Unintentionally, both stores furthermore remind us that *gara* is expensive, even as a handcrafted

fashion item. The lack of European shipping options for both online stores furthermore gestures that the Parsis living in England, having moved there following the independence of India, are not considered part of the niche market of *gara* today.

V – The religious dimensions of *gara*

Arriving at the last of the three chapters focusing on the dimensions of identity communicated by *gara*, this chapter will discuss the embroidered *saris'* religious dimensions. To wear *gara* is to communicate a connotation to the Zoroastrian religion, as well as the distinct shape the Parsi community has given this ancient religion over the course of many centuries. This chapter concludes that to wear *gara* is to refer not to a specific religious function, but rather to a religious context in which *gara* is worn and used to communicate a religious connotation. Several motifs embellished on *gara* pieces strengthen this context by gesturing toward sacred, protective, and in essence, religious connotations. By creating a framework of the religious dimensions of *gara,* this chapter seeks to answer how *gara* communicates a distinct religious Parsi identity to both Parsis and non-Parsis. The following chapter will discuss how these religious dimensions can be connected to the historical and social dimensions of earlier chapters to form the Parsi identity embellished on *gara* today.

Parsi meaning Zoroastrian

The term Parsi, meaning 'Persian' in Gujarati, would suggest that the Parsi community understands itself in terms of a shared geographical history or ethnicity. It might be possible to assume that many Parsis would self-identify as being 'Persians in India'. For the longest time, however, this was not the case at all. The Parsi community did not self-identify as an ethnic community until at least the late 19th century, when contact with Iran and Iranian Zoroastrians had been firmly re-established through philanthropic efforts and trade, much like that of the Iran League in the 20th century. Especially ethnic interpretations of the Parsi community are a rare find in their own sources (De Jong 2018, 132-133), and should be treated carefully. *Gara*, furthermore, communicates but one of the factors one might connect to a Persian ethnicity – a presumed heritage of ancient nature motifs, of which the precise origins cannot be reconstructed with certainty – and it is for this reason that ethnicity is not a topic of discussion in this thesis.

Rather than ethnicity, the religious origins of the community have been used time and time again to underpin a shared identity of Parsi-ness, both within and outside of the Parsi community. It is this collective religious identity that is also embellished on *gara,* as to be Parsi means to be Zoroastrian first. The religious connotations of *gara* are, unlike their social and historical counterparts, less direct and yet even more tangible. They are not found in the type of dress, not in the gender or social class of its wearers, not in the wealth needed to produce and procure the item, but rather in what is shown as a whole. First and foremost, the context in which *gara* is worn shows a distinct religious connotation. The motifs of *gara*, furthermore, rather than the dress and technique itself, show us religious connotations as well.

Ritualistic connotation

Similar to the Parsi accessory girdle, *kusti*, *gara* can be attributed with religious connotations. Yet, whereas the *kusti* serves a specific religious function as a Zoroastrian identifier crafted by Parsi women within the household (Cama and Lilaowalla 2014; Cama 2014; Varadarajan 2014), *gara* does not serve a specific religious function. Rather, it is religious by connotation to ritual performance of Parsi women

in what one can suggest is a religious context, in which *gara* and in particular *gara saris* play a role as ritual props in at least two rituals: marriage and new year's celebrations.

Gara as a ritual prop in Parsi Zoroastrian performances

Both marriage ceremonies and new year's celebrations are part of a list of distinct Parsi Zoroastrian rituals I would propose are religious in nature. First and foremost, the celebration of the Parsi new year in India, traditionally called Navroz, has Parsi women wearing *gara saris* as part of a dress code. Navroz is a celebration that is part of the Parsi Zoroastrian religious calendar, which places Navroz not near the Spring Equinox like its Iranian counterpart, but rather 200 days later. This year, 2022, the nearest new years' celebrations take place on the 17th of August. It requires the cleaning of the home, family visits, food items as well as a temple visit in traditional clothing (News 18, 2021). The institutionalization of this ritual fits neatly into most definitions of religion that underpin institutionalization as one of the hallmarks of a religion. *Gara* is still among the costumes worn to the Navroz celebration, as photographs from the ritual in 2021 with women wearing *kor* borders with floral *gara* suggest (see image 8).

