The tradition of Meskwaki ribbonwork: cultural meanings, continuity, and change

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The tradition of Meskwaki ribbonwork: cultural meanings, continuity, and change

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Textiles and Clothing

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2008

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the participants of this study for sharing their time and experiences. It was my intention to give voice to the Meskwaki ribbonworkers and enable them to “speak” through this study. I have gained a deep appreciation for their valuable talents, expertise, and skills. I am deeply grateful to Marjorie Mauskemo and Gladys Benson for sharing their vast cultural knowledge. And I am forever indebted to my grandmother, Minnie Hunter Youngbear, who sparked my interest in sewing, provided me with a sewing machine at a very young age, and constantly encouraged perfection.

I am grateful for the knowledge and encouragement from my POS committee. Susan Torntore, who shared her knowledge, provided guidance and support and believed in my topic of research; Jean Parsons, for her perspective on design; and Lynn Paxson, for her knowledge of design and Native American culture.

I would also like to thank my fellow graduate students, Satish Hanmanthgari, Yi-Tung Lo, and Sandra Stewart, who inspired and supported me throughout the process.

I would especially like to thank my husband, Ron, and my children, Erin, Bryan, and Kayla, who showed much patience and encouragement in my determination to achieve a Masters Degree.
ABSTRACT

Applied decoration of garments is common practice for the majority of Native American tribes in North America. Ribbonwork, a textile art form, is a method of applied decoration to dress prevalent in Indian tribes originating from the Great Lakes Region. This study examines the tradition of ribbonwork from the perspectives of those who make it and wear it. Participants are from the Meskwaki Nation of Iowa where the tradition of ribbonwork has been in existence for over 175 years. Though the materials used are not native in origin, the traditional method of applied decoration to garments continues as a form of ethnic dress that is a visual marker of identity as it has for centuries. The results show that through the process of cultural authentication, ribbonwork is selected from non-indigenous materials, incorporated into the culture, and transformed into a unique textile form. Contemporary versions of ribbonwork reflect the past in the motifs, assembly, and color, and the changes that have occurred in ribbonwork do not alter its meaning. Tradition is not static; tradition is subject to change. There is continuity in the cultural meanings assigned to the role and function of ribbonwork and it continues to exemplify Meskwaki tradition. Adaptation to use of available materials surrounding their environment resulted in an innovative and creative response to change: the lack of one material is generally substituted by another, and so the tradition continues.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ribbonwork is a rainbow tradition of color and beauty. Although the present base materials are of non-Indian manufacture, the fundamental styles and motifs are from old Indian traditions. Ribbonwork renders any garment spectacular and the complex intricacy of the planning, cutting, folding, and sewing of its manufacture once again clearly demonstrates the sophistication and skill of the Indian arts.

George Horse Capture (1980)

The Native American tradition of applied decoration to garments has been in existence for centuries. Applied decoration is a method of adhering materials to a garment in a decorative fashion. Ribbonwork is a textile art form and a method of applied decoration developed by Native American women of the Great Lakes region after the introduction of European trade in the early 17th century. Today, the Meskwaki Nation of Iowa, originally from the Great Lakes region, uses ribbonwork as the primary means of applied decoration on garments. The Meskwaki tradition of ribbonwork is a reflection of the past in how it symbolically carries on the meanings of the culture, while the actual form in material goods has changed over time.

Meskwaki ribbonwork is a traditional form of applied decoration. To create ribbonwork, pairs of ribbon strips in contrasting colors are layered and then the top layer is cut, folded under, and stitched to the bottom layer into a repeating design configuration. The contrast of color forms the design and takes on a positive/negative image of an abstract representation of flora. Two or more of these strips are sewn together to form a mirror-image of the repeating design which becomes a panel (see fig. 1.1). The panels are then used to embellish skirts, leggings, and breechcloths. Today, Meskwaki wear western-style dress for
a. Two sets of different colored ribbons are layered (light blue over dark pink and dark blue over light pink).
b. The light blue and navy blue ribbon is cut and sewn into the repeating design.
c. Two strips are combined to form a panel.
d. Matched pairs of panels

e. The matched pairs form a full panel.
f. The panel is applied to black wool with an additional panel added to the bottom border to form a skirt.

Fig. 1.1  Example of Meskwaki ribbonwork. (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).
daily attire, but for weekly ceremonies and periodic dance festivals, they wear Meskwaki ethnic dress decorated with ribbonwork.

As a member of the Meskwaki tribe, I design and produce Native American dance regalia. One of my products for women is the Meskwaki ribbonwork skirt. When I set out to design the ribbonwork skirt, creating a garment that reflected Meskwaki tradition was important to me, and my dilemma was how to combine the concept of tradition in ribbonwork with contemporary methods of construction using contemporary materials. My method of constructing ribbonwork uses machine-stitched appliqué to attach the design in place, rather than hand stitching which was more common in the past. The hand sewing technique is tedious and time consuming and does not fit my business goals to provide the best product at an affordable level. So, is my method of construction and the materials used to make ribbonwork considered traditional? This question led me to further consider what constitutes tradition in the Meskwaki culture and how tradition applies to ribbonwork.

When I started my business in 1995, I conducted informal research on ribbonwork that focused on designs, motifs, and color combinations by looking at museum catalogs, examining ribbonwork garments from family and friends, and observing dancers who wear ribbonwork. At that time, my customers shared their thoughts and ideas about what they considered tradition in ribbonwork, and the majority stated that tradition in ribbonwork is in the motif and color. However, not everyone had the same point of view. Some stated that modern ribbonwork is not traditional because it is not hand-stitched and ribbon is not used.

What is tradition in ribbonwork then? Tradition, in general, is a long-established custom or belief, often one that has been handed down from generation to generation. Tradition, according to scholars, is a symbolic act that carries the meanings for people in the
present while the object, behavior, or the beliefs from the past may change (Handler and Linnekin 1984). How does ribbonwork fit into this concept of tradition? Is it in the process, the design, the color selection, the materials, or is it a combination? How does change in materials and methods affect what is considered traditional? And what constitutes the ribbonwork tradition for the Meskwaki people?

This study focuses on the Meskwaki tradition of ribbonwork as a primary means of applied decoration to garments and as a form of ethnic dress. While several types of ribbonwork-decorated garments for men and women exist, such as shawls, breechcloths, leggings, moccasins, and bags, the primary garment for women is the ribbonwork skirt. Accordingly, this study centers on the ribbonwork applied to the skirt because, first, ribbonwork is most common in skirts; second, because I make and am familiar with ribbonwork skirts; and third, I want to understand more about the complex historical and cultural aspects of ribbonwork and ribbonwork skirts.

Ethnic dress, like a ribbonwork skirt, is worn by members of one group to distinguish themselves from others. Meskwaki ethnic dress, or regalia, decorated with ribbonwork are worn for weekly ceremonies and also worn for social and celebratory events at periodic dance festivals or powwows. In general, the Great Lakes ribbonwork design is characterized as curvilinear (Neill 2000) as opposed to geometric patterns of ribbonwork that are associated with the Plains culture groups. The Meskwaki ribbonwork designs are and were more organic and resemble stylized flora such as flowers, stems, and leaves.

Research on ribbonwork

While there is certainly a long standing oral history among various tribal nations regarding ribbonwork, written documentation or history of the cultural practice of applied
decoration of garments also exists. For instance, museum catalogs feature photographs of collected ribbonwork items from various tribes. These include the Flint Institute of Arts (1973); The Chandler-Pohrt collection (Penney 1992); and University of Iowa Museum Art (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Non-pictorial works include written descriptions of early 18th and 19th century Native American garments and cultural practices, such as Major Morrell Marston’s 1820 memoirs (Blair 1911) and John Heckewelder’s 1876 memoirs (Heckewelder 1971). In addition, information about early Native American dress is documented in archaeological excavation remains (Quimby 1966).

While few written studies have been devoted to ribbonwork, a few scholars have worked in this area and have proposed systems for classifying types of ribbonwork. Alice Marriott and Carol K. Rachlin (1980) examined the origins and development of ribbonwork of the Southern Plains region, Richard G. Conn (1980) studied the origins and diffusion of ribbonwork in the Plains region, and Rachel Pannabecker (1986) explored the cultural dynamics of ribbonwork as part of material acculturation. According to the scholars, the most useful and accepted classification system was developed by Donna Abbass (1979). She developed a typology, or a system of notation for classifying ribbonwork based on techniques and structural characteristics of ribbonwork samples of tribes from Oklahoma. Abbass also described specific construction techniques that she classified into four developmental styles of ribbonwork:

1) *Developmental stage* - simple geometric design and construction

2) *Style I* - shingled ribbonwork where the pattern is repeated with multiple layers of ribbon
3) **Style II** - negative ribbonwork formed with pairs of ribbon; the top ribbon is cut away and the bottom ribbon is revealed, an example of reverse appliqué

4) **Style III** - positive ribbonwork where the top ribbon forms a design

Abbass’ (1979) classification system was developed for the description of technical aspects and chronological stages of styles of ribbonwork. She also made the distinction in the technique called “appliqué,” the use of cut cloth to form “medallions” or motifs, as opposed to “ribbonwork” using lengths of cut and sewn selvedge edged ribbons. Consequently, the appliqué technique as well as the use of simple ribbons to decorate garments was omitted from her classification system. Also, her study was limited to ribbonwork from Native American culture groups from Oklahoma.

In her study, Carleen McPharlin-Coen (1974) posited that ribbonwork and quillwork patterns are rooted in established traditional motifs transferred from other materials; mainly the twined and woven bags of the Great Lakes region. She argued that “cross-stimulation” occurred when a pattern developed in one medium is introduced and built on with another, and her study proved useful in establishing a crossover of patterns and designs using different media.

In a similar vein, Rachel Pannabecker (1986) conducted extensive research on the distribution of ribbons in her dissertation, which focused on the cultural dynamics of ribbonwork through an examination of its origin, diffusion, and persistence. She examined the origin of ribbon availability in the Great Lakes region by the 1770’s via European trade networks. Her research on trade lists suggested an increase in the value of ribbons as they appeared more frequently as trade items.
Susan M. Neill’s (2000) ongoing investigation of ribbonwork attempts to establish a system of attribution for particular tribes based on formal attributes of ribbonwork. Using Abbass’ system of classification, Neill has developed a database based on visual characteristics, techniques, design motifs, color combinations, and cut of clothing in hopes of defining tribal styles of ribbonwork. In addition to Abbass’ categories, Neill added a fifth classification, which she also terms appliqué and defines as a contemporary method of cutting motifs out of fabric, then sewing them onto a foundation layer of fabric strips rather than using continuous lengths of selvedge edged ribbons. Furthermore, Neill has explored the role of ribbonwork in the expression of cultural identities:

When wearing traditional clothing, Native Americans are literally embodied by their heritage; thus these ribbonwork-decorated garments are truly emblems of ethnicity. (Neill 2000, 165)

Her investigation concluded that ribbonwork carries meaning for the wearer, reinforces traditional values, and is a material symbol of identity.

Many previous studies collected data using museum samples of ribbonwork (e.g., Neill 2000; Conn 1980; Marriott and Rachlin 1980; Abbass 1979; McPharlin-Coen 1974). In contrast, this study will use data from interviews of Meskwaki members who make and wear ribbonwork to gain their perspectives of tradition in ribbonwork. The concepts of ethnic dress, culture, and tradition will provide the framework for exploring ribbonwork. More specifically, ribbonwork, as a form of applied decoration used on garments by specific ethnic groups, falls into the two theoretical areas of dress and culture: ribbonwork as a function of dress and ribbonwork within culture, cultural change, and tradition. The history and culture of the Meskwaki tribe will provide the context necessary to understand ribbonwork as it relates to the technology, ideology and social interaction of the group.
Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a deeper understanding of the tradition and function of an applied decoration called ribbonwork and to ascertain the perception of the tradition and change in ribbonwork from the perspective of the Meskwaki.

Research Questions

1) What do the Meskwaki perceive as defining characteristics of their ribbonwork?
2) What role does ribbonwork play in the Meskwaki culture?
3) How do the Meskwaki define the tradition of ribbonwork?

Objectives

This study explores and interprets factors related to the cultural meanings of ribbonwork. These factors include the cultural relevance of ribbonwork related to process, use, motifs, and changes.

Findings of this study will:

1) Describe key structural characteristics of Meskwaki ribbonwork,
2) Describe intrinsic characteristics of Meskwaki ribbonwork,
3) Identify the role of ribbonwork in the Meskwaki culture,
4) Identify cultural meanings in ribbonwork, and
5) Identify tradition in Meskwaki ribbonwork.

Organization of Study

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter One provides the introduction for the study. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature on dress, culture, and tradition; provides an historical overview and sociopolitical organization of the Meskwaki and reviews European trade in the Great Lakes region. Chapter Three is a literature review on methods of
Native American applied decoration of garments. Chapter Four describes research methods of this study, and Chapter Five conveys the findings of the data analysis. Chapter Six discusses contributions of research findings, suggests areas for further study, and provides a summary.

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Algonquian** - languages spoken by the native people of the Great Lakes region; based on language similarities; language similarity allowed communication and interaction between the tribes

**Applied decoration** - method of adhering materials to a garment in a decorative fashion and is a part of dress

**Appliqué** - stitching of fabrics onto the top of a background fabric to create a design

**Appliquéd beadwork** - method of applied decoration in which trade beads are stitched directly to a foundation fabric in parallel rows to form a design or pattern

**Cultural authentication** - a process of adaptation and a strategy of change that relies on four categories or domains of change in the study of dress: selection, characterization, incorporation, and transformation (Erekosima and Eicher 1981)

**Culture** - basic concept in cultural anthropology; the learned way of life for groups of people that includes technology, beliefs, and behavior. Material culture includes physical objects and how ideas and beliefs are embedded in those objects.

**Dress** - an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body; types of dress are body supplements called enclosures that can be pre-shaped, wrapped, or suspended; attachments to enclosures can be inserted, clipped, or adhered (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992)

**Ethnic dress** - worn by members of one group to distinguish themselves from members of another by focusing on differentiation; a significant visible mark of ethnicity, used to communicate identity of a group or individual among interacting groups of people (Eicher and Sumberg 1995)

**Great Lakes region** - culture groups of the region in Michigan and Wisconsin prior to European contact; tribes include Meskwaki (Fox), Sauk, Kickapoo, Winnebago, Chippewa, Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Huron as well as others; these tribes share similar culture, language and traditions.
**Motif** - a decorative, repetitive design sewn onto something such as a piece of clothing, or a single example of the pattern

**Meskwaki** - Native American culture group, more commonly known as Fox; originally from the Great Lakes region and now located in central Iowa

**Positive appliqué** - method of appliqué that uses the top to form shapes of the design

**Quillwork** - early form of applied decoration using porcupine quills; designs formed by manipulation of quills and sewn directly to the garment

**Reverse appliqué** - a method of appliqué where the top fabric is cut through, the raw edges are turned under and stitched to expose the fabric or fabrics that are underneath

**Ribbon** - narrow strip of woven fabric with finished edges, often in a bright color in various widths; used for decorative purposes

**Ribbon appliqué** - a contemporary form of Native American applied decoration that involves cutting motifs out of fabric, then sewing them on top of another; resembles a positive appliqué.

**Ribbonwork** - a traditional form of Native American applied decoration and is a method of reverse or positive appliqué made by layering, cutting, and sewing different colored selvedge edged ribbons

**Sannibah** - Meskwaki word for ribbon; Meskwaki spelling: *se ni ba*

**Sannibah-eegwaday** - Meskwaki word for ribbonwork; Meskwaki spelling: *se ni ba i ga ti*

**Sugahoon** - Meskwaki word for German silver brooches

**Trade beads** - European glass beads that became available through trade to the Native Americans by the mid 17th century used as a form of applied decoration

**Tradition** - long-established custom or belief that has been handed down from generation to generation

**Traditional** - practices fixed in the past and carries the assumption that things do not change

**Woven beadwork** - trade beads woven together on a loom into warp and weft rows using thread
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

An interpretive study about tradition in ribbonwork requires a review of literature that places the study within the context of existing scholarship, and this chapter sets up the conceptual framework for the study. This study focuses on the tradition of ribbonwork as a form of dress. Ribbonwork, as a form of applied decoration used on garments by specific ethnic groups, falls into the two theoretical areas of dress and culture. The first section of this chapter explores the concept of dress and the functions of dress, and this section also explores perspectives on other concepts relevant to this study: culture, cultural change, and tradition. As a study of dress within a cultural context, these concepts all provide the theoretical framework for this research. The second section of this chapter provides background for this study in an overview of the Meskwaki culture and of the influences of European trade. In order to gain a perspective on ribbonwork, dress, culture, and tradition must first be defined.

Dress, Culture, and Tradition

Dress

*Dress defined.* Scholars have developed theoretical frameworks for the study of dress, the functions of dress, and the importance of the social function of dress as a means of communication (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992).

The term *dress* is used by scholars in order to develop a more comprehensive, holistic definition and to provide a classification system for types of dress based on this definition (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992). *Dress* is defined as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992, 1). This definition includes direct body modifications (e.g., pierced ears, tattoos) and body
supplements (e.g., garments, jewelry) with a classification system indicating sub-types of dress and their properties. For example, body supplements called enclosures can be pre-shaped, wrapped, or suspended. Attachments to enclosures can be inserted, clipped, or adhered.

Dress as a form of identity and non-verbal communication. Previous studies have developed theoretical frameworks for understanding the link between identity and dress. For instance, Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) stated that dress functions as media for communication. Further, dress is “presented as an effective communication system about personal and socio-cultural identities” (Eicher 2000, 66). In other words, dress functions as a communicator of age, gender, social class, affiliations, and religion. Moreover, meanings communicated are dependent on subjective interpretations and are based on socialization within a particular culture. The characteristics of dress that communicate identity are dependent on materials available as well as the social structure that organizes the activities within that structure, such as kinship, economy, polity, and religion (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992).

Ethnic dress. Ethnic dress is a form of dress worn by members of one group to distinguish themselves from members of another by focusing on differentiation (Eicher and Sumberg 1995). According to Eicher and Sumberg (1995), ethnicity refers to the heritage of a group with a common cultural background and includes ideas of group cohesion. Ethnic dress could evoke stereotypical images or reflections of the past that never changes; however, ethnic dress, as ensembles and modifications of the body that captured the past of the members of a group, can also be a positive form of change. Eicher and Sumberg argued that “dress is often a significant visible mark of ethnicity, used to communicate identity of a
group or individual among interacting groups of people” (1995, 301). They concluded that ethnic dress: 1) may include borrowed items from other cultures; 2) is not static over time; 3) may contain variety within a group exhibiting creativity and individuality; and 4) is not worn daily but, instead, is reserved for special occasions (1995, 303-304). The use of ethnic dress can also establish boundaries of a particular group.

**Culture**

*Culture defined.* The concept of culture can aid in analyzing the meanings of dress. Culture influences the way people dress because of interaction with others within a given society. Further, culture, as a basic concept in anthropology, is the learned way of life for groups of people that include technology, beliefs, and behavior (Ferraro 2006). According to Ferraro (2006, 21), culture is transmitted through the process of learning and interacting with one’s environment, rather than through the genetic process, and culture is learned and shared by groups as members of their society. The three major structural components of the concept of culture include: 1) material objects; 2) ideas, values, attitudes, and beliefs; and 3) patterns of behavior in socially prescribed ways (Ferraro 2006). Cultures create for themselves systems of organization for economics, family, education, social control, and supernatural beliefs (Ferraro 2006) and organize themselves in ways that they deem important to their survival (Carsten 2004).