Likewise, contemporary photographs of Zoroastrian marriages within the Parsi community are easily found online (see image 9 on the next page). Today, the rituals surrounding marriage have women hand-stitch their *sudreh*, an undergarment vest, for their wedding (Cama 2014, 264). Female attendees of the wedding ceremony, which takes a total of three days, often wear *gara* as well, as the 1893 'Decking the Bride' painting by Raja Ravi Varma, seen in chapter three, already suggests. Much like the celebration of Navroz, Parsi marriage is a ritual of an institutionalized character, and can for this reason, as well as many others, be called religious.

8 - Parsi women celebrating Navros by lighting candles outside of the Fire Temple in Hyderabad, 2021.
Source: Photograph by Chitti Babu via India Times Online Newspaper.

9 - Photograph of a Parsi wedding ceremony.
Source: Zoroastrians.net website.

If we look at Navroz and marriage, *gara saris* play a role in the performance of the distinct rituals. They are considered a type of 'traditional dress', a term closely related to folk costume, and the rules of each ritual demand *gara saris* are worn by women. *Gara,* in these contexts, is not an optional attribute that is fun or beautiful to wear. The distinct Parsi *gara sari* is not worn to display gender, wealth or history per sé, nor is it not worn just because it is beautiful. The use of distinct white thread *gara* in marriage ceremonies is much more distinct. It is a carefully chosen institutionalized identifier of Parsi-ness, a prop to the performance of Parsi Zoroastrianism through the religious ritual that binds wife and husband. Likewise, the use of *gara* in new year's ceremonies communicates both 'I belong to the Parsi community and 'I belong to Zoroastrianism' to all who encounter the dress by being connotated in the context of the religious ritual of Navroz. In both cases, we might call *gara* both a ritual prop and a religious identity marker.

Sacred and protective motifs

Using the different stitching techniques to create *gara* embroidery is not seen as a ritual or religious act. The items on which *gara* is found can be sold to others, though most contemporary shops only sell dress and accessories on which *gara* can be found within the confines of India, where most of the Parsi communities are still found today. The items on which we find *gara* are not religious by nature, but their associations are. To wear *gara* is to communicate a connection to Zoroastrianism, and *gara* ought to be recognized as such. It is here that motifs found in the embroidery function to communicate religious attributes of Zoroastrianism that are tied closely to both social and historical dimensions of Parsi identity. In this communication, two things stand out: first, the clinging to nature motifs, in which flowers, animals, and even fungi play a role in connecting *gara* to the Zoroastrian focus of deified nature (Cama 2014), and second, the absence of embroidered texts and geometrical shapes on *gara*

sari one might expect from an artform connected to an Islamic legacy and contemporary connection, both from Iran and India, especially when some Iranian wedding dresses do indeed have texts embroidered on them.

Nature motifs and the charter myth of *gara*

Traditional Parsi embroidery features motifs of flowers, birds, and other animals like fish, symbolizing power, fertility, health, purity, and even protection (Cama 2014, 265). Emblems promoting health, like roosters, are especially desired for children's dress (ibid. 266). Fish, on the other hand, as symbols of fertility (ibid. 264), feature more heavily during weddings. Live figures such as angels, whose depictions were forbidden during the Islamic age, were synonymized with specific flowers (ibid.) like the rose, marigold, and white jasmine, fusing nature with religious symbolism into a kind of deified nature (Cama 2014) symbols. A similar censure of brightly colored textiles during the Islamic reign of Iran still explains the popular use of black or navy-colored fabric for the creation of *kor* borders.

Moving along the silk road, mirroring the charter myth of *gara* described in the previous chapter, *gara* motifs started to include not just Chinese textile stitches, but traditional motifs from Chinese culture. Additions from Chinese culture, Parzor scholar Ashdeen Lilaowala says in an interview with Indian fashion magazine Verve, included cranes, weeping willows, pagoda, and divine fungus scenes (Cama 2014, 268; Dastur 2017) derived from Taoism, as well as the *china-chini*, or Chinese man and wife, returning living figures to the folds of *gara*. Other motifs popularized by the Chinese in the 19th century were the peony, butterfly, and floral tendril (Kawlra 2014, 220), the latter of which is often used today. Indian additions to the nature motifs include paisley, waterlilies, and peacocks, mirroring the new environment the Parsi community found itself in from the 8th century onwards. Likewise, contact with the English brought European motifs like basket and bow, symbols of plentitude, as well as scallops (Dastur 2017), one of the most expensive crustaceans in the world and a symbol of wealth.

The concern with nature motifs, in which plants, flowers, birds, and fish are emblems of power and other desirable effects is not unique to the Parsi Zoroastrian religion. It is, however, the only link that can effectively be made between the *gara* of today and the much older Zoroastrian embroidery of a pre-Islamic past in Iran. This is no coincidence, as both the Parsi Zoroastrian religion and its roots in pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism holds that nature, and especially nature's forces, must be worshipped and maintained (Cama 2014, 264), as they are the essence of all that is good and thereby sacred. Animals, water and produce (ibid.) lie at the heart of Zoroastrianism and can be seen as the motifs still stitched unto *gara saris* today. Some nature symbols, like flowers, were synonymous with non-human agents of religion like angels. Nature motifs thus reference directly to the Zoroastrian religion, and indirectly to the charter myth of *gara* in which each country visited added to the wealth of motifs to pick from for one's dress.

The absence of text and geometrical shapes

One thing hinted at in the text by Shernaz Cama on the subject of Zoroastrian motifs in *gara* is the absence of geometrical shapes (Cama 2014, 266), much loved by Islamic communities and used in architecture as well as on textiles not belonging to the Zoroastrian community. Only two of such shapes ever ended up on the Iranian predecessor of *gara* – the pearl discs and trellis grid pattern, both referring to patterns of interlacing lines. Apart from geometrical shapes such as these, text, either in stitching or another type of application, does not appear on any of today's *gara*. The absence of these

types of motifs is strange if we consider that one of the most revered artforms of Islamic(ate) material culture is calligraphy, and the Parsi Zoroastrians have been in contact with Islamic communities using calligraphic art both in Iran and in India since the mid-19th century.

VI – The embellishment of *gara*

To begin with, *gara* – as an embellishment of Parsi-worn *saris* and other items, as a type of embroidery made and used by Parsis, and as an embroidery technique unique to Parsis, has had an undeniable link to Parsi-ness since its invention. To wear *gara* is to self-identify as Parsi as much as it is to communicate this identity to others. Today especially, when the *gara sari* is a requisite of rituals as well as an everyday embellishment of fashion items sold in India. How this identity is applied to *gara* is dubbed embellishment in this thesis, reminding us that like *gara* is an embellishment of the (Hindu) *sari*, identity is an overlay on dress that communicates to others through being seen.