Material culture focuses on physical objects and how ideas and beliefs are embedded in those objects. Until recently, in anthropology material objects were seen as mainly functional items, “vital to the social process but seldom informing it” (Gosden and Marshall 1999, 169). But, the new realization is that material objects were integral to human action. Consequently, the modern opinion is that ribbonwork and dress are embedded with cultural
ideologies and their continued use for over a century has showed that ribbonwork and dress are an integral part of the material culture for the Meskwaki people.

Culture and change. Cultural groups and their material objects have rich histories; people and objects gather over time, movement, and change. They are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other (Gosden and Marshall 1999). The material object has been seen as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally specific meanings (Kopytoff 1986, 68). For example, Kopytoff saw objects as having a history and, therefore, that objects cannot be fully understood at one point in time. Objects change as a result of processes through time and usage and must be viewed as a whole in order to understand the present significance of an object (Gosden and Marshall 1999).

According to Ferraro (2006), cultures are subject to change as a result of internal or external forces. Specifically, change can occur when material or economic resources became available to a given culture group, and culture groups adapt to evolving conditions of their environment. According to Ferraro, cultural diffusion is the borrowing of cultural items from another culture. He further stated that cultural diffusion is a selective process where cultural items are borrowed if they are deemed useful and are reinterpreted so that they are integrated effectively into the borrowing culture.

Cultural authentication. Erekosima and Eicher (1981) developed the concept of cultural authentication in order to analyze this borrowed but changed nature of dress and textiles in a cultural setting. Cultural authentication applies to specific articles of dress
identified as ethnic and considered indigenous when the material used is not indigenous in origin (Eicher and Erekosima 1998).

Cultural authentication is a process of adaptation and a strategy of change that relies on four categories or domains of change and is particularly helpful in the study of dress. Cultural authentication has four interrelated steps: 1) selection - an external cultural object, process, or idea is selected as appropriate; 2) characterization - the object selected is renamed with a name more distinctive than the original name; 3) incorporation - the object occupies a significant functional role; and 4) transformation - a physical change in design from the original form occurs (Erekosima and Eicher 1981).

The process of cultural authentication can be used in multi-cultural settings in order to analyze and understand change in dress across time and space. Torntore (2005), for example, examined the relationship of fashion and tradition of the Hmong Americans in Minneapolis, Minnesota using the process of cultural authentication to analyze change in ethnic dress. She concluded that the “concept of ethnic dress is a visible, tangible means of defining, constructing, and linking tradition and identity” (Torntore 2005, 122). Through the process of cultural authentication, selected items become transformed so that they become meaningful to the borrowing culture group. This will be a useful concept to understand change in Meskwaki ribbonwork.

*Culture and the study of dress.* Hamilton (1987) proposed a metatheory for the study of dress as a cultural sub-system based on the technological, social-structural, and ideological components and the interrelationships that occur within them. These components are similar to Ferraro’s (2006) three major structural components of the concept of culture. Hamilton,
however, layered the components into 1) the top layer, ideology; 2) the middle layer, social structure; 3) and the bottom layer, technology or material culture. According to Hamilton:

[The] layers represent the means by which humans satisfy the kinds of needs they have. Technology is the means to satisfy bio-material needs; social structure is the means used to satisfy social needs; ideology is the means to satisfy psychic needs. (Hamilton 1987, 3)

Hamilton further stated that humans organize themselves through various mechanisms for solving problems that cut across each component. Mechanisms include economic, political, family and kinship, socialization, ideological organization, arts and aesthetics, and communications. These components “contribute to each of the various mechanisms through which humans organize themselves to solve problems and optimize the quality of life” (Hamilton 1987, 2). Furthermore, each component influences the other; therefore, a change in one affects change in another. For example, change could begin with technology (as a foundation layer) and bring about change in social structure, which, in turn, results in new assumptions and beliefs that give sanction to the new technology (Hamilton 1987).

Material culture is used in “adaptation to the social environment, to the techniques in their use and to the way these are organized for use in the cultural system” (Hamilton 1987). Change in dress is the adaptation or acceptance of a garment in the social structure, thereby adapting change in new beliefs and values, which gives sanction to the newly acquired mode of dress. Hamilton’s explanation is a way to understand this change specifically related to dress and therefore helpful to understanding changes in ribbonwork within the Meskwaki cultural setting.
Tradition

Defining tradition. The core of this study focuses on the Meskwaki tradition of ribbonwork as a primary means of applied decoration. The concept of tradition shows both continuity and change in material objects, beliefs, and practices that can be re-assessed depending on the needs of a particular culture. Indeed, there are many ways to define the concept of tradition because tradition is a dynamic concept and itself subject to change. Consequently, theoretical discussions are complex and continue to challenge the definition of tradition. Past scholars viewed tradition as static and firmly fixed in the past. However, Henry Glassie (1994) defined tradition as the creation of the future from the past. He claimed tradition not as a static concept, but as a continual selective ongoing process. Others have described tradition as an inherited body of customs and beliefs (Handler and Linnekin 1984). They have concluded that tradition is not handed down from the past; rather, it is symbolically re-invented in an ongoing present. As an ongoing process, tradition is a “symbolic act that carries the meanings for people in the present while the object, behavior, or the beliefs from the past may change” (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 286). Tradition, then, is a process of interpretation, of attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past (Handler and Linnekin 1984).

The invention of tradition is a concept that describes the process of change in practices that are identified with the past. Eric Hobsbawm (1989, 1) wrote that traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. Hobsbawm (2) further stated that traditions are “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.” The use of ancient elements can be adapted in newer contexts using old
traditions for new purposes, and often invented traditions use references to the past for group cohesion and legitimizing actions (Hobsbawm 1989). For instance, Demaray, Keim-Shenk, and Littrell (2005) examined two apparel companies who use different approaches to tradition as a basis for decision making. Their article, titled *Representations of Tradition in Latin American Boundary Textile Art*, shows how tradition can be negotiated in specific contexts, defined and re-defined to achieve certain goals, and that it can be an abstract symbol connecting the present to the past. Furthermore, their work shows that tradition is not a freeze-frame of the past and that, in fact, tradition encompasses both continuity and change as any other cultural product (Mauze 1997). The concept of tradition, like culture, is a transmitted, learned knowledge or behavior of a group or society and encompasses material objects as well. It is continually reassessed and reconstructed depending on the course of events.

Meskwaki Culture

Overviews of the Meskwaki culture, sociopolitical organization, and the influence of European trade beginning in the early 17th century are necessary to understand the function and role of ribbonwork to the Meskwaki people.

*Historical Background of the Meskwaki*

The tribes\(^1\) that originated in the Great Lakes region of the United States included Meskwaki (or Fox), Sauk, Kickapoo, Winnebago, Chippewa, Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Huron as well as others (Odle 1973). The Meskwaki, more commonly known as the Fox, first came into contact with French fur traders in the mid-17th century in central Wisconsin.

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\(^1\) The term *tribe* suggests a negative connotation, carries the assumption that these culture groups are primitive, and implies inferiority; therefore, the term should be used with caution. However, the term is also used as a legal designation in the US for identifying specific groups of Native Americans, and is used here in that context.
(Callender 1978). Fox was the name given to them by the U.S. government for treaty making purposes, but the tribe has always called themselves Meskwaki, meaning *People of the Red Earth*.

By the early-18\textsuperscript{th} century, the Meskwaki were at war with the French as a result of conflicts over policy and trade. In 1728, France adopted a policy of genocide with the intent of exterminating the entire tribe (Callender 1978), but in 1735, after a long series of skirmishes, the surviving Meskwaki sought refuge with their allies, the Sauk, in Green Bay, Wisconsin and shortly thereafter both groups moved to Iowa (Callender 1978). In 1737, the French government ended the Fox wars, and in 1766, the Meskwaki returned to Wisconsin then moved again back to Iowa by 1780. They settled west of the Mississippi river valley in present day Davenport, Iowa (Green 1983).

In 1832, as a result of the Black Hawk War, a Sauk war, the U.S. government combined the Meskwaki and the Sauk for treaty making purposes. The combined group became known as the Sac and Fox of the Mississippi though they maintained separate identities (Green 1983). In 1845, both tribes were forcibly removed to a Kansas reservation to make room for white settlers. Unhappy with the conditions of life in Kansas, a group of Meskwaki came back to Iowa and with their own money purchased their first eighty acres of land in 1857. The Meskwaki still live on this land today, which has expanded to seven thousand acres through a series of land purchases. Through these transactions, the Meskwaki asserted themselves by adapting the Anglo-American concept of land ownership allowing them to set up a sovereign entity (Green 1983). This move made it possible for the Meskwaki to continue their cultural traditions without interference from outsiders and allowed them to proclaim and preserve their identity.
In proximity, all of the Great Lakes culture groups shared similar traditions. For example, Algonquian languages were spoken by the Native American people of the Great Lakes region and were classified as Algonquian based on language similarities (Callender 1978). This language similarity allowed communication and interaction between the groups. Moreover, intermarriage and gift exchange was a common practice, including the exchange of dress and methods of applied decoration. A map shows the approximate locations of the Great Lakes tribes of the early 17th century prior to their removal (see fig. 2.1).

Historical information about the culture groups is based on anthropological excavation sites around the eastern and western Great Lakes region and European traveler and missionary observations (Quimby 1966). Archeological evidence indicated that the Great Lakes culture groups lived in palisaded villages and that they farmed and organized seasonal hunts. At the time of European contact, in the early 17th century, the culture groups of the Great Lakes region shared significant features that included maize agriculture, seasonal hunting and gathering, bilateral kinship, patrilineal clans, and dual divisions called moieties (Callender 1978). Each tribe was organized around a social system consisting of patrilineal exogamous clans, with rituals that incorporated outsiders into the society (Callender 1978). These practices, along with their semi-nomadic lifestyle, resulted in similarities in cultural practices including dress.

The Bell site, for example, located in Winnebago County, Wisconsin, was one site of the Meskwaki (Fox) villages dated within the archeological Middle Historic period,

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2 The written history presented in this study is also confirmed by Meskwaki oral history.
Fig. 2.1. The approximate locations of the Great Lakes Indians of the early 17th century. (Odle 1973).
approximately from 1680 to 1730. At the time of occupation at the Bell site, archaeologists reconstructed Meskwaki dress based on excavated remains:

- Men wore a breechcloth and moccasins in warm weather; but for winter they had deerskin or elkskin shirts and leggings, topped by robes of beaver or buffalo skins. These robes were sometimes embroidered with flattened, dyed porcupine quills or decorated with painted designs. Winter clothing for women included dresses of elkskin or deerskin, leggings, and moccasins. (Quimby 1966, 124)

At the Bell site the lodge and furnishings belonged to women (Blair 1911). Division of labor based on skills was necessary for the survival of households, and women were in charge of household activities, which included making garments for the family (Callender 1978). Women made the embroidery and porcupine quillwork that were used to embellish items of dress. This division of labor by artistic skills still holds true. The Meskwaki people continue to value their artistic tradition and believe that these skills and talents are gifts bestowed from the creator (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).

**Kinship and Clans.** Cultures organized themselves in ways that they deemed important to their survival. According to Carsten (2004), the understandings of personhood are formed in a particular historical and cultural context. Kinship is used by culture groups to define relatedness to each other, and groups use various means to define relatedness. The kinship-model can include systems of organization such as clans and divisions called moieties.

Janet Carsten (2004) examined the old model of kinship in anthropology, based on the western model of biological relationships, and found that it seldom fits the diverse cultures of the world. New models of kinship are flexible and are, for the most part, non-biologically based. Instead, they take into account many other variables such as gender, history, and the lived experience. However, for some cultures, the biologically-based kinship
model is still relevant. For instance, clan organization is a common kinship-model among the tribes of the Great Lakes region (Callender 1978), and tribal and clan affiliation are important to the Meskwaki, even to this day. The Meskwaki kinship system is patrilineal and relatedness is defined through a system of patrilineal clans based on kin groups (Quimby 1966). Both males and females are born into a clan group, and membership is acquired through the father.

The culturally constructed kinship system of the Meskwaki forms the social organization of the society. The multiple functions of the clan based kinship system include the following:

- Birth names
- Common religious ceremonial rites
- Common burial sites
- Reciprocity between clans in duties and obligations
- Specific duties in tribal leadership positions

For the Meskwaki, the biologically-based kinship system is organized into clans and is used as a social structure. A person must fill a role to benefit the clan; thus, personhood is integrated into clanship, and identity is formed in clan affiliation. The pre-contact kinship system was a vehicle for designating people for political office, ceremonial leadership, and warrior societies (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Today, the Meskwaki continue to use patrilineal descent to designate clan affiliation for religious functions that all members share.

Clans made up the social, political, and religious organization of the Meskwaki which, in turn, affected behaviors and cultural practices, including dress. Clan names included animal names such as Bear, Fox, Wolf, and Fish or mythical names such as Thunder (Callender 1978). Some tribes used color to identify clan groups, including the Meskwaki who used colors to signify spiritual beliefs and clan identity. For example, green represented
the creator and red represented the people. Colors also identified clan groups. For example, the Bear clan is green, the Fox clan is red, and the Thunder clan is yellow. Green and red in various shades and hues are the dominant colors commonly found in ceremonial garments and accessories (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Therefore, the colors red and green indicate dual roles.

Moieties. Another element of the kinship-model is a moiety, which is often used as a social structure to divide a group. Moieties are common to tribes from the Great Lakes region, and the Meskwaki moiety is a dual division that is not based on descent (Callender 1978). Instead, Meskwaki moieties are based on birth order. The first-born child is placed in the division opposite that of the father, and subsequent children are then placed in alternate sequence called *To ka ni* and *Kis kos*. This division, still used today, provides a system of organizing people of both genders for various purposes such as games, dances, and ceremonial rituals. Moieties offer another layer of color designations, black (*To ka ni*) and white (*Kis kos*). As an example, a Meskwaki born into the Bear clan who is *Kis kos* may select colors for ribbonwork that are red (Meskwaki), green (clan), and white (moiety), while a Meskwaki born into the Thunder clan who is *To ka ni* may select colors for ribbonwork that are red (Meskwaki), yellow (clan), and black (moiety).

Spiritual beliefs. The spiritual belief system of the Meskwaki, as well as other tribes of the Great Lakes region, centered on three parallel worlds: the earth in the center; the underworld below the waters; and the above the earth dominated by the Great Manitou, or god (Hartman 2000). Other manitou represented the four directions, animals, and nature, and, in fact, all the elements of nature were regarded as sacred and believed to possess spirits (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Early 18th and 19th century design patterns reflected these
manitous in clothing, medicine bags, burden straps, quivers, and moccasins (Hartman 2000). These design patterns used in applied decoration symbolized the religious belief system as well as the culturally constructed system of kinship.

European Contact and Trade in the Great Lakes Region

French Fur Trade, 1600’s

In the early 17th century, French explorers and fur traders arrived in the Great Lakes region (Quimby 1966). French exploration moved westward into the Great Lakes region with journeys by Etienne Brule in 1622 and Jean Nicollet in 1634 (Stone and Chaput 1978). The explorers gathered information on the people, the geography, the resources, and the potential economic value. The abundance of furs in the area was an attractive commodity for the French and fur trade was established by the 1640’s in the upper Great Lakes region. Some of the tribes of the Great Lakes region, such as the Huron, participated in trade with the French. As middlemen in the fur trade, the Huron were familiar with and used French trade goods. However, little evidence exists that other Great Lakes tribes’ culture and material possessions were significantly affected at this time, particularly for the tribes west of Lake Michigan (Stone and Chaput 1978). As the fur trade and contact with the French increased, it resulted in conflicts between tribes as they competed for hunting grounds. Early conflicts over trade forced a move westward for some of the western Great Lakes tribes—the Fox, Sauk, Kickapoo, Mascouten, Miami, and Potawatomi. These tribes retreated to the present-day Wisconsin area; therefore, the cultures of these tribes were least influenced by Europeans in the 17th century (Stone and Chaput 1978).

By the 1690’s, however, the French traders moved further west and established military posts in the western Great Lakes region, near the Green Bay, Wisconsin area, in the
interest of controlling fur trade (Stone and Chaput 1978). This led to major cultural changes in the Great Lakes groups and created economic and political difficulties, especially when the tribes became involved with the fur trade. Hunting grounds determined both trade routes and tribal locations (Stone and Chaput 1978), and the establishment of missions, forts, and trading posts promoted French economic, political, and religious interests. These establishments became economic and social centers for bands and tribes at the urgings of traders and missionaries (Stone and Chaput 1978). This altered the native settlement patterns as French interests became the major determinant of Indian activities (Stone and Chaput 1978, 603).

British Establishment, 1700’s

The struggle to control fur trade between the French and the British affected the native way of life in the 18th century. For instance, the French and Indian Wars of 1756-1760 marked major changes for the tribes of the Great Lakes region (Stone and Chaput 1978) as groups were divided over alliances with France or England. In 1760, the British won the war and the hostilities ended, and soon after, the French army and French traders dispersed. The new British political system had differing philosophies, objectives, and methods of administration regarding the tribes of North America. The Native Americans came under British rule enforced by the England’s army. Like the French, the British were interested in fur trade, but they were also interested in colonization of the Americas.

The tribes of the Great Lakes region became dependent on European goods as they abandoned traditional tools; thus, being involved in the fur trade became essential for the tribes to access European goods (Stone and Chaput 1978). Soon, British policies became a hardship. In contrast to the French system, trade goods were no longer freely distributed by
the British as a means of securing alliances with the local tribes. Instead, goods and provisions were traded only for valued commodities such as furs as the British saw fit. In time, the tribes became increasingly dependent on European goods and provisions for their survival (Stone and Chaput 1978). Fraudulent trading practices increased, and, as a result, Indian rebellions increased. These rebellions caused the British government to adopt major changes in Indian policy (Stone and Chaput 1978), and these new measures included forced removal and prohibition of land purchases for the tribes of North America. But, by 1776 the British had lost its claims to this territory as a result of the Revolutionary War.

The 19th century continued to see great changes to the way of life for all Native Americans. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 resulted in the forced removal of several tribes of the Great Lakes region to Kansas and Oklahoma. In the Great Lakes region, the period of 1820-1850 was the “Removal Period” when tribes were forced to sign treaties giving up their homelands and move to reservations west of the Mississippi to the newly established “Indian Territory” (Hartman 2000).

Trade goods and cultural change. Evidence of trade is found in the form of written records of travelers, missionaries, and trade lists (Quimby 1966). A list of trade goods from a fur trader in 1688 included beads, ribbons, wool blankets, calicos, linens, and cloth (Quimby 1966). In addition, the Hudson Bay Company trade list dated 1748 included iron and brass pots, metal tools as well as cloth and clothing items (Quimby 1966). In 1755, William Johnson included silk ribbon as one of trade goods as well as other cloths (Johnson 1921-1965). The height of trade occurred in 1802 with the formation of the American Fur Company established in Mackinac, Michigan.
Since the mid 1700s, the influx of European trade goods had a profound effect on the way of life for the Native American tribes in North America, and evidence of trade was found in the remains of excavation sites in Michigan and Wisconsin, dated 1760-1820 (Quimby 1966). Excavated artifacts received through trade included metal tools such as flintlock guns, iron knives, brass kettle fragments, iron axes, metal awls, and needles. Quimby noted that the material culture of this period is a record of cultural change, and cultural authentication occurred in the acquisition and use of these trade goods by the local tribes. Records also showed that in the 1800s, Native American women had individual accounts with traders and were selective in choosing trade items (Heckewelder 1971; Pannabecker 1986).