The process of embellishment

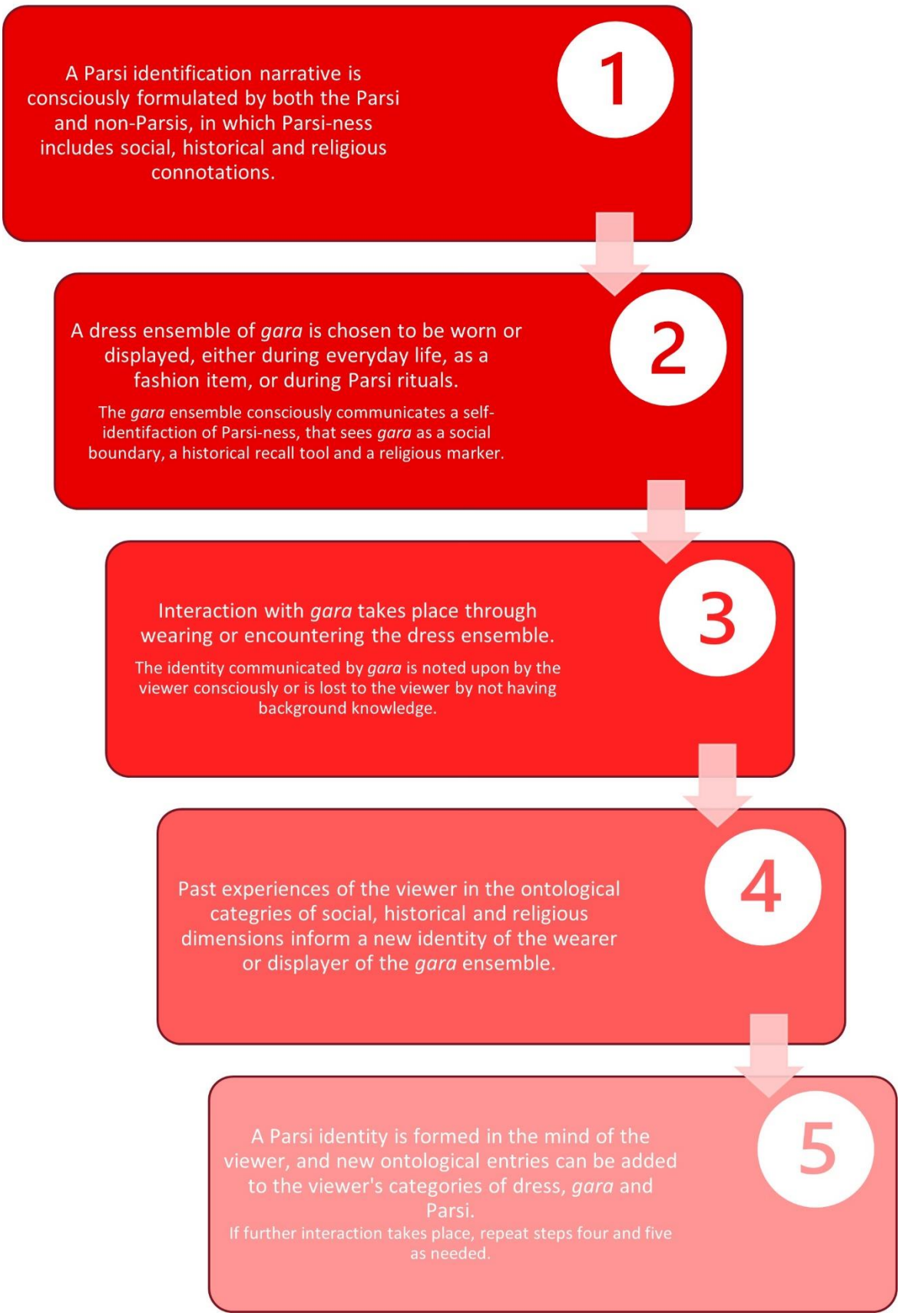
As explained in the second chapter of this thesis, the process of embellishment functions by making use of five steps from choosing the one's dress ensemble to the formation of your identity by others based on what you are wearing and the past experiences of that person.

In this process, the first step is choosing a dress ensemble. Doing so means having an identity in mind based on what you want to, or do not want to communicate to others about yourself. It is here that a step can be added before the official first step of embellishment mentioned in figure 4 to create a new first step: conscious identity formation, the creation of an identity narrative. A dress ensemble is then chosen in the second step of this process that highlights (parts) of this identity narrative. Usually, these highlights are meant to communicate a part of one's identity that is positive about oneself. It is here that we see the first embellishment of one's identity unto dress take shape. The embellishment of an identity narrative, in which dress is merely a means of communication. The second step is the conscious choice to wear or display the dress ensemble. The second type of embellishment takes place, in which one's dress embellishes the body or the item embellishes the space it is displayed in.

The third step in this process has interaction take place with the dress ensemble, starting the process of symbolic interactionism upon which this embellishment theory is based. It is from this point on that the focus of embellishment lies not just on the wearer, but on the one interaction with the dress by others. We might call these viewers, as social interactionism works through seeing the dress, whether or not it is worn. Following along, the fourth step has the viewer process their past experiences with the dress ensemble, making use of their ontological categories of dress' social, historical and religious dimensions. The final step in this process creates a temporarily fixed identity, allowing for a new entry to be added to the ontological category of dress when needed. This temporarily fixed identity might also be called an embellishment, taking into account that the fixed identity is an overlay of the actual identity of a person, which cannot be fully reconstructed by another at a glance. Like a *sari,* this temporarily fixed identity is draped over the body of the other, covering the identity underneath.