Methods of applied decoration, such as quillwork and beadwork, were used by Native Americans tribes in the Great Lakes region. Excavated artifacts (1760-1820) were found that combined local materials and imported goods using these methods. Examples included the following: cloth shirts, blankets, or other imported clothing that were decorated with beads; dyed porcupine quills, or painted designs; skin clothing patterned after European styles but ornamented with painted, beaded, or quillwork designs; and iron awls with local handles of wood or bone (Quimby 1966). These examples reflected the innovation in the use of European trade items and how they were selected and incorporated into the culture.

The forced removal to reservations uprooted and dispersed the tribes, but they carried the methods of applied decoration with them to Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa. The majority of the tribes continued the practice of applied decoration of garments for ceremonial and religious occasions as required by tribal customs using available materials, many of which were selected from European trade items.
Defining Ribbonwork

The history of the Meskwaki correlates with the history of other tribes from the Great Lakes region, and this is evident in the similarity of cultural practices, language, systems of organization, and dress. The highest concentration of ribbonwork was found in the south and west regions around Lake Michigan by the Potawatomi, Kickapoo, Miami, Shawnee, Sauk, and the Meskwaki before their removal to the west (Leech, Polyak, and Ritzenthaler 1973). The Meskwaki tribe, presently located in central Iowa, continued the practice of ribbonwork and its use in regalia for religious ceremonies and traditional dances after their move out of the Great Lakes region. A surviving garment from that time is a ribbonwork skirt from 1885 (Figure 3.13, p. 62). This piece showed the use of ribbonwork 28 years after they had settled into the current location in central Iowa.

Terminology. Ribbonwork is a method of applied decoration where ribbon strips of contrasting colors are layered; the top layer is cut, folded under, and stitched to the bottom layer into a repeating design configuration and used to embellish garments. Technically, ribbonwork is a method of sewing made by layering, cutting, and sewing ribbons together; hence, the more correct term might be ribbon appliqué. Ribbonwork can be appliqué'd in two ways. The reverse appliqué technique involves cutting away the top layer to “reveal” the bottom layer forming a design. On the other hand, the positive appliqué technique involves cutting away excess top fabric around the shape of the design; thus, the top layer forms the

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3 Ribbon is a narrow strip or band of fabric finished at the edges and used for trimming, tying, or finishing. Woven-edge ribbons are common to the textile industry; they are narrow pieces of fabric with two selvedges or woven edges. Ribbon is classified by the textile industry as a narrow fabric ranging in various widths. Ribbons have been used for centuries as ornamentation. Once called ribands, they were narrow strips of fabric attached to garments (Columbia electronic encyclopedia, 6th ed., s.v. “ribbon”)
shape of a design. In ribbonwork, pairs of different colored ribbons are selected to create a contrast that forms a mirrored design.

The term “ribbonwork” assumes the idea that two ribbons are paired and layered to appliqué the design. Using the technical term, ribbon refers to a narrow band of fabric. However, “true” ribbon that has finished edges may not be used and “ribbons” of fabric cut into narrow strips can be used instead. This definition of ribbon adds another layer of confusion about how ribbonwork is defined. Early ribbonwork used “true” woven ribbons with finished edges (see fig. 2.2), but there was later a transition from using “true” ribbon to using “ribbons” of cut fabric (see fig. 2.3), though it is not known when or why. However, the methods of application remained the same.

Various scholars have used different terms for ribbonwork: *ribbon appliqué work* referred to the decoration of fabrics by sewing ribbon to them in simple strips or by turning, folding, or cutting to produce decorative designs (Marriott 1958); *ribbon appliqué* also referred to the technique of cutting ribbon of one color into a design configuration and sewing it to a background ribbon of a different color (Torrence and Hobbs 1989); *ribbon work* referred to the structural placement of designs⁴ (McPharlin-Coen 1974); and *ribbonwork* referred to the specific cutting and sewing techniques that emphasize the shape, color, and texture of long woven bands of ribbons (Abbass 1979; Pannabecker 1986; and Neill 2000). All these terms used by scholars, with the exception of McPharlin-Coen, refer to the general technique used to produce ribbonwork.

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⁴ McPharlin-Coen’s study focuses on design transfer and does not address the technical aspects of ribbonwork.
Fig. 2.2. “True” ribbon used in ribbonwork. Selvedges or finished edges are visible.

Fig. 2.3. Cut fabric “ribbons.” Edges are finished with pinking shears.
Susan M. Neill (2000) asserted that ribbon appliqué is a shift from using cut and folded lengths of ribbon to the use of cut out and sewn appliqués made of fabric. According to Neill, the terminology also shifted: ribbonwork represents the tradition and technique from the past, in general, but ribbon appliqué represents the contemporary technique most commonly used today (Neill 2000). The appliqués she referred to are made with the contemporary method of cutting motifs out of fabric strips and sewing the cut-out motifs onto another layer of fabric strips. This ribbonwork style resembles the positive appliqué technique in which the top fabric strip forms the design (see fig. 2.4). According to Neill, this method of application began to appear in the early 20th century (2000).

In contrast, the reverse appliqué technique using cut fabric strips is seen in figure 2.5. The base was formed by sewing two fabric strips together. One large fabric strip was laid onto the base, and the top fabric was then cut and sewn revealing a design formed by the bottom layer typical of reverse appliqué (see fig. 2.5).

Most scholars have discussed ribbonwork in terms of the technical process (Abbass 1979; Pannabecker 1986; and Neill 2000). For example, Neill used a system classifying types of ribbonwork based on visual characteristics using Abbass’ typology system that is based on structural characteristics. Neill used the term *ribbonwork style* to classify structural types: developmental, shingled, positive, negative, and appliqué (Neill 2000). Pannabecker (1986) also used the term *ribbonwork style* to describe structural characteristics. Therefore, in order to minimize confusion about terms, *ribbonwork style* is used to refer to the technical process of appliquéing cut fabric strips to form a design that resembles those historic designs made with ribbons.
a. Two strips of fabric are sewn together to make the base (purple/blue); two more fabric strips are sewn together (black/yellow) and layered onto the base.
b. The “appliqués” are cut out of the black/yellow to form the design then sewn in place.
c. Two sets or pairs of fabric strips are combined to form a mirrored panel.
d. Panels are sewn onto skirt with additional strip bordering the hem horizontally.

Fig. 2.4. Positive appliqué technique on a Meskwaki skirt. Photo by author.

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a. Two fabric strips (black/dark pink) are sewn together to form the base; a third piece of fabric (light pink) is layered onto the entire base.
b. The light pink fabric is cut and sewn, revealing the design (black/dark pink); a form of reverse appliqué.
c. Matching pairs of strips are combined to form a mirrored panel and sewn onto skirt.
d. An additional panel borders the hem horizontally.

Fig. 2.5. Reverse appliqué technique on a Meskwaki skirt (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).
Neill (2000) also referred to ribbonwork as the art form used to adorn clothing and other personal items developed by Native American women in the Great Lakes region. Indeed, the term ribbonwork represents an old tradition in the contemporary lives of Native American people; therefore, the term ribbonwork used in this study refers to not only the art form and tradition of the past made with “true” ribbons but more generally to refer to the concept of ribbonwork that includes subsequent forms based on these historic traditions and made with fabric strips or “ribbons” of fabric and not to any specific use of material or technique.

The Role of Ribbonwork

*Cultural Practice in the Adoption Ceremony.*

The role of ribbonwork for the Meskwaki can best be illustrated through the example of the adoption ceremony. This ceremony took place after the funeral of a tribal member. Death, the most ritualized event of the Meskwaki, illustrates not only the concept of kinship in Meskwaki culture but the role of ribbonwork and its cultural significance. It also illustrates how spirituality and clan membership play an important role in Meskwaki dress.

Excavation of burial sites, missionary memoirs, and U.S. agent’s reports make reference to funeral, burial practices, and subsequent ceremonies of the Meskwaki people (Callender 1978; Heckewelder 1971; Quimby 1966; Kinietz 1965; and Blair 1911), and these reports are also confirmed by Meskwaki oral history.

When a tribal member passed away, a runner or crier announced the death to the community. The body was dressed in the finest garments (Blair 1911) by the patrilineal family (Callender 1978; Heckewelder 1971; Blair 1911). Dress embellished with ribbonwork was considered to be the best clothing and typically contained the colors green and red (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). A wake then took place in the worship lodge and lasted
until the burial the next day. The runners, singers, pall bearers, and funeral officiates for
these ceremonies were selected through a system of clan reciprocity (Callender 1978).

This ritual did not end with the burial. Mourning for the surviving family could last
up to four years, and the eventual release from mourning occurred through ceremonial
adoption (Callender 1978). Records indicated that this ritual behavior occurred in the early-
19th century (Blair 1911), so it appears to be a long-term cultural practice that is still
important today.

In the adoption ceremony the Meskwaki symbolically “replaced” the deceased by
adopting another person chosen by the surviving relatives of patrilineal descent (Callender
1978). This person retained his/her own identity and did not change households, in contrast
to the Euro-American idea of adoption where a non-biological child is raised within a
different household after undergoing a formal legal process.

The adoption ceremony was a community event at the lodge with feasting and
dancing where the adoptee arrived in traditional ribbonwork-decorated dress. The adopting
family undressed the adoptee, replacing the old garments with new ones. Typical dress
included ribbonwork garments with a combination of colors such as green, red, and clan
colors, or perhaps the favorite colors of the deceased. A public feast and dancing signified
the end of the mourning period and ensured that the spirit of the deceased was at peace and
would continue the journey into the afterworld. Following the ceremony, the adoptee took
on the symbolic role of the deceased.

Traditional garments for the adoption ceremony had to be new and never worn. In
preparation for the adoption ceremony, family members of the deceased gathered and a
sewing circle was formed to make the ceremonial clothing (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). In
the event that there was no one with the skills necessary to produce the garments, other clan members, or someone from the community, would donate their time and talents to the family of the deceased (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).

The Meskwaki custom of burial and ceremonial adoption continues today. The use of ribbonwork in ceremonies shows the correlation between cultural practices and the role of ribbonwork. These long-standing cultural practices require the use of ethnic dress.

**Summary**

The first section of this chapter described scholarly definitions of dress, culture, and tradition that will be used as framework to ground this study. The study of dress in a cultural setting includes the social function of dress as a means of communication, and meanings communicated are dependent on subjective interpretations and are based on socialization within a particular culture. These cultures organize themselves through various mechanisms according to their needs. Hamilton’s metatheory is a useful tool to explore how cultures adapt to their social environment, to the techniques they use and to the way these are organized for use in the cultural system.

Ethnic dress was described as ensembles that capture the past of members of a group and is often a significant visible mark of ethnicity used to communicate identity among interacting groups of people. Studies have indicated that the process known as cultural authentication can be used to analyze and understand changes in cultural settings.

Furthermore, in a cultural setting, groups of people create systems of organization that included technology, beliefs, and behavior that are learned and handed down to the next generation. Tradition is an inherited body of customs, beliefs, and resources in a constant
state of flux; tradition is continually assessed and reassessed depending on the course of events as experienced by a particular culture group.

The second section of this chapter provided an overview of the Native American culture, Meskwaki history, and social organization. The Meskwaki are a separate and distinct group possessing a culturally constructed system of organization, and the Meskwaki culture created a system of organization based on the ideologies of their spiritual belief system. The social organization established the social roles and functions for its members. The culturally constructed kinship system and clan affiliation affects dress which is evident in how ribbonwork garments are used in cultural practices.

The last section provided an overview of European trade and its influence on Native American culture. European trade resulted in dramatic changes in garment construction from porcupine quills and tanned hides to beads, ribbons, and cloth. Historically, evidence has shown that the discriminate selection of new materials and new tools have provided transformation in Native American dress. Ribbonwork has become an example of creative and innovative response to culture change.

Over time, the Meskwaki nation has experienced tumultuous changes, yet continuity is seen in applied decoration of dress. Garments came to be constructed with new materials such as cloth combined with old techniques of applied decoration. When they left their homelands of Wisconsin, the Meskwaki were able to take with them the artistic skills necessary to produce elaborately decorated dress and so the tradition, though changed, continued.

As the review of literature shows, the tradition of ribbonwork as a method of applied decoration has specific meanings and uses for the Meskwaki people though the materials
used have changed over time. Historically, ribbonwork garments signify cultural
authentication in the discriminate selection of materials, and ribbons acquired through trade
were adopted and transformed in appearance by cut and sewn methods. As a result, ribbon
was incorporated into Native American material culture.
CHAPTER THREE: OVERVIEW OF APPLIED DECORATION

The core of this study focuses on the Meskwaki tradition of ribbonwork as a primary means of applied decoration. Traditions are subject to change including applied decoration and dress, which is illustrated in how European trade items influenced change in the methods and materials of applied decoration. This chapter provides an overview of the Native American methods of applied decoration to garments, including quillwork, beadwork, and ribbonwork.

Dress Prior to Contact

The Native American practice of applying decoration to garments has been in existence for centuries. Written documents at the time of contact by explorers on the eastern coast indicated that early Native Americans decorated their garments using available materials from their environment (Kinietz 1965). While ribbonwork is a post-contact form of decoration, it has its roots in pre-contact tradition; scholars have suggested that quillwork patterns and application techniques were transferred to beadwork and ribbonwork (Hartman 2000; Conn 1980; Marriott and Rachlin 1980; Torrence and Hobbs 1989; and Leech, Polyak, and Ritzenthaler 1973).

Early 17th century dress was determined in various ways set by tribal custom using tanned animal hides (Hartman 2000). In 1615, explorer Champlain wrote about the dress of Algonquian groups of the Great Lakes region:

Above all others, Algonkians are those that take most trouble with it; for they put on their robes strips of porcupine quill which they dye a beautiful scarlet colour. (Kinietz 1965, 10)
Several groups from the Great Lakes region applied porcupine quills to their garments in the form of a design, either decorative or symbolic. Highly developed use of porcupine quills to decorate garments was present at the time of contact as early as 1615 by explorers.

**Function of Dress**

The early culture groups of the Great Lakes region had specific dress based on environmental factors, availability of materials, ritual behavior, and the culture in which they lived (Hartman 2000). Early Native American dress of the 17th and 18th centuries was more than utilitarian. The function of dress was a means of non-verbal communication. For instance, dress served as a way of displaying rank, clan identification, and social status. In addition, the designs and patterns that were used to decorate the clothing were symbolic of their culture and belief system (Hartman 2000). Often personal adornment was a means of self-expression (Torrence and Hobbs 1989), but the embellishment of garments also served to establish a group identity in tribal and clan membership. Clothing sometimes inspired awe, frightened enemies, and commanded attention and adoration (Hartman 2000), and stylized, iconic images of supernatural beings often manifested in garments served as protection (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Furthermore, abstract symbols, such as the Thunderbird, represented sacred and religious meanings (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). In all these ways, the designs created were more than just decoration; they were a means of communicating personal and socio-cultural identities.

In the Meskwaki language, the word *wa wa se so ki* means to “shine out,” and the word refers to both “the splendid appearance of a person beautifully adorned in ceremonial dress” and “to the inner radiance associated with spiritual knowledge and power” (Torrence and Hobbs 1989, 6). In the spirit of *wa wa se so ki*, designs were symbols often exhibited in
abstract and geometric motifs, and the meanings of the symbols depended on the way they were used in relation to each other. Some of the motifs epitomized the spiritual world that symbolized power (Hartman 2000). For instance, abstract thunderbirds and panthers on opposing sides of a bag were symbols of spiritual power, and a single thunderbird was a symbol for a Manitou or god. The cross motif was a symbol of the natural world representing the four directions, and animal representation in abstract form reflected tribal membership, kinship and clan membership, accomplishment of deeds, status, rank, and religious significance (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). All these symbols were considered sacred and demanded respect from the observer and the wearer (Hartman 2000).

Quillwork

Prior to European contact in the 17th century, Native American tribes in the Great Lakes region used tanned animal hides for garments (Hartman 2000). The major differences between the tribes were in the forms of applied decoration using quillwork, natural dyes, and other ornamentation such as natural shells and bone beads (Hartman 2000). While few documented pieces of these artifacts exist today, documented written descriptions can be obtained from primary sources such as excavation remains, travel diaries, and memoirs from explorers, missionaries, and traders.

Evidence of Quillwork

Early Native Americans used porcupine quills to decorate garments using a wide range of techniques prior to 17th century European contact (Hartman 2000). The Bell site in Wisconsin excavated remains that revealed use of deerskin, elkskin, beaver robes, and buffalo robes embroidered with flattened, dyed porcupine quills or decorated with painted designs. Various tools such as bone needles, bone awls, and small flint knives were also
present in the excavation sites. Similarly, Meskwaki oral history refers to the use of porcupine quills once used to embellish garments.

Porcupine quillwork was perhaps one of the oldest Native American forms of decoration and was well established as a principal means of applied decoration in the Great Lakes area at the time of contact (Torrence and Hobbs 1989; Odle 1973). Highly developed quillwork flourished in the Great Lakes region as well as the surrounding area (Orchard 1971). Due to the complicated nature of intricate patterns and the wide range of the methods used “[a] great length of time would be necessary for knowledge of the various methods to become so widespread” (Orchard 1971, 71).

The geographical concentration for the use of porcupine quills corresponds to the area of porcupine habitation (Odle 1971). A map (see fig. 3.1) show the overlapping locations of Native Americans during the early contact period, the range of porcupine habitation, and the extent of quillwork use during the 17th century.

Before contact with the Europeans, Native Americans also adorned their garments, as evidenced by excavation remains, with beads formed from shells and various animal bones. However, quillwork was the most common method (Quimby 1966) and porcupine quills were the primary decorative material before the introduction of European trade goods.

Early records indicate that the Huron were one of the first tribes to make European contact (Kinietz 1965), and Champlain and other explorers made reference to Huron clothing in written accounts. For example, Gabriel Sagard-Theodat, who accompanied Champlain in 1632, was noted as an accurate observer in his writings:

Some of them have also belts and other ornaments, made of porcupine quills tinted crimson red and very exactly woven. (Kinietz 1965, 343)
Fig. 3.1. Approximate locations of Native Americans during the early contact period, the range of porcupine habitation, and the extent of quillwork during the 17th century. (Odle 1973)
Similarly, a Canadian official to the Jesuits, Antoine-Denis Raudot, 1709, wrote in his memoirs:

The ordinary costumes of women are two skins of moose or deer, attached together at the shoulders and with an opening at the sides down to the armpits, and from there they are sewed to the knees; they are double from the belt to this place, painted neatly with black, red, and yellow, and ornamented with porcupine quills… (Kinietz 1965, 343)

Although the origin of quillwork is not known, scholars can infer that this was a highly developed form of applied decoration as early as the first contact in the eastern most Great Lakes region in the early 17th century by Champlain, Sagard-Theodat, and in the early 18th century by Raudot.

Quillwork Techniques

The wide range of techniques suggests that quillwork had been used for many years before the arrival of the Europeans (Orchard 1971). William C. Orchard, considered an expert on the techniques of porcupine quillwork, wrote on the various methods of the use of porcupine quills:

The desire for designs of symbolic import stimulated the inventive genius of the artists, so that a remarkable number of complex foldings of the porcupine-quills and stitches have been devised. (Orchard 1971, 3)

The method of using porcupine quills to decorate clothing was a time-consuming and tedious task done by women (Odle 1973). First, the quills were dyed using natural materials from the environment such as roots, berries, moss, and bark. Colors were generally black, red, blue, and yellow in various shades as documented by early writings (Odle 1973).

Several techniques were then used to apply the porcupine quills to garments. Robin Odle (1973) in Art of the Great Lakes Indians gave a detailed account on the techniques of quillwork based on early specimens. According to Odle, dyed porcupine quills were
moistened to make them soft and pliable. Next, they were sorted and flattened, and then the porcupine quills were folded, twisted, wrapped, plaited, woven, or sewn into patterns. Porcupine quills that were sewn directly to the garment were stitched in place in the form of a design using bone needles and sinew.

The Viability of Trade Beads

_The New Medium_

Excavated archeological sites indicate that beads made from the natural environment had been in use for some time prior to European contact. Artifacts from burial sites reveal that beads were produced from shells and bone (Quimby 1966), and beads made from white marine shells from the coastal waters also indicate trade from the present day southeastern United States.

European glass trade beads became available to the Native Americans by the mid-17th century (Stone and Chaput 1978), and beads made convenient trade items because they were compact and easy to carry (Hartman 2000). The resulting beadwork designs contributed to the development of ribbonwork, and many of these designs incorporated quillwork patterns (Hartman 2000; Torrence and Hobbs 1989; Leech, Polyak and Ritzenhaler 1973). Techniques for application included weaving or appliqué in floral designs. When trade beads became available, quillwork was not completely abandoned; instead, it was often combined with beadwork in garments and accessories (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). In fact, Cree, Ojibwa, and others continue the tradition of quillwork today (Native Tech 2007).

But, trade beads, which came in a variety of colors, added to the selection of materials used to decorate garments, and the ease of using beads, along with needles and thread
acquired through trade, allowed for more complicated patterns. Consequently, the use of beads grew quickly and soon appeared on skirts, breechcloths, leggings, moccasins, bags, and pouches using weaving and appliqué techniques similar to quillwork. Over time, geometric and abstract designs were adapted from quillwork patterns to beadwork patterns (Hartman 2000). Through artistic ingenuity, the tribes of the Great Lakes region soon developed complex designs that used double-curves and bilateral symmetry.

Woven Beadwork Method

Several techniques of beadwork were developed that contributed to the applied decoration of garments. Prior to European contact of the 17th century, beads made from natural shells were incorporated into finger-woven bags, sashes, and garters. Weaving, requiring complex twining and braiding, was not new to the Native Americans at that time. Woven animal hair garments were found in excavated burial sites (Quimby 1966), and the method of weaving is evident in dyed bulrushes\(^5\) that were woven into mats with designs incorporated into the weave dated to the early pre-contact era of the Great Lakes region (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). The Meskwaki continue the weaving techniques in beadwork and yarn belts today.

The same weaving technique using European trade beads appeared in belts and sashes. In 1827, Forsyth, a U.S. Indian agent, mentioned the use of woven beads on belts in a letter to General William Clark:

\(^5\) A bulrush is a plant that grows in wet conditions native to the Great Lakes area (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).
The wampum\(^6\) belts are woven together by thread made of the deer’s sinews, the thread is passed through each grain of wampum and the grains lay in the belt parallel to each other, the belts are of various sizes.....in white, blue, red....belts are made of white wampum interspersed with diamond like figures of blue wampum. (Blair 1911, 185).

**Appliqué Beadwork Method**

Another decoration technique using trade beads is the appliqué method. The appliqué method involved stitching the trade beads directly to the foundation fabric until parallel rows of beads created abstract curvilinear designs (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). An artifact from a Bell site dated 1670-1760 included a leather belt or sash fragment with beads fastened in five parallel rows (Quimby 1966).

**Bilateral Symmetry and the Algonquian Double-curve**

The use of bilateral symmetry and the Algonquian double-curve established a form of design that is clear in patterns of appliqué beadwork techniques. Bilateral symmetry is an art form where an imaginary plane divides an object into equal right and left halves, each side being a mirror image of the other (see figures 3.2a and 3.2b). The Algonquian double-curve is a design that uses two incurves within a particular pattern (see fig. 3.3). Frank G. Speck described the double-curve as, “[consisting] of opposing incurves as a foundation element, with embellishments more or less elaborate modifying the enclosed space and with variations in the shape and proportions to the whole” (Speck 1914, 1).

Curvilinear designs, or designs that have curved, rounded parts, used in appliqué beadwork and ribbonwork, were evident in the early 1600’s. An excavation site in western Michigan found remnants of a beaver robe which had a curvilinear design on the inside

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\(^6\) Wampum beads are made from the Atlantic whelk shell (white bead) and the Atlantic quahog clam (purple bead), threaded or woven, and used by Native Americans for ceremonial purposes. Tribes used the belts as gifts, as an offering to other tribes, or as a record of important events. Wampum belts served as currency and as a binding treaty (Oswalt 2006).
a. Speck’s bilateral symmetry (1914)


Fig. 3.2. Bilateral symmetry
a. Speck’s incurve or double curve (1914)


Fig. 3.3 Algonquian double curves
which was painted in red. The remnants of this site were dated approximately 1600-1680 (Quimby 1966).

The use of the Algonquian double-curve with bilateral symmetry was predominant in the Great Lakes region in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century and was used to decorate skirts and breechcloths. Appliquéd beadwork in a Meskwaki breechcloth dated 1865 and a Meskwaki skirt dated 1890 used bilateral symmetry and double curves in a curvilinear design (see figures 3.4 and 3.5).

The use of bilateral symmetry and the double curve in appliquéd beadwork was well established and used by several tribes due to inter-tribal exchange and diffusion by the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Torrence and Hobbs indicated that it may have been possible the appliqué method of beadwork was created by the Meskwaki. Beadwork patterns used abstract floral designs (see figures 3.4 and 3.5), which were documented around 1865 (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Ribbonwork also used curvilinear motifs in abstract floral designs (see fig. 3.18) reminiscent of the floral beadwork designs (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). The use of this artistic style in appliquéd beadwork became the accepted mode of applied decoration for the Meskwaki and also resulted in the transfer of this artistic style to ribbonwork (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).

**Ribbonwork**

*Ribbon and its Use as a Design Medium*

Ribbon was selected, incorporated, and transformed into Native American material culture, and historically it was culturally authenticated. Selection, incorporation, and transformation are three components of cultural authentication and are used as a process of adaptation and a strategy of change (Erekosima and Eicher 1981). Native American groups
Fig. 3.4. Meskwaki breechcloth and leggings, c.1865. Wool cloth, glass beads, silk ribbons, brass bells. Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Museum Bureau; I194a-c. (Penney 1992).

Fig. 3.5. Meskwaki skirt, c.1890; Wool fabric, silk ribbon, glass beads, German silver brooches. Milford Chandler; Richard Pohrt, (Penney 1992).
from the Great Lakes region used ribbon to decorate their garments like the Europeans but transformed the ribbon in a unique non-European manner (Hartman 2000).

Many scholars have suggested that pre-contact quillwork patterns and application techniques were transferred to beadwork and ribbonwork (Hartman 2000; Conn 1980; Marriott and Rachlin 1980; Torrence and Hobbs 1989; and Leech, Polyak, and Ritzenthaler 1973). When the arrival of European trade materials brought both trade beads and ribbon in the mid 1700’s (Hartman 2000), one media did not replace the other as quills, beads, and ribbons were used to embellish garments (Hartman 2000; Torrence and Hobbs 1989; Odle 1973). Beads and ribbon merely added to the selection of materials available for decoration. Native American women were discriminatingly selective in choosing trade items (Pannabecker 1986), an example of cultural authentication. Where ribbonwork originated is not known, scholars can assume that it was highly concentrated and highly developed in the Great Lakes region by 1800 (Hartman 2000). The design configuration of the appliquéd beadwork motifs (see fig. 3.5) were placed center front and around the bottom hem, which is similar to the placement of ribbonwork skirt panels (see fig. 3.19). Early appliquéd beadwork design and ribbonwork also share their curvilinear design patterns.

Ribbonwork method. As stated in Chapter One of this study, ribbonwork is a traditional form of Native American applied decoration that used pairs of ribbon strips of contrasting colors that are layered; the top layer is cut, folded under, and stitched to the bottom layer into a repeating design configuration. Neill (2000) described ribbonwork as the specific cutting and sewing that emphasizes shape, color, and texture of long, woven bands of ribbons. The simplest and most widespread form of early ribbonwork style appeared as a
sawtooth pattern, an example of Abbass’ developmental classification (Neill 2000; Abbass 1979).

Meskwaki ribbonwork started with a cut-paper pattern folded in half or quarters, forming bilateral symmetry. Pairs of ribbon strips were layered and basted together with a muslin backing for support. The paper pattern was then traced onto the top layer in one of two ribbonwork styles. One style was the reverse appliqué technique. A small seam allowance was cut inside the tracing, tucked under, and stitched, forming a design by revealing the bottom layer. The other method was the positive appliqué technique. A small seam allowance is cut outside the tracing, tucked under, and stitched with the top layer forming a design. Stitch types that were used were invisible stitches or decorative cross stitches (see fig. 3.6). Multiple strips were joined together to create a panel which was then applied to a foundation cloth or garment. Panels were used to decorate borders of skirts, breechcloths, leggings, and blankets (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).

Evidence of ribbon use. Woven silk ribbons with selvedge edges were the primary textile used in early ribbonwork. These silk ribbons were acquired through gifts and trade and appear in several trade lists. Sheryl Hartman (2000) cites many references to the presence of silk ribbon as trade goods, which included the following: William Johnson, 1755; John Johnson’s account book, 1802; the Tardiveau Document, 1884; and the Menard and Valle Account Book. Most of the early ribbon that appeared frequently in trade lists measured ½ to 1 ½ wide (Leech, Polyak and Ritzenthaler 1973). Pannabecker (1986) researched 1754 to 1779 journals, trade logs, and inventories on the distribution of ribbon in the eastern United States and showed that ribbon was available to Native American groups of

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Reverse appliqué technique where the bottom ribbon is revealed. The ribbon of one color (blue and green) is cut inside the pattern tracing, tucked under, and appliquéd with invisible stitches and decorative cross stitches, revealing the background of ribbon of another color (lavender and coral).

Fig. 3.6. Example of reverse appliqué technique in ribbonwork using invisible appliqué stitches and decorative cross stitches. (Photo by author)
the Great Lakes region via trade networks by the late 1770s. By the 1840’s, ribbon measured 3 to 4 inches wide.

Few documented pieces of ribbon-decorated garments from the early 18th century exist because early ribbons were made of silk which deteriorates with time. However, written descriptions and artist renditions provide visual documentation of the use of ribbons to decorate garments at that time. For example, the simple use of ribbons to decorate clothing is described by John Heckewelder in 1762:

Her scarlet leggings were decorated with different coloured ribands\(^8\) sewed on, the outer edge being finished off with small beads also of various colours. (Heckewelder 1971, 271)

The earliest surviving sample of the use of silk ribbons and ribbonwork is a collection piece called the Rankin Ensemble from the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The ensemble, made up a woman’s robe, skirt, and leggings, was worn by Sophie Therese Rankin, from the Menominee tribe for her marriage to French trader, Louis Grignon, in 1802 (see fig. 3.7). The Rankin Ensemble illustrates the link between the use of plain ribbon borders and cut and sewn ribbonwork (Hartman 2000). Three techniques of ribbon use were illustrated in this ensemble (Hartman 2000), including early plain ribbon use, as described by Heckewelder (1971), apparent in multiple bands parallel to the bottom edge (Hartman 2000). In addition, a structural type not identified by Abbass (1979) showed the use of plain ribbon applied in a folded criss-cross pattern on the vertical front of the skirt (Hartman 2000). And third, the ribbons that appear on the lower border of the skirt show that they are cut and sewn and are “an intricate use of silk ribbons and the ribbonwork appliqué

\(^8\) Riband is an older spelling of ribbon. (Encarta World English Dictionary, 2007).
a. use of plain ribbons in multiple bands parallel the bottom edge
b. use of plain ribbon applied in a folded criss-cross pattern
c. cut and sewn ribbonwork style

Fig. 3.7. Menominee woman’s ensemble, worn as a wedding dress in 1802 by Sophie Therese Rankin, displayed on a mannequin in the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay, Wisconsin. (Conn 1980)
method to decorate garments” (Hartman, 2000, 53). Researchers have agreed that ribbonwork was highly developed by the beginning of the 19th century based on the Rankin Ensemble (Neill 2000).

A portrait painted by the documentary painter George Catlin in 1835 provides another visual depiction of ribbon use (see fig. 3.8a). The full-length portrait of the wife of Keokuk from the Sauk tribe shows, according to Hartman (2000, 57), “wide bands of ribbonwork…clearly evident at the horizontal hem and left vertical front of the wrapped skirt.” In the 1830’s, George Catlin followed Lewis and Clark’s 1802 Trail along the Missouri and Columbia Rivers through Indian Territory with the intent of capturing the authenticity of the native people in paintings (Hassrick 1977). Catlin had to paint with speed, evident in often erratic portraits, but, according to Hassrick, some of Catlin’s portraits may lack artistic merit but have historic value (Hassrick 1977). George Horse Capture (2003), who has been a curator for exhibits for the National Museum for the American Indian, considered Catlin a master painter and an artist who preserved images of many Native Americans. The geometric style of ribbonwork on the skirt shown in Catlin’s 1835 painting is similar to a Meskwaki men’s breechcloth that continues to be used by Meskwaki today (see fig. 3.8b).

Geometric designs of the 1840’s. Prior to 1850, ribbonwork designs began with patterns that were entirely geometric with repeating designs using diamonds squares, and triangles in coordinated arrangements similar to those used in porcupine quillwork (see fig. 3.9). Using Abbass’ classification, this is a sample of developmental shingled ribbonwork, where the pattern is repeated with multiple layers of ribbon with combinations of diamonds and parallelograms (1979). In this type of ribbonwork, several layers of narrow ribbon were
Fig. 3.8. George Catlin, 1835. Sac and Fox, oil on canvas. Keokuk’s wife’s dress consists of a wrap around skirt, decorated with appliquéd ribbonwork, and a blouse richly covered with silver brooches (Hassrick 1977) that compares to Meskwaki geometric ribbonwork style that is still in use today.

Fig. 3.9. Early quill-decorated baby carrier panel, 1793. (Penney 1992)
incorporated and combined to make an elaborate panel (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). A skirt from the Miami tribe dated 1820-1840 is characteristic of the geometric pattern (see fig. 3.10).

*Early curvilinear patterns after 1850.* After 1850, the designs were still repeating and continuous but in much larger, complicated motifs (Torrence and Hobbs 1989) made possible by the availability of wider ribbons conducive to larger coverage and more intricate designs (Leech, Polyak and Ritzenthaler 1973). Major changes occurred with the introduction of bilateral symmetry that resembled appliquéd beadwork designs (see fig. 3.5). An important and identifying feature of these patterns is the visual figure-ground reversal of the pattern and background, which changes with the shifting perception of the viewer where the background can become the foreground depending in how it is viewed (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Using Abbass’ classification, this is an example of positive-style ribbonwork where pairs of ribbons are joined and the top ribbon forms the design (1979). At this time, designs also became more curvilinear but were still somewhat angular as shown in a Potawatomi blanket dated 1860-1880 and a Meskwaki blanket dated 1880 (see figures 3.11 and 3.12).

Bilateral symmetry and double curves are present in a Meskwaki skirt dated 1885 (see fig. 3.13). According to Neill (2000), this is a positive continuous strip with bilateral symmetry. In this case, the method of appliqué remained the same, but wider ribbons were used so fewer strips were needed to make a panel (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). According to the Denver Museum of Natural History, the silk ribbons measured 3 to 4 inches wide (see fig. 3.14). Using Abbass’ classification, this is an example of reverse appliqué where the bottom ribbon forms the design (1979).
Ribbonwork patterns use repeating geometric shapes; multiple rows of narrow ribbons were formed to create an intricate panel. Example of developmental shingled ribbonwork.

Fig. 3.10. Miami skirt, 1820-1840; wool fabric, silver brooches, silk ribbon; CIS 2221. Provenance: collected at Peoria, Indiana by Milford Chandler. Flint Institute of Arts 1973 (Penney 1992).

Designs are still repeating but in a much larger, more complicated, more varied motifs using wider ribbons. Designs become more curvilinear, but still somewhat angular. Positive ribbonwork, made of pairs of ribbons where the top ribbon is cut, is seen here (vertical panel, l-r, lavender, pink black, pink is cut).

Fig. 3.11. Potawatomi wearing blanket, Wisconsin, 1860-1880 (Penney 1992).
Designs are still repeating but in a much larger, more complicated, more varied designs using wider ribbons. Designs become more curvilinear, but still somewhat angular. Positive ribbonwork is made of pairs of ribbons where the top ribbon forms the design.

Fig. 3.12. Meskwaki blanket, c. 1880 (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).
More coverage of design area; continuous design; less angular. Positive ribbonwork

Fig. 3.13. Meskwaki skirt, 1885 (Torrence and Hobbs 1989)

More coverage of design area; continuous motif; less angular; Negative ribbonwork

Fig. 3.14. Potawatomi skirt, 1880
Denver Museum of Natural History
Floral motifs of 1900. According to Torrence and Hobbs (1989), curvilinear floral motifs began to appear in 1890 and 1900 (see figures 3.15 and 3.16), and by the end of the century, ribbonwork designs were sometimes broken in a progression of motifs (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). These design resembled curvilinear appliquéd beadwork designs (Torrence and Hobbs 1989; Leech, Polyak and Ritzenthaler 1973) because they were still repeating and the angularity started to diminish (see figures 3.17, 3.18, and 3.19). Abbass (1979) described negative ribbonwork as made with pairs of ribbons in which the figure is formed by the bottom ribbon (see fig. 3.17). Figures 3.18 and 3.19 are examples of positive appliqué where the top ribbon forms the design.

Ribbon appliqué and the use of cloth strips. Until 1930 most ribbons used for ribbonwork were pure silk (Leech, Polyak, and Ritzenthaler 1973), but after 1930 taffeta and satin ribbons made from rayon began to be used for ribbonwork because silk ribbons became either unavailable or too expensive (Leech, Polyak, and Ritzenthaler 1973). According to Neill (2000), a firm date for the shift to using fabrics instead of ribbons has not been established, but she speculated that the use of fabric could have prompted the shift to the ribbon appliqué style or even that the opposite could be true where the ribbon appliqué style could have prompted the use of fabrics (Neill 2000). She suggested further research in what prompted this shift.

As an example of the transition from using ribbon to fabric, a Meskwaki skirt (see fig. 3.18) dated 1930 was decorated with silk ribbon according to Torrence and Hobbs (1989); whereas, a much later skirt dated 1970 uses taffeta fabric (see fig. 3.20). Although the date of this transition is not clear, what is clear is that ribbonwork styles underwent significant changes in the mid 20th century (Neill 2000). Producing a ribbonwork panel required
Fig. 3.15. Winnebago skirt; c.1890; (Flint Institute of Arts Collection 1973)

Fig. 3.16. Winnebago skirt; c.1900; (Flint Institute of Arts Collection 1973)

Fig. 3.17. Winnebago skirt, c. 1930, (Flint Institute of Arts Collection 1973).