It is this process of embellishment that *gara* makes use of in communicating a Parsi identity. Steps one and two formulate a Parsi identity that is communicated through *gara,* which is then interacted with in steps three and four, to form an identity in the final step of the process. Should we replace dress in the above explanation of embellishment with *gara*, the 5-stepped process would look something like image 10, detailing how *gara* works to communicate identity.

10: The Embellishment process of Gara.
Graph by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.

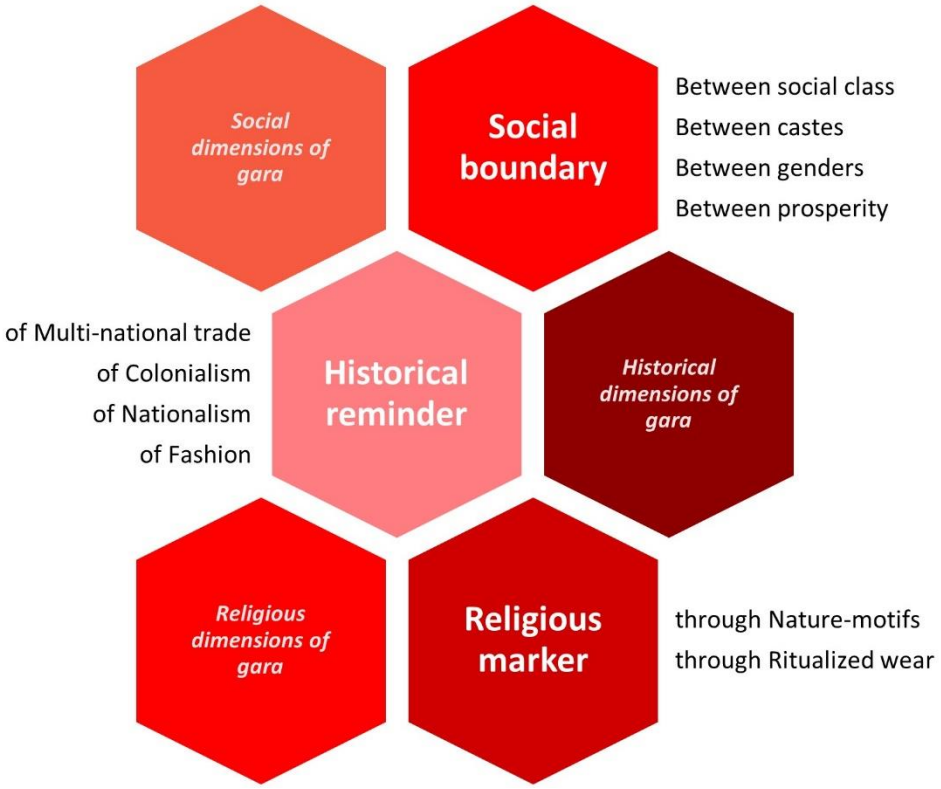


The Parsi identity communicated by *gara*

Now that we have answered the first part of our research question with the process of embellishment, one important question remains to be answered – which Parsi identity is communicated by *gara*? To answer this question we can draw upon the previous chapters of this thesis on identity and *gara*. Instead of asking how *gara* works as a communicative tool, we are now flipping the question to encompass how *gara* is embellished on Parsi identity. We must thus look at the identification narrative of the Parsi community of India, and highlight where *gara* intercepts it.

Three dimensions of interceptions between the Parsi identity and *gara* are visible in the process of embellishment: social, historical, and religious dimensions. Step two in image 10 already details it briefly, but the identity communicated by *gara* is drawn from social, historical and religious dimensions to formulate *gara* as a social boundary, a historical recall tool, and a religious marker of the Parsi community (see image 11).

11: The Parsi identity communicated by gara through the embellishment process.
Graph by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.