Fig. 3.18. Meskwaki skirt, 1930, (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).
Positive appliqué reveals motif as separate, l-r, top, white forms design

Fig. 3.19. Meskwaki blanket, 1955; (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).

Reverse appliqué reveals the design (black/red) as separated; 3 colors of taffeta fabric are used. Black/red as the base, light pink on top.

Fig. 3.20. Meskwaki skirt, 1970 (Torrence and Hobbs 1989).
approximately sixteen yards of ribbon, while using cloth only required two yards of fabric that was then cut into strips to make the amount needed for the ribbonwork (Leech, Polyak, and Ritzenhaler 1973). Wide strips cut from a length of fabric also allowed a much larger surface plane to be covered. The art form was characterized by large curvilinear designs and abstract floral motifs that are clearly separated (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Figure 3.20 is an example of ribbon appliqué style because it used fabric strips rather than ribbon. The technique used in this skirt is reverse appliqué which does not fit Neill’s definition of ribbon appliqué where the top ribbon forms the design. Here, the reverse appliqué consists of two cloth strips sewn together (black/red) with one wide strip of cloth (light pink) layered over the base. The top (light pink) was cut away and appliquéd with invisible stitches. The bottom cloth strips (black/red) formed the design.

Current Meskwaki Ethnic Dress

Meskwaki used dress and ornamentation as a means of self expression and identity. Everyday dress was plain, but elaborately decorated items of clothing were worn for ceremonial occasions (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). The ribbonwork skirt was only one part of the ensemble created for decorative, emblematic, or spiritual purposes (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Women wore a ribbonwork or beaded skirt, knee-high leggings, moccasins, and blouse adorned with ribbons (see fig.3.21). Hair was tied back with ribbon ties or a hair binder decorated with ribbonwork or beads. They wore necklaces, earrings, and bracelets which can be seen in dance festivals of today. In addition to ribbonwork decorated garment a simpler form of dress called the two-piece outfit\(^9\) was worn by Meskwaki women in the early 20\(^{th}\) century. Torrence and Hobbs (1989) referred to this as a trade cloth skirt and

\(^9\) In my experience, Meskwaki women referred to this as the “two-piece outfit.”
Left to right:
1. Ribbonwork skirt, reverse appliqué, ribbonwork borders hem
2. Southern style
3. Ribbonwork skirt, positive appliqué, ribbonwork borders hem, German silver brooches
4. Southern style
5. Ribbonwork skirt, reverse appliqué, plain ribbon borders hem
6. Two-piece outfit
7. Ribbonwork skirt, positive appliqué, plain ribbon borders hem, German silver brooches
8. Ojibwa jingle dress
9. Appliquéd beadwork on skirt

Fig. 3.21. Various types of Meskwaki dress. 1993 Meskwaki Annual Powwow, Tama, Iowa, *The Legend*, 1(1) October 1993.
blouse that was worn for everyday wear. The two-piece outfit consisted of a blouse and skirt made of calico or other cotton material (see fig. 3.22). The blouse had quarter-length sleeves and a yoke with gathered or pleated body. The mid-calf or tea-length full skirt was gathered at the waist with a gathered or pleated flounce at the bottom, and a double row of plain ribbon sometimes decorated these garments. The two piece cloth was also worn for religious ceremonies and social dancing. The woman in figure 3.21, number six, has on a light orange outfit dated 1993 and was reminiscent of the outfit dated 1921 worn by the women fourth from the right in figure 3.22. Figure 3.21 showed how relatively unchanged the structure of the two-piece outfits are when compared to figure 3.22. The two piece outfits are no longer worn as everyday wear but are still used for ceremonies and social dancing based on my observations of Meskwaki women’s dress.

Summary

With the arrival of trade goods from the Europeans, the method of applied decoration to garments became easier. Cloth replaced animal hides. Porcupine quillwork, a labor-intensive process, gave way to beads and ribbons as the primary form of applied decoration. Traditional methods of applied decoration and designs for beadwork were adapted from quillwork to suit the modern materials.

The curvilinear nature of early appliquéd beadwork designs is similar to the ribbonwork designs as are the application techniques. Ribbonwork is a composite of European materials and is an adaptation of old techniques through the process of cultural authentication in an innovative response to both political and economic factors that resulted in culture change.
Fig. 3.22. Two piece outfits worn for everyday wear, dated 1921. Photo from author’s collection.
The persistence of ribbonwork over the centuries shows the value that was placed on ribbons and on the skill required to produce ribbonwork (Pannabecker 1986). The use of ribbonwork by the Sauk was evident in 1835, and the Meskwaki lived near the Sauk in Iowa at this time. In 1845, both tribes were forcibly removed to a reservation in Kansas, but the Meskwaki moved back to Iowa, and though they faced poverty and hardship, they continued the technique of ribbonwork. A Meskwaki blanket dated 1880 and a Meskwaki skirt dated 1885 (see Figures 3.12 and 3.13) clearly show the use of ribbonwork by the Meskwaki twenty three years after they moved back to Iowa.

In 1930, silk taffeta ribbons were used to make ribbonwork panels. By 1970, taffeta cloth was used to create the ribbonwork panels, which illustrates adaptation to changes in available resources. How and when the transition occurred is unclear.

We must bear in mind that while the source of materials may have changed, the methods and meanings of applied decoration of garments remained the same over many years. Ribbon-decorated dress is an example of culture change and remains a tradition that has survived for over a century. Ribbonwork, a composite of European materials and Native American techniques, is firmly rooted in Native American culture and the tradition of ethnic dress and identity.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the tradition of ribbonwork, a form of applied decoration in Native American dress. The Meskwaki, as well as many other Native American tribes, continue to use methods of applied decoration unique to their own cultures. I chose to focus on my own tribe, the Meskwaki of Iowa. I make ribbonwork garments and am familiar with styles and methods of today’s ribbonwork; however, I wanted to learn more about ribbonwork and examine it from a scholarly perspective. Research methods for this study include in-depth interviews with those who make and wear ribbonwork. The goal for my research is not to predict what will happen in the future, but rather to understand what tradition in ribbonwork means in the lives of Meskwaki people. This chapter describes the methods and procedures used in conducting this study.

Researcher’s Perspective

From my own experience as a Meskwaki, I have observed that ribbonwork is a unique textile tradition common to many Native American tribes. I know that, for the Meskwaki, ribbonwork is more than a textile art; ribbonwork decorated garments are revered as “traditional” dress and are worn as ceremonial garments. The ribbonwork skirt is an important part of dress for Meskwaki women, and, in many ways, it could be said that ribbonwork communicates identity. As a Meskwaki, I wanted to understand what ribbonwork really means, how it communicates identity, and if there are any other characteristics that are not immediately visible. Because I am Meskwaki, I was able to interview members who may not otherwise have shared in-depth information because trust is an important issue when sharing sensitive cultural information.
Consistent with the purpose of this study, I chose research methods that would help
give voice to those who make and wear ribbonwork and allow them the opportunity to
express their views on their “traditional” dress. Few studies devoted to ribbonwork exist and
none have been done looking at it from the perspective of this study. Consequently, I wanted
to add to the body of knowledge by exploring the tradition of ribbonwork and understand
what it means from the perspective of those who make and wear it.

Methodological Approach

A basic interpretive approach was selected to facilitate the discovery of themes
related to the research questions presented in this qualitative study. Qualitative research
involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), and
researchers using qualitative methods study things in their natural settings, attempting to
make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people have for them at one particular
point in time. As part of qualitative research, the interpretive approach strives to understand
the meaning that people have constructed about their world and their experiences (Merriam
2002). The interpretive approach differs from the positivist approach: the positivist approach
seeks to discover a set of causal laws that can be used to predict patterns of behavior, in a
sense, to predict and control, whereas the interpretive approach seeks to understand and
interpret (Esterberg 2002). The research strategy for this study was to use in-depth
interviews as a primary means of data collection. The goals of this type of interpretive
research are consistent with my research interests, as I sought to understand meanings of
ribbonwork from the perspective of the Meskwaki people who make and wear ribbonwork.
Data Collection

Interview Document

The interview questions were consistent with the purpose of this study: to gain a deeper understanding of the tradition of ribbonwork from the perspective of the Meskwaki people. The questions were intended to provide a representation of the meanings that people have for ribbonwork. Furthermore, the interview questions (Appendix A) aided participants in discussing three general topics regarding ribbonwork: 1) personal experiences; 2) techniques in making ribbonwork; and 3) the cultural meanings of ribbonwork. The semi-structured format was chosen to allow the topic to be explored more openly and to allow the participants to express their opinions and ideas (Esterberg 2002). Open-ended questions established the territory to be explored and allowed the participant to take any direction they wanted (Seidman 1991). The open-ended format also was conducive to allowing the thought processes to flow naturally. A purposive sampling method was used in this study. Purposive samples represent a full range of responses with as little redundancy as possible (Lincoln and Guba 1985) with the goal of maximizing information, not facilitating generalizations.

The first section of the interview questions focused on personal feelings and meanings in ribbonwork, in other words, what ribbonwork means for them on a personal level. The second section focused on the technical aspects of ribbonwork: how it is assembled, how they determine color choice and design choice, and the meanings they attach to those choices. The last set of questions focused on the cultural meanings of ribbonwork and why ribbonwork is important to the interviewees. The participants were also asked if they would care to add additional information, providing an opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas about the topic, as suggested by Esterberg (2002). The interview
questions were submitted and approved by the Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Board before interviews were conducted. The signed approval is included in Appendix D.

Study Sample

Ten participants were interviewed for in this study. Nine participants live or have lived on the Meskwaki Settlement near Tama, Iowa, which is located in central Iowa, approximately 15 miles east of Marshalltown and approximately 70 miles northeast of Des Moines. The Meskwaki Settlement, a small community of approximately 1500 members, is tribally owned property consisting of seven thousand acres. When this study began, I already was acquainted with all the participants because I have lived in the Meskwaki community in the past. Prior to the interviews, I did not have frequent contact with them, but I knew of two people who made ribbonwork. For the first participant, I initiated contact with a phone call and explained my research; she agreed to be interviewed. The second respondent I interviewed, a Meskwaki woman well-known for her ribbonwork skills, provided three names of people who made ribbonwork as possible candidates for this study. I contacted these people and two of the three agreed to be interviewed. I then traveled to the Meskwaki Settlement over the course of the summer and early fall of 2007 to conduct eight of the ten interviews for this study.

The ten participants included Native Americans, nine females and one male, ranging in age from 31 to 85. I wanted to use a wide age range in order to gain perspectives from older people and younger people, but, as it turned out, finding ribbonworkers who were under 30 years old was difficult. Nine of the participants have lived on the Meskwaki Settlement for the majority of their lives, while one participant is a member of the
Winnebago tribe, lives in Des Moines, Iowa, and is employed at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. The final participant, who is a member of the Ho Chunk tribe of Wisconsin, was married to a Meskwaki man and lived on the Meskwaki Settlement for many years. She had moved back to her home tribe in Wisconsin one year prior to her interview, but I was able to interview her during one of her visits to the Meskwaki settlement in September 2007.

Participants, all of whom were eager to share their stories, had either made ribbonwork, have worn ribbonwork skirts, or were familiar with the cultural practices that require the use of ribbonwork-decorated garments. Five of the participants currently make ribbonwork for their families as well as for the community, and another three of the participants have made ribbonwork at one time or another. One participant, who is Ho Chunk, does not make ribbonwork but knew the assembly process and is familiar with ribbonwork’s use in cultural practices of her own tribe and the Meskwaki tribe. The non-Meskwaki participants were chosen because of their unique perspectives. Both come from tribes who use ribbonwork as a form of applied decoration and are familiar with Meskwaki culture and ribbonwork, and both of the non-Meskwaki participants represent an informed outsider’s view on Meskwaki ribbonwork. Moreover, some of the participants have traveled to dance festivals called powwows all over the United States and Canada where they have seen many different types of tribal dress, including ribbonwork. Participants in this study frequently traveled to fabric stores in major neighboring cities in Iowa—Marshalltown, Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Cedar Falls, and Des Moines—to purchase the necessary materials for ribbonwork.
Interview procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in eight of the participant’s homes, while one interview was conducted in my home in Ames, Iowa because the participant was in town and one interview was conducted in the participant’s office in Ames, Iowa. The interview process began with a brief explanation of the study using the informed consent document (Appendix B). Each participant was given a copy of the interview questions (Appendix A) and was told that the questions would serve as a guide and that they could answer or omit any question. The interview was then recorded using a small digital voice recorder placed between us. As suggested by Esterberg (2002), the participants were informed that they were in control of the interview process and could choose to end the taping of the interview at any time by turning off or indicating to me that they wished to turn off the recorder. Only one participant requested that I turn off the tape recorder for a few minutes and then shared personal information that was not relevant to this study. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour, and all interviews followed a similar protocol and format.

Three of the participants spoke a mixture of English and Meskwaki. Since I speak and understand Meskwaki, I had no problem understanding the participants or conducting the interviews in Meskwaki when necessary. This understanding was also helpful when transcribing the three interviews; I was able to translate the Meskwaki language with no difficulty. Two Meskwaki words are translated phonetically (e.g., “German silver brooches” and “ribbon”), and using the Meskwaki terms is important because that is the way they are identified within the culture. The other seven participants spoke English with the exception

\[10 \text{ I, the researcher, was raised on the Meskwaki settlement and was taught both languages simultaneously.} \]
of a few Meskwaki words. These seven interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

During the course of the interviews, one participant showed me a woman’s traditional ribbon shirt decorated with ribbons of various colors. Two participants showed me beadwork that had designs similar to ribbonwork motifs, and one participant showed me ribbonwork panels she was currently working on at the time of the interview. These were personal items belonging to the participants and were not used for this study.

Limitations

Readers should use caution when generalizing the results:

1. Obvious limitations to this study are sample size.

2. Data is limited to the participants’ willingness to be open and honest about feelings they have and the willingness to share information.

3. The sample location is limited to the Meskwaki Settlement.

Data Analysis

Data analysis procedures were based on open coding, focused coding, axial coding, and constant comparative methods (Esterberg 2002, Merriam 2000, Lincoln and Guba 1985). In the initial stage, open coding data is analyzed line by line, identifying themes of interest (Esterberg 2002; Merriam 2000). Focused coding is similar to open coding but the focus is on key themes identified in open coding (Esterberg 2002). Next, axial coding makes connections between categories and sub-categories (Merriam 2000), and the constant comparative method involves continually comparing one unit of data with another in order to derive conceptual elements (Lincoln and Guba 1985).
Data analysis began after the first interview and continued through the entire data collection process. As suggested by Esterberg (2002), preliminary analysis was done after each interview by listening to the recorded interview again before transcribing and then continually reviewing transcripts to immerse myself in the data. After preliminary analysis, as suggested by Merriam (2000), data was grouped into very general categories based on interview questions: 1) personal experiences; 2) techniques in making ribbonwork; and 3) the cultural meanings of ribbonwork.

**Coding**

Open coding was used in the first stage to discover broad categories of information, and in the second stage focused coding was used to identify major themes (Esterberg 2002). Excerpts that held similar ideas were organized into broad categories. Next, in the third stage, axial coding identified major themes, which were subdivided into categories, and these categories were constantly compared to similar entries to discover minor themes, which were then sorted based on their similarity to the major themes. Along the way, a coding guide was developed based on the broad and subdivided categories that arose throughout this process. Data that yielded demographic information are discussed in Chapter Five.

Peer review, allowing others to scan raw data, was conducted to determine plausibility in findings, as suggested by Merriam (2002). Three people, two classmates familiar with the study and one relative of the researcher familiar with the Meskwaki culture, viewed the transcripts with the coding guide (Appendix C) to assess the accuracy of themes based on raw data. A few minor discrepancies were identified, but overall the reviewers found that the themes were congruent.
Emerging Themes

After the three stages of coding, five major themes emerged. The first theme included data related to the process of ribbonwork, information that yielded the technical aspect of construction. The second theme related to the practices and experiences, information that provided personal and social experiences and cultural practices. The third theme focused on the sources, inspiration and shape of the design and motifs within ribbonwork. The fourth theme related to changes in use of ribbonwork, motifs, and availability of resources. A fifth overarching theme supports the previous four themes and illustrated cultural meanings of ribbonwork as part of the tradition and dress of the Meskwaki. The next chapter will present the findings based on interview data.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

Analysis of data reveals five over-arching themes. The data within the first four themes describe ribbonwork as part of Meskwaki dress within the cultural norms. These themes include 1) process, 2) practices and experiences, 3) designs and motifs, and 4) change. Minor themes within the major themes represent the range of ideas embedded within each theme. The data from the first four themes provide the framework that generated a fifth theme. This final theme illustrates cultural meanings of ribbonwork as part of the cultural traditions and dress of the Meskwaki.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section will describe the demographics of the respondents, the ten participants who provided in-depth interview data. Next, the second section will summarize participants’ views on ribbonwork according to the four themes of process, practices and experiences, design and motifs, and change based on interview data. Last, the third section will describe the fifth and most general theme of cultural meanings in the participants’ lives in regard to ribbonwork tradition.

Demographics

Participants of this study willingly shared their stories for this research (Table 5.1). The 10 participants consisted of nine women and one man ranging in age from 31 to 85 years of age. At the time of the study, one woman was in her 30s, one man and one woman were in their 40s, one woman was in her 50s, three women were in their 60s, two women were in their 70s, and one woman was in her 80s. All the participants are members of one of three Native American groups. Eight of the participants are Meskwaki, while one woman is Ho Chunk from Wisconsin and one woman is Omaha/Winnebago from Nebraska. Pseudonyms are used in this study.
Table 5.1. Demographics of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Tribal Affiliation</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Learned to Make</th>
<th>Makes Ribbonwork</th>
<th>Wears Ribbonwork</th>
<th>Makes Ribbonwork For:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>Retired, administrator</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Marianne</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>Retired, culture instructor</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Self-taught Class</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Family/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lacey</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>High school library science teacher Employed</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Family/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Reyna</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Family/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>Employed, various</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Meskwaki</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Family/class</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Arlyce</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ho Chunk</td>
<td>Retired, gaming operations</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Omaha/Winnebago</td>
<td>Iowa State University, Administration</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Family/community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Four of the participants were employed, three were retired, two were homemakers, and one was a college student. Three of the participants have higher education degrees. Three were married, five either widowed or divorced, and two are unmarried. Eight of the participants had children, seven had grandchildren, and four had great-grandchildren.

Overview of Participants and Ribbonwork

Four of the participants regularly made ribbonwork for family and community members, one woman made ribbonwork for her family only and, at the time of this study, three people seldom made ribbonwork. One woman (1) attempted ribbonwork but did not make it because of her lack of sewing skills. However, she has worn ribbonwork and was familiar with Meskwaki cultural practices. One woman (9) was never taught ribbonwork and seldom wore ribbonwork but is familiar with Meskwaki and Ho Chunk cultural practices. Both of these participants were familiar with the construction and assembly process even though they don’t themselves create ribbonwork. In general, six participants have worn ribbonwork skirts, three seldom wore ribbonwork skirts, and one male has worn ribbonwork aprons and leggings.

The terms ribbonwork and ribbon appliqué have caused some confusion among scholars. Ribbonwork, according to scholars, refers to the general technique used to produce ribbonwork and is defined as a traditional form of Native American applied decoration. Ribbon appliqué, on the other hand, is defined as a contemporary form of Native American applied decoration that involves cutting motifs out of fabric, then sewing it on top of a foundation fabric.

Ribbonwork has its own name in the Meskwaki language. As mentioned earlier, the Meskwaki word for ribbon pronounced phonetically is *sannibah*. The actual Meskwaki
spelling is *se ni ba*. The Meskwaki word for ribbonwork pronounced phonetically is *sannibah eegwaday*. The Meskwaki spelling for ribbonwork is *se ni ba i ga ti*.

The participants had preferences in their terminology. Six of the participants saw no difference between the terms ribbonwork and ribbon appliqué and used both terms interchangeably (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7), while four of the participants preferred the Meskwaki name for ribbonwork skirt (1, 2, 4, 8). Two participants preferred to use the term ribbonwork (4, 5), and two participants preferred to use the term appliqué (3, 9). One participant (6) made a distinction between ribbonwork as a traditional form that used hand sewing and ribbon appliqué as a modern form using machine-stitched methods. Finally, one participant (10) used the term ribbonwork to refer to the traditional method of cut and sewn ribbons or fabric.

In general, all the participants discussed ribbonwork styles as the method of layering, cutting and sewing ribbons or fabrics into a design configuration. Two participants shared their thoughts and definition of ribbonwork:

> I’ve always understood ribbonwork as a process for applying layers of fabrics in a floral or geometric design that reflects individual designs that are either tribal or completely the individuals own interpretation of what they want to put on their piece of ribbons that are pulled together. (10)

> Ribbonwork is the taking of two pieces of material, the bottom is the base and the top is where you cut out your design and that design material is sewn to the bottom piece of material. (4)

All participants referred to ribbonwork as the panel but also used the term ribbonwork to refer to the skirt that has a panel. One participant summarized it in this way:

> If you say ribbonwork to someone, in my family, they are assuming it is the skirt. If I said “Bring my ribbonwork,” they wouldn’t just take the two strips I’m talking about; they would bring my skirt. Though, in our family, my grandmother used to have a blanket, what I would consider a blanket. You didn’t wear it, you put it over your shoulders and there would be an appliqué on the bottom with [silver broaches] on the back. I have seen it on a blanket but only on the one my grandmother had.
Then I have an appliqué shawl; a shawl with an appliqué design on it. So those are the three forms I know. But if I said ribbonwork, it would be the skirt. (4)

Participants learned to make ribbonwork primarily through three means: 1) through instructional classes taught by experienced ribbonworkers; 2) through family members; and 3) through self-teaching, primarily by examination of existing samples. Three participants took classes during the 1990’s in the Senior Center on the Meskwaki Settlement (4, 6, 10), while one participant learned in a 7th grade Settlement School home economics class in the late 1940’s (2). Three participants were instructed through family members (1, 5, 7), one learned from family and through a class (8), one was self-taught (3), and one (9) never learned to make ribbonwork.

Elder women of the Meskwaki community have offered to teach ribbonwork methods to anyone who wanted to learn, and classes have taken place, typically in the fall, in the Senior Citizens Center located near the Tribal Office Building on the Meskwaki Settlement since the early 1990’s. One participant described taking an evening class 15 years ago from the elder women of the tribe: “There were about 8 of us women, maybe 8-10 women.” (4) Another participant shared her motivation for learning ribbonwork methods. When her parents died, she was dependent on others in the community to make the necessary garments as required by tribal custom. For instance, according to tribal custom, in the event of a death the community contributes to the family by providing clothes, money, and food to assist in burial costs. She felt the community support when her parents died and wanted to learn how to do ribbonwork for her family and to give back to the community. As a result, she signed up to take ribbonwork classes:

I wanted to learn how to do [ribbonwork] because when my mom and dad died, I had to depend on other people to do all this sewing for us. And I didn’t want to be
dependent on anybody else to do this. I know that everybody comes together during this time and helps each other out but it’s nice to have somebody that knows how to do [ribbonwork] or have something on hand to contribute something, to be able to help somebody out because when I was little my mom used to always tell me, you know, you always help when you can. They had appliqué class at the center, or they said ribbonwork classes. They were going to show us how to do ribbonwork, so I signed up because I wasn’t working. (6)

One participant recalled learning as a young girl at school in the late 1940’s when she was required to learn ribbonwork in her home economics class:

We were going to school over here at the settlement school and there was a teacher. We had a sewing class. I must have been in the 6th or 7th grade. She had a sewing class and we made an apron appliqué with cotton. (2)

The participant who is Omaha/Winnebago was taught by a Meskwaki elder. At that time she was a student at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa:

When I really started looking at the Winnebago designs, one of my professors here on campus challenged me, “You really need to learn about that.” By then I was going out to the settlement. I was under the tutelage of an elder who agreed to help me. With my research on Winnebago designs and the Omaha nation designs, because the Omaha do ribbonwork as well, I began working with the elder woman and learned about just the basics on how to pull it together and the research helped me to look at symbolisms and what different colors mean. (10)

Instructional classes that taught ribbonwork methods illustrate just how important this skill is to the Meskwaki people, and classes are useful when family members are not proficient in sewing and are unable to pass this skill to the younger members of the family. But even with the available classes, not everyone had the ability to sew or some found it too difficult as one participant described: “I don’t make ribbonwork. I never developed the art of making it; it’s too hard.” (1) Another participant who never learned how to make ribbonwork explained that “there were Ho Chunks that did the appliqué but we didn’t do that in our house but I knew about them.” (9)
Either formally or informally, ribbonwork, like most traditions, was taught to the young; the skill was passed down from previous generations of Meskwaki women. Two of the participants learned through family members who passed this skill to them, mainly from grandmothers and aunts. One participant described learning ribbonwork techniques by observing her grandmother:

When I was about 8 or 9 years old, I would take scraps of grandma’s ribbons and taffeta and make doll clothes, little dresses for the dolls, little ribbonwork. She made these all the time and we just watched her. So what was left, our little scraps, we would decide what we would have enough for. Sometimes we would only have enough for the front of the little doll dress and sometimes we would have enough for the bottom and we watched the kind of patterns she had, and then we created our own miniatures of what she had. (5)

In an example of a change in tradition, a few men now also learn ribbonwork methods. The male participant described how he learned by watching his grandmother:

I just watched [grandma]; then I thought I could try it. So I did small stuff, just single patterns. It was the same color but at least I tried it. That’s what she said. That’s the way you are going to learn; if you try it. So I started from there. Ever since then I have been amazed by it. (7)

Another participant was taught by both family members and by taking a class. She described learning from her grandmother and her aunt:

I probably started in high school; maybe even before that because they used to have classes during the summer. And my grandma taught me and my aunt. I don’t know how to do the sewing machine. I basically know how to do it by hand. (8)

As mentioned earlier, ribbonwork could be learned by observing existing samples, and, indeed, some women have the creative ability and exceptional technical skills to teach themselves the methods of ribbonwork. For example, one participant taught herself by observing existing samples of ribbonwork because her daughters wanted regalia to participate in dance: “When I came back [to the Settlement], my girls started dancing so I
started sewing. That’s when I started doing the appliqué. I just tried it myself, that’s how I learned it.” (3)

In summary, ribbonwork has been passed on to the next generation both informally by female family members and formally by female teachers in classes. While traditionally a female task, males are now also learning ribbonwork methods. Instructional classes have helped to maintain the tradition of ribbonwork and reflect, in the end, a cultural change in how tradition is passed down.

Major Themes

The core of this study focuses on the Meskwaki tradition of ribbonwork as a primary means of applied decoration. Ribbonwork is still used today by the Meskwaki people and is a form of ethnic dress that is used in a cultural setting. The experiences and practices of the Meskwaki culture play an important role in the process of making ribbonwork, and cultural meanings are generated from the process, practices and experiences, designs and motifs and the changes that occur within them. This section provides an analysis of the data that describes ribbonwork in the contemporary context of the Meskwaki experience. The data within the first four themes describe ribbonwork as part of Meskwaki dress within the cultural norms. These themes include 1) process, 2) practices and experiences, 3) designs and motifs, and 4) change. Together, these themes illustrate the fifth theme, the cultural meanings of ribbonwork. All of the major and minor themes are outlined in Table 5.2.

Process

The first major theme described the process of assembling the ribbonwork panels that would be later added to a garment. In general, the process consisted of making matched pairs of ribbonwork panels which began with designing the motif, layering cut ribbons, sewing the
Table 5.2. Major and minor themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) Process</th>
<th>4) Changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ribbonwork design process</td>
<td>• Changes in use of ribbonwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sewing and assembly process</td>
<td>• Changes in motifs and structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attaching to garment</td>
<td>• Changes in availability of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Practices and experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses of ribbonwork</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expression of spirituality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clan colors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Handing down ribbonwork</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feelings when wearing/making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Design and motifs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sources of patterns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sources of inspiration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Styles and types of motifs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Symbolism in design and motifs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Cultural meanings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Characteristics of tradition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal meanings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social meanings</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• Communication of identity</td>
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motif, assembling the panels, and, finally, attaching the panel to a garment such as a skirt.

Participants described three process components of making ribbonwork which resulted in the emergence of three minor themes: ribbonwork design process, sewing and assembly process, and attaching to a garment.

Ribbonwork design process. The process of making ribbonwork begins with a paper pattern of a single unit of design, the motif. The paper is folded in half or quarters, then a design is sketched and cut to produce bilateral symmetry where each side is a mirror image of the other. One participant spent a lot of time with her aunt and watched her as she made her ribbonwork. She described watching her aunt cut the paper and then select a pattern:
I think they just started; you just start cutting the design and come up with a design and which one you like to sew. Because I was watching my aunt when she used to cut up paper, she looked at them and looked at them, then she thought “that one would be good” so that’s the one she picked. I even watched her put them together because I was with her. I was always with her. She appliquéd; she made her own designs and came up with her own cut up designs. (2)

Precision is an important factor when making paper patterns. Merely folding the paper in quarters would produce an inaccurate pattern because of the bulkiness of the folds. One participant described how she cuts the paper and the importance of precision in creating the paper pattern:

What I do is I take a sheet of paper and I just do half the pattern. If you try to create two equal sides you won’t be able to, especially with appliqué patterns. So what I do is I create a quarter of the pattern and then I trace that to a half sheet. I’ll trace the quarter that I did, I’ll turn it over to reflect it and do the opposite side. Then I cut out my pattern, then it’s a half. If you fold your paper into quarters they’re not going to come out even because of the folds and the bulkiness of the paper. (6)

Making ribbonwork for a skirt requires a considerable amount of planning in preparing the motif pattern, which are cut in specific lengths depending on the skirt length and the height of the person. Generally, a single motif unit measured approximately 12 to 14 inches long and 5 to 6 inches wide. Placing two motifs vertically would measure 24 to 28 inches long and skirt lengths, in general, are approximately 30 to 34 inches long. Two participants described how the build and height of the person who will be wearing the skirt controls the length of the motif pattern and the finished ribbonwork panels:

The panels we have depend on how the woman is built. It depends on the build of the woman as to how long I make the panel around the bottom and how tall. I have nieces that are like 6’2” and one that is thin as a pencil. Her waist is like 24 inches and I wouldn’t want to make like a billowy skirt so I had to pull it down. And the design itself is anywhere from 9 inches to 14 inches and that’s how wide the panel gets. If she’s fairly thin then the design has to be thin. (10)

My patterns are usually no higher than 3 inches [in width] because I measured appliqué patterns or ribbonwork patterns I’ve seen. Most of them are 12 to 15 inches
long. Fifteen inch long ones are too long and as short as most of us are, we don’t need a 15 inch. I cut them down. I can shrink that pattern down to make it fit into a 12 inch pattern. (6)

The finished width of a single panel measures approximately 7 to 9 inches. The center front panel, made from two matching ribbonwork panels, generally measures 14 to 18 inches wide. The width of a skirt generally measured 54 to 60 inches wide, while the bottom border panel measured 42 to 44 inches in horizontal length with a series of three to four motifs. So, an 18 inch wide vertical front panel, made from two matching panels, on a 60 inch wide skirt left room for a 42 inch long horizontal bottom border thus using a 3-series motif would require a single unit motif pattern that was 12 to 14 inches long (See fig. 5.2, p. 96).

*Ribbonwork sewing and assembly process.* A variety of methods for stitching the motif into place are currently is use. Appliqué, in general, is the stitching of fabrics onto the top of a background fabric in a design configuration, and scholars have described appliqué methods as invisible stitching and decorative cross stitching usually done by hand sewing and as zigzag stitching using a sewing machine. In addition, scholars have differentiated between the reverse appliqué method—where the top fabric was cut through and the raw edges are turned under and stitched to expose the fabric underneath—and the positive appliqué method—where the top layer forms the shapes of the design. Ribbon appliqué is a contemporary method that involves cutting motifs out of fabric and then placing and sewing the motif on top to resemble a positive image.

Modern Meskwaki ribbonwork assembly process typically began with three layers consisting of 1) a muslin backing to provide support, 2) the bottom layer of two contrasting fabric strips sewn together, and 3) the top layer of two contrasting fabric strips sewn together (see fig. 5.1a). The paper pattern of the motif (see fig. 5.1b) is then traced to the top layer
a. Three layers are basted together: 1) muslin backing; 2) two fabric strips are sewn together to make the base (purple/blue); 3) two more fabric strips are sewn together (gray/yellow) and layered onto the base.

b. Cut paper pattern, bilateral symmetry.

c. The paper pattern of the motif is traced to the top layer.

d. Cutting a narrow seam allowance outside the tracing resulted in the top layer forming a design, an example of positive appliqué.

e. Cutting a narrow seam allowance inside the tracing resulted in the bottom layer forming a design, an example of reverse appliqué where bottom is revealed.

**Figure 5.1. Meskwaki ribbonwork panel assembly process**
(see fig. 5.1c). A narrow seam allowance is cut, tucked under, then appliquéd with invisible stitches, cross stitches, or machine stitches. Different appliquéd techniques result in two ribbonwork styles. Cutting a narrow seam allowance outside the tracing results in the top layer forming the design, an example of positive appliquéd (see fig. 5.1d). Another method is to cut the seam allowance on the inside of the tracing thus revealing the bottom ribbon to form the design, an example of reverse appliquéd (see fig. 5.1e). The seam allowance is cut away in small portions because of the raveling nature of woven fabric. Each technique created a different color arrangement as shown in figure 5.1d and 5.1e. Both techniques are currently used; however, participants made no mention of reverse or positive appliquéd methods. A completed a single panel generally has two motifs arranged vertically. These steps are repeated to make another matching panel in mirrored image, and then these two panels are combined to make a matched pair of a vertical full front panel for the center front of a skirt. The horizontal panel for the bottom border is made in the same manner but uses three or four motifs; the width is the same as the panel.

In general, two methods are commonly used by participants to stitch the motif in place: hand sewing and machine sewing. Participants referred to the hand sewing method as a slip stitch or invisible stitches. Participants explained ribbonwork assembly techniques:

A pattern is placed on top and then the top ribbon is trimmed and then you slip stitch that pattern onto the bottom ribbon. (5)

I tried [stitching the design] left to right to see what the difference is, but for me it was too hard to manage the material with my left hand and try to sew with my right hand. It was easier to hang on to the material, and hang on to your pattern and then stitch with your right hand going from right to left. Going from left to right was cumbersome, your hand was in the way, you couldn’t grasp the material, and you couldn’t hold it properly. So it’s easier right to left. (6)
All the participants preferred the method of sewing the motifs by hand instead of using a sewing machine. Hand sewing was described as refined, graceful, and less bulky than zigzag machine sewing. Three of the participants explained this preference:

I guess I would prefer the hand stitched because the lines seem more graceful though I know there is a lot of work to tuck that fabric in. I know it’s hard to do but ultimately they look more refined and graceful than the sewing machine. (4)

[The motifs] lay better when you sew them by hand, they don’t get bulky inside, and they straighten [the seam] as they sewed them. (2)

The hand sewn tends to flow a little bit more easily because it is just your single thread that’s tacking down the material and you can adjust your stitches however you sew, if you just sew a narrower stitch or a wider stitch and it takes longer. (6)

Hand sewn motifs were considered traditional and sacred, and they must not be touched by others as described by the participant from the Winnebago tribe. The participant described the difference in the two sewing methods used as dependent upon end use:

I think it is purpose-driven on whether or not it is hand appliquéd or machine stitched. The ones that are machine stitched are now the kinds of things that can be touched by others without crossing that sacred line because you know for a traditional garment there are things on there that are very sacred and could have ramification for the person wearing it and for the person who touched it. (10)

She explained the machine-sewn method removed the spiritual character of the garment and so the garment could be touched by others.

*Attaching ribbonwork design panels to a garment.* The completed ribbonwork panels are sewn to garments using hand sewing or machine sewing. For a skirt, approximately one and 1 ¼ yards of 100% black wool is used. The wool fabric is 58 to 60 inches wide, and though black was more common, red can be also used. The bottom border panel is attached horizontally first, and then the center front panel is attached vertically.
There are two approaches in attaching the panels to the skirt as described by participants. In one approach the wool fabric is laid flat, and then the horizontal panel for the bottom border is attached. Each single vertical panel is then attached to either side (see fig. 5.2a). The vertical sides of the wool rectangular piece are joined to create the center front thus creating a skirt (see fig. 5.2b). In another approach the wool is seamed lengthwise first, which becomes the center front as indicated by the dotted lines in figure 5.2b. The horizontal panel is then attached, and the matched pair of panels are sewn together, then attached centering over the center front seam of the wool. Some of the participants described sewing the matched vertical panels together first before attaching them onto the skirt, while others lay the fabric flat first to attach vertical panels. Participants described how the completed panels are attached to a skirt in different ways:

I usually put the bottom on first. I hem up the bottom of the skirt, then I put the bottom panel on first and then I attach the front panels. I put the left side and the right side on and then I’ll sew it together down the middle. That seems to be about the easiest way for me to do it. (6)

I lay the black material out, and then I baste the lower piece on. I divide the black [material] right down the middle and then I baste it and slip stitch it in. And then that little strip that holds the ribbonwork together, there’s a little ribbon that’s folded up, I’ll sew that on with a machine, just the top one. The bottom one doesn’t have to be sewn on, it just kind of lays there, underneath. And you’ve got to make sure its covering that black material on the bottom. Then the side panels are put on each side while it’s still laying flat. You bring them together and then you can sew with the machine, inside the material together and if you want to you can also sew up that front piece, and then across the top, then on the bottom. And then you’re all done. (5)

One participant explained her assembly method as being different from her aunt’s method of attaching the center front panel first:

My aunt puts the panels together first, then she sews that on top of the skirt, and then she does the edging. She said that is the right way. There is no one right way. There are different ways. (8)
a. Flat view of skirt before seamed. Vertical and horizontal rectangles represent ribbonwork panels made with two strips of ribbon or fabric, ovals represent motif placement. (Approximate dimensions: 60” wide, 34” long; motifs 12” to 14”)

b. Front view of completed skirt after seamed center front. Rectangles represent ribbonwork strips, ovals represent motif placement. Dotted lines indicate seam line.

Fig. 5.2. Configuration of panels and motifs.
The data indicated different processes of ribbonwork assembly. No prescribed methods of assembly appear to be in place; instead each participant used methods that they felt were easiest and most comfortable.