As a social boundary, *gara* places the wearer of the embroidery against others. Not only does chapter three of this thesis detail how these differences are between social class and castes in India, the *gara* is also indicative of the female gender and prosperity. Of these, only the gendered and prosperous aspects can be directly seen upon encountering *gara* in its shape as the *gara sari,* worn only by women. The wealth of the Parsi community, which in many cases was shared within its own ranks and settlements, can be physically seen in the intricate and expensive designs of *gara*. All of these attributes of *gara* create a boundary between the Parsi community and others, as well as boundaries within the community where women and men are concerned. To wear *gara* is thus not just to

communicate a social boundary between who is Parsi and who is not, but also to communicate the social aspects of Parsi-ness that formulate this identity. Be it social class, castes, gender, or prosperity, all of the aspects are drawn from during the formation of a Parsi identification narrative.

To wear *gara* is also to communicate a past. Chapter three details four main areas where *gara* and Parsi history intersect. First and foremost, *gara* is closely connected to multi-national trade, weaving together an envisioned link between Iran and India, but also connecting the Parsi community to China. This history is trade is closely linked to colonialism, being a direct effect of the trader's mentality of the Parsi community in working under colonial powers during the British-Indian colonial period in the 18th through 20th century to trade in tea, silk, opium, and *gara*. A link to politics is made here thanks to the Parsi connection to nationalism, a process during which the grand narrative of Parsi-ness and the charter myth of *gara* we know today was formulated. Moving to the 21st century, it is the intersection between wealth and the charter myth of the Parsi community that is used to sell contemporary *gara* as fashion items by shops like Ashdeen and Jophiel. To wear *gara* is thus to recall a past that is distinctly Parsi.

A final fold of communication is found in the religious dimensions of *gara*, in which religiously inspired motifs and nature motifs within the embroidery show the viewer a Zoroastrian connection. As a religion tied to nature, it is the motifs of *gara,* be it through flowers, animals, or plants, that immediately betray a religious connection. The context in which *gara* is worn, particularly as *gara sari*, during religious holidays and rituals like Navroz and marriage ceremonies also reveals a religious aspect to *gara*. To wear *gara* is then to communicate a religious marker, a marker of Zoroastrianism.

The identification narrative of the Parsi community intersects with *gara* on three levels, all interconnecting to form a narrative that embellishes the Parsi community of India as Parsi, be it socially, historically, or religiously. This narrative, following the process of embellishment, is in turn embellished on *gara*. To answer the research question of this thesis we have thus discussed the entire process of embellishment and can arrive at our conclusion.

VII – Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, the association between identity and dress formulated the following research question: How does *gara* work as a communicative tool of Parsi identity to both non-Parsis and Parsis? Breaking up this question into two, the chapters of this thesis have sought to answer how *gara* as a type of dress communicated identity, and which identity – referred to as Parsi – is being communicated.

Reflection

To answer the first question, this thesis concludes that *gara* works as a communicative tool of Parsi identity to both non-Parsis and Parsis through a process dubbed embellishment. Explained in detail in the second and sixth chapters of this thesis, the process of embellishment communicates an identity that is Parsi through applying an identity narrative on dress, which is then interacted with by others to formulate a temporarily fixed identity of the wearer.

These two identities are rarely the same, as they rely on different sources belonging to the wearer, who chose the ensemble to consciously communicate an identity, and the viewer of the dress ensemble, who bases the identity formed on previous experiences. The entire process, thus, explains how *gara* communicates a Parsi identity but concludes that this communication is not neces*sari*ly received in the identification of Parsis by their choice of dress. Especially when background knowledge of the identity narrative of Parsis is not available in the mind of the viewer of *gara*, an identity will be formed that is different from the identity communicated by *gara*. A one-way communication line thus exists for both the wearer and the viewer, while both create an identity of the wearer that is dubbed Parsi.

If background knowledge of the identity narrative does exist, an temporarily fixed identity of the wearer of *gara* and Parsi-ness that matches the intention of the wearer can be communicated by *gara*. The conscious communication of a Parsi identity through *gara* thus relies heavily on the creation of an identity narrative that can be communicated by dress. This thesis concludes that the parts of the Parsi identity that intersect with *gara* stem from the social, historical and religious dimensions of what it means to be Parsi. Looking at the applications of *gara*, its history, use and context, we can conclude that to wear *gara* means to communicate a social boundary between social classes, castes, gender, and prosperity. It is also to communicate a past of multi-national trade, colonialism, nationalism and the modern uses of *gara* in fashion, and finally to communicate a 'belonging' to the Parsi Zoroastrian religion.

It should be made clear that embellishment works best with symbolic types dress, like *gara*, that are deemed by the community itself, as well to those who know them, as typical of the community. Relating to folk dress as a symbol of identity, one might imagine that the process of embellishment might not be applicable to types of identities that do not have a clearly defined and consciously constructed identity narrative. We must remember, however, that all human beings have an identity narrative, and the dress ensemble people wear is always consciously chosen by someone. Hence, by

working our way back from the dress ensemble to an identity instead of the other way around, we might discover an unconscious identity narrative. This is because embellishment is a process of identity communication. What is communicated must eventually be representative of one's identity, no matter if it is consciously formulated.

One might also gesture that embellishment works only when the wearer and viewer of the type of dress have background knowledge (in their mind's archive) of the identity of the wearer or the dress. However, embellishment's connection to identity communication in dress explains what source is drawn from when specific background knowledge does not exist: other social, historical, and religious 'rules' in the viewer's mind. This is why the identity communicated and the identity formed in the mind of others do not need to match for the process of embellishment to work.

Future research

This thesis thus answers two important questions in the study of identity communication through dress. First and foremost, the process of embellishment described above, by drawing on various studies in the fields of fashion, textile, identity, and religion not only describes how *gara* communicates a Parsi identity, but how dress can communicate identity overall. It is therefore applicable to future studies on the communication of identity through dress, allowing for the process of identity communication by dress to be explained outside the field of religious studies in which this thesis was written.

Next to the process of embellishment as an explanation for identity communication by dress, this thesis sheds light on the identity formulation process of the Parsi community of India, an identity that intersects with *gara* through social, historical, and religious communications of what it means to be Parsi. Not only does this thesis by focusing on these three dimensions shed light on part of the Parsi community's social, historical and religious dimensions, where *gara* is concerned, but also on how these dimensions are chosen when communicating a Parsi identity through *gara*. Similar dimensions may be used in the communication of all kinds of identities, and I hope that further research will be conducted on other types of dress using this blueprint as its guide.

And should the reader of this thesis one day come across a *klederdracht* doll while traveling, I highly recommend you take a good look at the identity communicated by its dress – maybe one of them will be Parsi.

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Images

Front Cutout from *'Decking the Bride' by Raja Ravi Varma (1893)*.
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1 *Ten ways to 'belong', a list of modalities of religious belonging by Berghuijs (2017).* Graphic.
Image by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.

2 *Simplified diagram of the process of identity formation according to the theory of social interactionism of dress (Roach-Higgins 1992).* Graphic.
Image by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.

3 *A simplified example of the application of ontological categories to dress and gara. Based on the concept of ontological categories by Boyer (2001).* Graphic.
Image by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.

4 *The process of embellishment through interaction with dress. Based on the processes of social interactionism by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) belonging (Berghuijs, 2017), and*

performance (Goffmans 1959) of dress, and in part by the concepts of ontological categories (Boyer 2001), becoming (Deleuze 1994), belonging (Berghuijs 2017), biopolitics (Foucault in Rocamora 2019) and dress as boundary (Freitas 1997). Graphic.
Image by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.

5 *Gara kor (border) with floral, butterfly and rooster motifs (2018).* Photograph.
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10 *The Embellishment of Gara. Based on the processes of embellishment explained in detail in chapter two of this thesis, which based itself on social interactionism by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) belonging (Berghuijs, 2017), and performance (Goffmans 1959) of dress, and in part by the concepts of ontological categories (Boyer 2001), becoming (Deleuze 1994), belonging (Berghuijs 2017), biopolitics (Foucault in Rocamora 2019) and dress as boundary (Freitas 1997).* Graphic.
Image by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.

11 *The Parsi identity communicated by gara. Note that it is this identity that is part of the embellishment of gara*. Graphic.
Image by Aurora E. L. Turkenburg.