**Summary.** Participants displayed considerable knowledge in making ribbonwork, which requires detailed planning. According to the participants, ribbonwork begins with making the design of a selected motif on folded paper. The paper is then folded in half or quarters to produce bilateral symmetry where each side was a mirror image of the other; however, while participants made no mention of bilateral symmetry, they were aware of the mirror image as indicated by precision folding and cutting of paper to make the pattern. Participants also mentioned that the length and width of the motif is an important factor to consider in determining the length of a skirt and especially important when making a bottom border ribbonwork strip to ensure fit of motif placement. Moreover, the length of the ribbonwork panel and how many motifs are included is controlled by the length of the finished skirt, and each skirt is a custom piece that depends on the size of the person for whom the skirt is being made. Stitching and assembly varied with the individual, each using sewing methods they found comfortable, even though they may have been taught differently. These modifications in technique mean that opportunity still exists for innovation and change in the techniques of how ribbonwork is made.

Furthermore, participants described two methods of stitching the motif: the hand sewn and the machine sewn. The hand sewn technique was preferred because it was easier to control the stitches for a refined appearance. This preference for the hand sewn motif also may reflect preference for traditional methods in ribbonwork as opposed to the modern, machine-sewn technique. In addition, one participant indicated that the hand sewn method is
reserved for sacred ceremonial garments. The different techniques of assembly, as described by the participants, show how ribbonwork has become a creative and innovative response to culture change because participants were able to express creativity and preferences by changing the processes of assembly. Even though no prescribed ribbonwork production techniques are set in stone, in the end, today’s panel placement and skirt structure has a strong resemblance to skirts of the past.

**Practices and Experiences**

The second major theme describes six different practices and experiences of the Meskwaki people related to ribbonwork use today, which include uses of ribbonwork, expression of spirituality, clan colors, identity, handing down ribbonwork, and personal feelings when making or wearing ribbonwork. The data indicated that ribbonwork still has many uses and functions for the Meskwaki people and is currently used for garment decoration, ceremonial dress, and as a means of connecting with the community. Most participants have confirmed that, in their experience, spiritual beliefs are embedded in ribbonwork and worn to pay honor and respect to the Manitou, the Great Spirit. In addition, according to several participants in the this study, they use and recognize specific colors for each clan as a means of distinguishing clan identity, and the motif also serves as an emblem for identity. Given the importance of ribbonwork for cultural identity, several participants indicated that passing the knowledge of ribbonwork methods to the younger generation is vitally important. Participants willingly shared their personal feeling about ribbonwork and they clearly feel a sense of pride when making and wearing ribbonwork.

**Uses of ribbonwork.** Ribbonwork decorated dress has been used and continues to be used for ceremonies that connect the community through social roles. Ribbonwork is a
component of Meskwaki ethnic dress that is used as a means of individual, spiritual, and tribal expression.

Participants in this study were familiar with how the ribbonwork panel is used to decorate garments, and they described ribbonwork as a significant part of Meskwaki ethnic dress. Ribbonwork panels decorate skirts, aprons, leggings, bags, and blankets, and a single motif can even adorn a man’s shirt as one participant describes: “I just see it as another way of placing our designs somewhere where they can see it. Like men, they can’t wear skirts, so you can put it on their shirts” (8). Two participants shared their ideas on Meskwaki dress:

It’s a part of our way of dress; it’s part of our traditional outfit. If I talked to the young girls they would know what appliqué is. (4)

I think it’s as important as anything else in distinguishing us and carrying us through as Meskwaki because of the way we use it as a people. (6)

Ribbonwork decorated garments are currently worn for ceremonies, which are held weekly throughout the year. In addition, ribbonwork is used for funereal dress; in fact burials require the use of ribbonwork, stemming from long-standing customs of the past as indicated in Chapter Two. Ribbonwork is also used as regalia for social dancing at powwows, Native American festivals featuring singing and dancing. The Meskwaki host an annual powwow in August and also have community powwows regularly for special occasions such as graduations and Veterans Day where regalia are worn. Among the participants, all ten described using ribbonwork decorated garments for ceremonies and social dancing:

Ribbonwork is mostly worn by the Meskwaki. They use it for the social dancing and for ceremonial purposes. I bought some and I wore it for style. You got to get in style, something different, they were pretty and colorful. (2)
It’s really important because they use it for powwows and ceremonies; it’s a part of our life, part of our culture. (5)

I usually wear it to powwows to dance. It’s used in various ceremonies or different types of ceremonies and religion is, well, I don’t even know if you want to call it religion, it’s just like a way of life. (6)

It is my regalia for my traditional use or to go to a powwow. I don’t know how important it is to the tribe but to me it tells who we are because we use it for our ceremonies, the adoption and the clan ceremonies. (8)

The Ho Chunk tribe also uses ribbonwork decorated garments for ceremonies and powwows, and the Ho Chunk participant described their ethnic dress as formal attire: “The appliqué was for special occasions, special powwows, and special ceremonies. It was like formal attire; people would wear it to some ceremony.” (9)

In Meskwaki funereal practices, the deceased are dressed in their best garments as indicated in Chapter Two. One participant explained how ribbonwork garments continue to be used today for funerals:

We just follow how we dressed a long time ago. That’s how we keep going that way. It’s part of our culture. In funerals, that’s what I usually see is the appliqué outfits. When your relative dies you have to use them. You got to use them for burials and adoption. (3)

Whether in a ceremony or powwow, ribbonwork is used as a means of connecting the community. Ribbonwork decorated garments are required for use in ceremonies; however, not everyone has the skill to make ribbonwork, so ribbonwork skills are used as a way to contribute to others in the community. When a tribal member dies, the whole community is involved, from dressing the body to subsequent adoption ceremonies. Community involvement consists of making and contributing ribbonwork garments and other accessories such as moccasins, jewelry, and blankets, and community members feel a sense of satisfaction when helping others. Five of the ten participants regularly contribute ribbonwork
and accessories to other community members, and several participants described making ribbonwork for others in the community:

I knew how to make appliqué. Then other people started asking me to make them, like when somebody dies, for the adoptions, they ask me to make their appliqué. (3)

I make them for people and then when they need them for ceremonies, I give it to them, or I have people that ordered things. (5)

When someone asks you and they need help, I give it up. Then they ask me how much? I say when you are done [with ceremonies] because that is a better feeling when you help someone. Then what they return to you could be just a little blessing, it doesn’t have to be material items. I did what I was supposed to do. It is a sense of satisfaction. That is the best thing you can do. That’s what I learned from my grandparents. No need to repay. (7)

Expression of spirituality. Interviews with participants showed that spiritual beliefs are embedded in ribbonwork. The belief is that the Great Spirit recognized Meskwaki if they were in traditional dress, which is why the deceased are dressed in ribbonwork decorated garments. Similarly, wearing ribbonwork decorated garments to ceremonies is used to show honor and pay respect to the Manitou, the Great Spirit, and provide a feeling of regeneration and a connection to the past. Participants described how ribbonwork expressed spirituality:

They say that Manitou can see. He sees you dressed up when you go dance, “I see my relative dancing,” [He recognizes you]. And that gives you strength and life because he sees you as a person who is going to dress up for a ceremony. There is a good feeling in that when you go to dance. So that is why I put on my ribbonwork when I dance. That’s the only place I wear it now. (1)

In those years, like I said, they didn’t have sewing machines, they sewed them by hand. And when they dress the body, when they are going to bury them, ribbonwork has to be sewn by hand; you should not be sewing with a sewing machine. The reason for that, they had explained at the time, is Manitou knows how these are sewn. If he knows that this was sewn by sewing machine, it’s not going to be accepted. This is why we should wear ribbonwork skirts that are hand sewn and not by machine. That’s what I was told by my grandma. And they say that at ceremonies, you are supposed to be wearing a black woolen skirt when you are at a ceremony dancing because those are thick; that’s what Manitou likes to see, they always say. (2)
The youngest participant, 31 years old, also reported that she is motivated to wear ribbonwork garments as an expression of spirituality. She described how she felt wearing ribbonwork to ceremonies:

In the traditional ceremony, they tell us we have to wear those kinds of things otherwise they say that Manitou, or the Great Spirit, sees you unclothed if you don’t wear those. That’s the reason I wear them. And it kind of gives you more of a traditional feeling, you know, you can’t just go in there with American clothes because that’s not how they did it back in the old days. (8)

Moreover, the Omaha/Winnebago participant described the spiritual motivation of the wearer as a determinant for what type of ribbonwork she will make:

Sometimes when I know that an individual is not truly in the tribal mentality or the sacredness of it, I will do ribbonwork that they can allow others to touch, that has nothing to do with what is on there or in their tribe. It’s just a generic. (10)

Garments used for ceremonies are considered sacred; therefore, the wearer must not let others touch their clothing for fear of spiritual contamination.

*Clan Colors.* As discussed in Chapter Two, historically, color in ribbonwork was used to identify clan groups, and specific colors were assigned to each clan (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). For example, the Bear clan is green, the Fox clan is red, and the Thunder clan is yellow. The colors green and red were major colors that suggested tribal identity the same way that the colors red, white, and blue stand for the United States. The colors green and red also have spiritual significance where green symbolized the Manitou and red symbolized his people. For instance, the Meskwaki flag has two bands, a green band, always on top, standing for the Manitou and a red band that stands for his people, always below the green. I was once admonished by elders for sewing a green and red motif to a shirt that had the red on top, illustrating that the significance of these major colors continues today. The dominant
colors of red and green were, and are, commonly found in ceremonial garments and accessories and less often in garments for social dancing.

Specific clan colors are incorporated into dress in various ways. Dress and paint on the face is still used today to identify clan and tribal membership. Although a variety of colors are used throughout dress, the clan color is the identifying feature. For example, a green ribbon strip could be included in making the ribbonwork panel, and a shirt could be green or have green ribbons. Two participants described the use of colors as a means of clan identification:

The ones that I know are special colors for the Old Bear. They wear green, different shades of green, the Old Bear descendents. Like when you bury them you have to dress them in green, everything has to be green. Even a green blanket and ribbon on the moccasins maybe, and they use green here [pointing to side of eyes]. And then the Fox clan used red. Red material, mostly red and they used red rouge on their moccasins and red rouge over here [points to side of eyes]. Those are the two I know that have special colors. When we had our culture meetings we talked about this. What are the colors for Wolf clan? What are the colors for Thunder clan? What are the colors for Fish clan and other clans? So we gathered up some elders. Brown is for Wolf clan, brownish tan, and the Thunder clan is yellow. Thunder is the same as Eagle; they use yellow. (2)

Grandpa came from the [Bear clan] family so he was a descendent of a chief, so their color is green. (5)

While still in effect to a certain extent, the use of clan colors has diminished, as described by one participant. (6) She was forty-nine years old at the time of this study and was well known for her skill in ribbonwork assembly. She had been making ribbonwork garments for twelve years for members of the community so she was aware of clan color use, and she indicated that the use of color to identify clan was not as common as it once was:

I know a long time ago there used to be specific patterns, specific for different clans. Like if you were in this clan, you couldn’t use this kind of design or this kind of color. Like somebody told me “Now, when your doing this, green is chief colors.” But now, green, you can use as Bear clan colors. And so, some people, and I heard
this from two different people, that some of the colors that are this clan colors are almost the same as this clan colors. And somebody else will tell me something different, so I don’t know if they were confused or if they really were those colors. I know at one point there was certain designs that certain clans would wear and there were certain colors that were supposed to go with certain clans. But I think over time they’ve kind of gotten mixed up and now anybody wears anything. (6)

Clan colors have continued to have significance for the Winnebago/Omaha participant and the Ho Chunk participant. They described the importance of using clan colors in their respective tribes:

The colors I choose are of a particular clan. They are mixed and matched but it is there within that range of clan colors. The younger ones, its all over the place, turquoise whatever else, turquoise is not one of the colors we have in our clan. So when I start thinking of the age and the maturity of the individual then those determine the color. (10)

Each clan has their colors. Bear clan has green and Wolf clan is black and gray. Different clans have their different colors. So in making the appliqué, you would use that particular color. The main color would represent that person’s clan. The colors depend on who you are making it for. If you are making it for a Bear clan, then you have to pick out colors for Bear clan. The colors that are used in appliqué work are dependent on who the item is being made for. You can have whatever color goes well with the appliqué, whatever color you want to make it but the main color is there. It tells you it is Bear clan; it tells you it is Wolf clan. The person that is making the appliqué decides which colors would go well with gray, black, or green. But the clan color is the most important and widely used throughout the design. (9)

In contrast, using colors to identify clan or tribal membership is now not as prevalent for the Meskwaki as it was in the past. In fact, the youngest participant was not even aware of the use of clan colors for ribbonwork. However, the older generation (60+) indicated its use in some of the traditional ceremonies.

**Identity as a function of Meskwaki dress.** Dress, as described by scholars, can function as a communicator of age, gender, social class, affiliations, and religion, and ethnic dress, in particular, is worn by members of a group to distinguish themselves from others by focusing on differentiation and to communicate identity (Eicher and Sumberg 1995).
Neill (2000) described ribbonwork as an emblem of ethnicity and a significant marker of ethnic identity. Similarly, several of the participants discussed how ribbonwork is used for identity. For example, participants expressed a need to identify with their own tribes and distinguish themselves from other tribes, especially when attending powwows. Participants explained that wearing ribbonwork gives them a sense of self and communicated to others where they come from:

When wearing my outfit, it is showing something that Meskwaki wear. (1)

To me the ribbonwork skirt said more Meskwaki and I wanted people to know that I was Meskwaki when I danced. (6)

In powwows, when I’m out there, it let’s everyone know who I am, and where I am from. Ribbonwork, that’s like… that’s us, that’s Meskwaki. It’s really important to the tribe because without those we wouldn’t be who we are. We would be just like any other Native American because it just tells who we are. (8)

*Handing down ribbonwork.* Culture is learned and shared by groups as members of their society that include technology, beliefs, and behavior (Ferraro 2006). As a cultural feature, ribbonwork techniques and dress have been handed down from generation to generation of Meskwaki people. Two participants who were 71 years old (2) and 63 years old (4) at the time of this study described how ribbonwork was handed down to them:

I prefer the hand sewn because of how I was taught; I was told it should be sewn by hand instead of a sewing machine. (2)

I just know that they wore them, my grandma wore them, my mother wore them, and my aunties wore them. (4)

The youngest participant, 31 years old, at the time of this study, had a similar experience in how she was taught:

I make it to use at the powwows and the traditional ceremonies and basically it is just the way I was taught. My girls, they all have one. It’s just normal, I guess, it’s what I grew up with. (8)
Passing the knowledge of ribbonwork techniques to the younger generation was important to the participants. At the time of this study, one participant (6) age 49, had three daughters in their twenties. Another participant (2), age 71, had several grand-daughters. Both expressed the importance of teaching the younger generation in order to preserve the ribbonwork techniques and dress:

I thought this was something I could learn, that I could be helpful and plus I have three daughters. They could learn how to do this. This is something that I think as Meskwaki women, we need to be teaching our kids. (6)

[My granddaughter dances jingle dress\[11\]] That’s fine. Because they like that style of how they dance. Just let them go out dancing. But eventually you explain it to them, you know, the traditional way. Now they say “Oh, that’s old-fashioned.” They want to stay with new styles. (2)

The youngest participant at age 31 had two daughters. She reported that she has taught them about ribbonwork and its uses and that the participant herself was taught by her grandmother and aunt. She described passing the knowledge to her daughters: “I always tell my girls how important that is; I’m trying to teach them how to make it, too. Nowadays it’s just about keeping my kids educated about our traditions.” (8) Participants were well aware that ribbonwork may become lost. Participants described their concerns in losing this skill because not enough young people are now learning the technique:

They always told us someday we will not have it. Whatever we have won’t be there. And what are we going to do when we don’t have that skill. Not enough know how to do it by hand. The ones I know are older women. I don’t see the younger women doing it. (7)

It is something we should pass on, ribbon work appliqué. It is very important to the women, to have something to wear. You are proud to wear it. For the future, it is questionable. There are some younger women learning how. Without you people

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11 Jingle dress is a traditional Ojibwa garment that has gained popularity among other tribes and is used at powwows by various tribes.
your age teaching the girls then it is going to be lost. You got to teach, you people. At our age, we tried to teach the young people things, the ways, the outfits. It is questionable about the future; it seems they are made carelessly. They used to be very careful, of course they had to hand stitch; you had to be careful. Today, it seems as though it was made in a hurry. (1)

Using the sewing machine to attach the motifs has become a convenient and fast way of appliquéing ribbonwork, but one participant believed that the ribbonwork skill might be lost due to the use of the sewing machine:

The person who did this was lazy. That’s what I think, it is more of a convenience this machine stitch and not enough hand. I think it is that idea where they don’t want to take that time to do it by hand. That’s being too much of a hurry. If you notice some of these girls they are not into that. It gets in the way; they don’t do it the old way. They don’t want to learn it. By the time they want to learn it, it might be too late. (7)

In general, the continuity of ribbonwork is dependent on teaching the younger generation in order to preserve their culture, including dress. One participant shared her thoughts and concerns on the future of ribbonwork of the Meskwaki people:

In terms of the future, it depends on what we teach our kids or who is teaching the kids. It’s a question for every tribe. How do you preserve and maintain what you think is important to your tribe. How do you do that? How far down the line are we going to continue seeing the appliqué skirt as part of our traditional outfit? I don’t know when. (4)

*Feelings when wearing and making ribbonwork.* Ribbonwork represents a significant investment of time. Since each one is custom made; each one is distinct. The motifs are unique as well. For these reasons, wearing ribbonwork inspires a feeling of pride, and one participant described ribbonwork as pieces of artwork. She described how she feels when wearing her ribbonwork skirt:

I feel proud of them. They are beautiful. I know they are a lot of work. I feel like you’re wearing pieces of artwork because each one is so unique in terms of design and in terms of the choice of colors that person has used. That’s one thing I noticed about appliqués. There is such a variety in textures and materials that they use to
make the outfits with. If you are looking at outfits at a powwow, including ribbonwork skirts, they are all unique. Not one the same. (4)

Creating ribbonwork also brings about a sense of pride, satisfaction, accomplishment, and personal gratification for those who make it for themselves and others. Participants shared their feelings when making ribbonwork:

I feel like I’m helping when I am making their stuff. And I try not to make mistakes. I feel proud when I am done with it. (3)

I haven’t danced in quite awhile but today it is much more meaningful. There’s a pride in having completed a ribbonwork or your ribbon appliqué, so you wear it with pride. (5)

When I make it, it gives me that sense of…I did that myself. When I see my kids wearing it, what I made, it makes me feel good and I’m trying to teach them how to make it too. (8)

If I know what the whole symbolism means, I can just get into the rhythm of it and I just feel like, you know, there’s nothing else in this world but this thing that is in front of me and I feel complete. I don’t know how it makes anybody else feel but it just establishes a rhythm, sewing along, pulling all those things together. (10)

Wearing and making ribbonwork clearly evokes feelings of pride. It represents an investment of time, accomplishment, and expertise that was even understood by the two participants who do not make it.

Summary. The major theme of this section described six specific practices and experiences of the participants related to ribbonwork, which include uses of ribbonwork, expression of spirituality, clan colors, identity, handing down ribbonwork, and personal feelings when making or wearing ribbonwork. The data revealed that ribbonwork plays an important role in the way of life of the Meskwaki people. Participants described the uses of ribbonwork decorated garments in the Meskwaki cultural setting and that cultural practices require wearing ribbonwork for ceremonies, burial dress, and social dancing.
The Meskwaki are a distinct culture group with their own system of organization based on the ideologies of spiritual beliefs that are embedded in ribbonwork, rendering the garment sacred. When worn for ceremonies, ribbonwork is an expression of spirituality and a way to show honor and respect to the Manitou, the Great Spirit, as indicated by the data, and wearing ribbonwork to ceremonies evokes feelings of regeneration and a continuity of the past. The social organization establishes the social roles and functions for its members, and the data revealed that social roles still today advocate sharing ribbonwork expertise and providing ribbonwork without expecting payment. For the participants, great satisfaction is found in fulfilling this social role of a ribbonwork maker.

Ribbonwork garments are a form of ethnic dress used as a non-verbal means of communication (Eicher and Sumberg 1995), and specific colors are associated with each clan as a means of distinguishing clan identity. The data revealed that clan color usage is not as common as it once was; however, the Winnebago and Ho Chunk tribes continue to use clan colors as a special component of their ribbonwork. The major Meskwaki colors, green and red, communicate tribal and clan membership and are still used in funereal dress. Furthermore, as indicated by participants, ribbonwork is a significant visible mark of ethnicity and communicates to other tribes that they are Meskwaki.

Culture is learned and shared by groups as members of their society (Ferraro 2006), and the data showed that ribbonwork methods were taught to the participants and the younger generation is passing on this knowledge as well. Learning and sharing ribbonwork establishes a connection between community members, and transmitting knowledge about ribbonwork to the next generation is imperative to the Meskwaki culture. However, some of the participants indicated that not enough young people are learning this skill. Continuity of
ribbonwork is dependent on teaching the younger generation in order to preserve and maintain their culture which includes dress. Ribbonwork represents a significant investment of time, a highly skilled art form, and an embodiment of Meskwaki culture. Participants indicated that ribbonwork is a source of personal gratification; it gave them a sense of self, a sense of pride, and a sense of accomplishment.

Design and Motifs

The third major theme describes ribbonwork designs or motifs. The motif is a single unit of design that is repeated throughout the panels of ribbonwork often called “designs” by the participants. Participants described the sources and inspiration of their patterns, the styles and types of motifs, and the symbolism in the motifs, and, as they reported, inspiration for creating patterns comes from the individuals’ interpretation of plant life that was generally curvilinear, meaning it had a rounded characteristic. The symbolism of the motif, generally, is a record of edible plant sources of the past. A cut-paper pattern is the first step in the ribbonwork assembly process, and was described as critical in conveying the symbolism that translates into ribbonwork. In general, the process of ribbonwork consists of tracing, cutting, and sewing these motifs onto the design fabric using one of several sewing methods to create panels. Six of the ten participants make their own paper patterns for the motif through various means.

Sources of patterns. There were two sources for motif patterns that were described by participants: existing paper patterns and ribbonwork samples, both of which were handed down from the previous generation. Participants described using old patterns inherited from the previous generation, and old patterns are sometimes duplicated or are manipulated and reworked. In addition, new patterns are created by combining isolated parts of two old
patterns. One participant described how she used the stockpile of patterns she received from her grandmother:

> When [Grandma] was finished with the pattern, she’d throw it in the box, and then make herself a new one. Or if she had a favorite pattern in that box, she would retrace it. Well, when she died, that was one of the things I wanted, her box of patterns. So that’s where a lot of mine come from. When she threw them in there they would get all wrinkled up together. So I took spray starch and ironed them out then I put them between plastic and I took pictures of them and that’s where the patterns I have come from. You can interchange them. You can use pieces of other patterns to create a new pattern. But I never actually have gotten bored to create my own yet. (5)

Paper patterns that were handed down had special meaning; the patterns are a way to remember family members, as described by two participants:

> I use my grandma’s old patterns, or my aunt’s old patterns. I try to keep them in the family or something because we have pictures of my grandma in some of her appliqués. I just copy them because they are meaningful to me. (8)

> My grandmother gave me the paper patterns. I will probably try to make something later on, I don’t know when, but I just keep them because they were my grandmothers, I know they were hers, and I know she worked with stuff, making things. (4)

Old ribbonwork decorated garments were also handed down, and often patterns are created from the motif of ribbonwork from the previous generation. One participant is well known for his artistic abilities in beadwork and making moccasins. He made ribbonwork but is now primarily focused on beadwork, and his beadwork incorporated ribbonwork motifs inspired from his grandmothers ribbonwork. He described how he used handed down ribbonwork samples as a source of patterns:

> I already had an idea just by seeing the older patterns of grandma’s. I just incorporated it. Most of the things I do come from patterns of ribbonwork because it goes all over, that stuff, those patterns. Most of the things I do come from patterns of ribbonwork. (7)
Existing patterns that came from grandmothers held significance for the people that used them; it was described as a way to remember them and to keep the tradition within the family, as in an heirloom. For example, I once made a pattern for someone using a variation of her great-grandmother’s motif taken from a picture; the motif had great significance for her.

Sources of inspiration. Some of the participants were creative enough to make their own patterns. Inspirations for patterns come from nature, more specifically from plant life—flowers, leaves, vines, trees—images found in the natural environment where they lived. A Meskwaki skirt dated 1885 had motifs with curvilinear form (see fig. 3.13), and according to Torrence and Hobbs (1989), curvilinear motifs began to appear in ribbonwork around 1900. Participants described how they are inspired by the natural environment when making their patterns:

My daughter’s mother-in-law told me just look at the leaves, there’s all kind of designs. So I look at the leaves, the kind of shape they are. She said that’s how she got her patterns. So I tried that. It’s hard to make a design. (3)

I look outside. I look at the leaves because that’s how the designs are. (8)

I asked [an elder]. She sat down and started drawing a pattern and she said, “Now look, you look out here and you see this, then you can add that,” and so that’s what I’ve done with a lot of patterns. I create my own patterns by looking at the leaves and stuff, the way they lay, the vines, the trees, how the trees go because it’s all in nature. She said it’s all part of nature. Then I thought about that for a long time. When I actually started doing it myself, I could really see what she was talking about. And so it got easier for me, to create my own patterns, so that’s where I get all my patterns, just looking around, just sitting here [gestures out her window]. (6)

It is all incorporated in there; they just look outside. That’s the way it is; you just look outside. You see all the patterns out there. It’s no big mystery. People put too much into something that is simple. (7)

The Ho Chunk also used plants as inspiration for designs:
In making appliqué we, more or less, make designs, floral designs, leaves that are familiar to our area. What I saw is more floral and leaves. (9)

*Styles and types of motifs.* The unique style of Meskwaki motifs resembles abstract forms of flowers, leaves, stems, and vines. This abstract artistic style of flora appeared rounded and curved. According to Torrence and Hobbs (1989), beadwork patterns used abstract floral designs (see figures 3.4 and 3.5) which began to occur around 1865. Ribbonwork motifs also used curvilinear motifs in abstract floral designs (see fig. 3.18) reminiscent of the floral beadwork designs (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). The use of this artistic style in appliquéd beadwork became the accepted mode of applied decoration for the Meskwaki and also resulted in the transfer of this artistic style to ribbonwork (Torrence and Hobbs 1989). Participants described the curvilinear nature of flora designs:

The designs I’m familiar with are more floral or Woodland style design of leaves, sculptured leaves and stems, and flowers. (4)

The Meskwaki are more, what I know is usually a floral pattern, flowers, leaves. Sometimes you’ll see hearts in there, you know, a heart inside the leaf or a leaf shaped like a heart and I don’t know if there’s a significance to it, but I noticed that most Meskwaki have flowers and vines. (5)

Most of those are like leaves, some of these leaves you see are incorporated into ribbonwork. Have you ever seen those ones that have three? That’s from a flower. When you look at it one of those leaves, when it’s turned up, that’s when you see that ridge. That’s what you got to look at. (7)

I try to make the floral designs, kind of like the plants, fruits and stuff like that. (8)

The curvilinear nature of the abstract flora was recognized by participants as a uniquely Meskwaki design. All of the participants indicated they could identify a motif as Meskwaki based on the abstract floral style and that the Meskwaki motifs were simpler and less elaborate than other tribes. The participants were also able to identify a motif as non-Meskwaki, but most were unable to pinpoint the non-Meskwaki tribe as summarized in the
following: “I probably wouldn’t know whose is whose but I think I would know that they are not Meskwaki.” Participants described these differences in motifs:

[It is] based on the pattern, sometimes the way it’s sewn together because some of the other tribes, they make theirs much wider than the Meskwaki and sometimes that will tell me. (5)

First of all, I think our skirts, the Meskwaki skirts, are much more floral than maybe the ones in Oklahoma. That is just a guess. Winnebago, there is something a little different about theirs but I don’t know what that is. (4)

We kind of do the same thing, I guess, but over there [Ho Chunk] they are different, like they were more work, more fancy. Some were layers and rows of designs, ours are simpler. (3)

One participant compared Meskwaki style with the southern tribes:

[The] Sauk and southerners, theirs are more geometric. They are pointier, straighter; they’re not so much the arches, curves, circles, and leaves that we are. Theirs are more geometric than the natural type of design; I guess that’s what you would call ours. (6)

Participants described the design or the motif as the identifier that distinguishes them from other tribes. Two participants described the motif, or design:

I think everybody sees the floral designs in the appliqué as Meskwaki. Each tribe has their different designs and how they do it, so you can probably tell the difference. (8)

It is true that some of the designs are distinct to this tribe; if you look closely they are. And it would show you where you are from. The design is unique. Just like when they use the Meskwaki pattern, that is one of our identities for our womenfolk, it is their style. (7)

Meskwaki floral motifs can also be transferred to other non-Meskwaki regalia. One participant, who also made beadwork, transferred a Meskwaki style pattern to non-Meskwaki regalia. She described how she used the pattern:

[My daughter] wanted something Meskwaki; she said she wanted appliqué and something Meskwaki. I created a little appliqué pattern for her and I beaded that design on her cape. She said, “I want people to know I’m Meskwaki,” so that’s what I did. I beaded for her a little Meskwaki style appliqué. (6)
In general, motif styles are an abstract representation of natural plants found in the environment around the participants, and this natural style is recognized as a Meskwaki style that could be differentiated from other tribes based on the shape and simplicity of the design.

*Symbolism in design motifs.* Motifs are a representation of flora, but one participant described how some designs are also a visual record of edible plants sources that reflect a way of life no longer practiced:

The Sauk use the water lily, the bulb, they cook it. It would be like our way of potatoes. The wild potatoes, the flower, you can see on some designs. Where that potato comes from there are little white flowers. And the leaves are pretty. The corners are nice. It represents the flower. It was pretty and at the same time it was a necessity to know that design, then they could find the potatoes. Like some of the plants we use, some of the older patterns you will see berries, strawberries and all that stuff. That’s where you see the nature. It will show you what is edible. They will go so far as to show you what the leaves will look like and incorporate into the pattern. What we see; what we can use. Some of them have the leaf patterns on them. Some of them can be used for tea. (7)

The Omaha/Winnebago participant described Meskwaki designs as floral and reflected on symbolisms of other tribes:

The Meskwaki use a lot of florals; there are few geometrics. So there are definitely differences. There are symbolisms that are unique to each tribe although there are similarities. Like the Winnebago use the lily, the stylized lily. So do the Meskwaki. The Omaha do now; theirs are more flowers that are open. There is a strawberry. Strawberry is also done in a lot of beadwork but the strawberry can be used on the ribbonwork. That’s used by the Potawatomi, the Meskwaki, and the Winnebago. The maple leaf is done, not the Winnebago but the Miami, the Potawatomi, and the Meskwaki. (10)

*Summary.* The major theme for this section described the sources and inspiration for ribbonwork motif patterns, the styles and types of motifs, and the symbolism in the motifs. The motif, called “designs” by participants, is a decorative design sewn onto a piece of fabric to create ribbonwork. The data showed that motif sources came from creating original
patterns, from existing patterns or from ribbonwork samples. The latter two were handed down from the previous generation and can be manipulated into many configurations to create new patterns. These patterns hold special meaning for those who use them, and the patterns are a way to remember the motifs as an heirloom. Six of the participants could create their own design for patterns inspired by the natural environment, and, as indicated by the data, those that have created their own patterns drew inspiration from flora. The self created motifs are the individuals’ interpretation of plant life, which are generally curvilinear, or rounded.

The data indicated also that the motif could be a visual representation and documentation of edible plant sources of the past. Motifs were described as having curves resembling stylized flora such as flowers, leaves, stems, and vines. The data also revealed that Meskwaki style motifs set them apart from other tribes based on the shape and simplicity of the design, an example of ethnic dress (Eicher and Sumberg 1995). The next section will describe changes that have affected ribbonwork.

*Change*

This fourth major theme describes changes in ribbonwork and dress, changes in design and motifs, and changes due to availability of resources. Ribbonwork was used by very few until the late 1930’s. When they came into use, early skirts were worn by adult women with panels that hung down the side rather than the center front of today, and the early skirts often had two rows of plain ribbon that changed to a ribbonwork panel. Early motifs were geometric in shape in smaller panels as compared with the curvilinear nature of the motifs and wider panels of today. Early on, colors that were chosen for ribbonwork panels were based on clan colors and clan symbolism; whereas, today’s color choices are
based on personal preference. Over the years, changes in availability of resources resulted in changes in how ribbons were used and in how the panels appeared due to the sewing machine and the wide availability of fabrics.

**Changes in use of ribbonwork.** Today, ribbonwork decorated garments are used as a form of ethnic dress and worn for ceremonies, funerals, and as regalia for social dancing at powwows. However, the older generation recalled that until the late 1930’s ribbonwork was worn by few and the majority of women wore the two-piece outfit, a simpler form of dress worn by Meskwaki women in the early 20th century and which is still worn today. As previously mentioned, the two-piece outfit consisted of a blouse and skirt made of calico or other cotton material. Based on the participants’ descriptions, the two-piece cloth was worn not only for ceremonies and powwows but also for everyday dress. A 1921 picture of a family shows the style of dress. The young girl in the picture (see fig. 3.22, 2nd from the right) is my grandmother who told me many times that this was how they dressed when she was young. As indicated by the participants, ribbonwork became more frequent after the 1930’s. However, Meskwaki skirts dated 1885 and 1930 (see Figures 3.13 and 3.18, respectively) show highly developed forms of ribbonwork. It is not known why ribbonwork skirts were seen infrequently by the participants.

Two participants who, at the time of this study, were 85 years old (1) and 71 years old (2) described the two-piece outfits:

When I was young, at ceremonies and powwow, for Meskwaki women, there wasn’t much appliqué, just two pieces, made out of rayon, satin, or thin gabardine. That’s what they wore. Ribbonwork just became popular, probably in the late 1930’s or early 1940’s. Before then it was not used much. (1)
First time I ever noticed ribbonwork was probably in the early 1940’s because all I saw before that was two-piece outfits. My grandma always wore two-piece outfits and I had two-piece outfits myself which was probably about 1945. (2)

The participant from the HoChunk tribe, who was 67 at the time of this study, described similar dress in her family: “So in my family they wore the two-piece outfit made out of cotton material. The two-piece outfit was daily attire.” (9) As indicated by the participants, the early 1940’s marked the change in the frequency of ribbonwork.

Two participants also recalled wearing the two-piece cloth as young girls in the 1940’s. One described ribbonwork as worn by adult women: “Just the women had the appliqué skirts.” (3) Another described how young girls did not wear ribbonwork: “It seems like when I was growing up little girls didn’t wear that much ribbonwork. (4).

Furthermore, one participant described the transition from wearing the two-piece cloth to a ribbonwork skirt when she became a teenager in the 1950’s:

[Ribbonwork skirts] were special, because when you’re a little girl, you would start off with the little two-piece dresses, you know, the ribbons and the little gathers at the bottom. Those are nice but when you become a teenager you want a ribbonwork because it made you more grown-up. My other friends had the same little dresses we did, and then as you got a little older, in junior high maybe, by then you had a ribbonwork. (5)

Today, younger girls are wearing ribbonwork skirts as described by one participant:

I’ve noticed lately there are a lot more young people wearing this. It is good in a sense that maybe there are more young girls that want to be traditional dancers. But it seems like when I was growing up little girls didn’t wear that much ribbonwork. I don’t remember wearing appliqué when I was younger. They do now, I’ve seen them. So if it brings people out, if they like the way they look, and if they feel good in whatever they are wearing, that is okay by me. For me I try to be as old school as I can be. I’m old school myself. (4)

Between the early uses of ribbonwork and today, a change took place in how the panel was worn—from the side to the center front. One participant, who is 71 years old,
described how her aunt wore the skirt so that the panel was on the side rather than center front:

I used to go with my aunt when she went to a ceremony, then that’s when I noticed she had ribbon appliqué and she wore it on the side. Not in the front, just plain ribbon, on the border. And the ribbonwork was kind of narrow too, you know, not as wide as this, they are kind of narrow and then they had them on the side, not in the front. (2)

Today, the Ho Chunk women occasionally wear ribbonwork skirts with the panel on the side rather than center front. The participant from the Ho Chunk tribe described a change in the way ribbonwork skirts were worn. Born in 1943, she remembered when the panel would hang from the side:

As far as I can remember, I remember them putting it on the side. A long time ago they used to hang it on the side. Later on, a photographer was taking pictures and asked one of the ladies to put that in the front so he could get a better picture of the design of the skirt. And it seemed like that sort of took off, just because a photographer wanted to see the full design of the skirt. They started placing it in front. The original way was to have [the panel] hang on the right side [of the skirt]. (9)

Wearing the skirt with the panel in the front became the accepted mode of dress through the process of cultural authentication where selected items, or ideas, become transformed so that they become meaningful to the borrowing culture group and results in change in dress (Erekosima and Eicher 1981).

Changes in designs and motifs. Changes occurred in the panel and motifs: from a narrow panel with geometric shapes to the current abstract flora of today’s motifs; from a plain two ribbon border to the bottom ribbonwork panel; and in color use based on personal preference rather than using clan colors.

Early ribbonwork skirts of the late 1930’s and early 1940’s were described as having a narrower panel in the center front and two rows of plain ribbon parallel to the bottom hem
with German silver brooches between the ribbons. Participants did not say when the bottom ribbonwork panel appeared, but the plain two-ribbon border was considered the “original style.” One participant, who was 71 years old at the time of this study, remembered early ribbonwork skirts and described them in this way:

The original ribbonwork that I saw, the elderly ladies would wear. When I was young, it wasn’t wide, it was narrow. Then they had wide *sannibah* [wide plain ribbon] on the bottom; they didn’t have the appliqué on the bottom. Appliqué work on the bottom just came in recently because they didn’t have it before. They just had the wide ribbons. That’s the way I used to see them. And when they want to be fancy they would have the *sugahoons* [German silver brooches] in between. But it wasn’t wide down the center. The way Meskwaki style would be is all narrow. I don’t know where they got these real wide ones. The bottom they never really had them when I was young. So that is the original style. (1)

Another participant described the “older style” that had the two rows of wide ribbon parallel to the bottom and the change to a ribbonwork panel:

You have the two panels in the middle and then you have two wider ribbons running parallel on the bottom, then you would have those *sugahoons* [silver brooches] either in between or on top. To me that is the older style, that’s the one I like. And nowadays, it seems like a lot of the appliqués have it on the bottom. That’s the major change I’ve noticed. (4)

Current ribbonwork skirts have a panel that borders the bottom and the motifs resemble abstract flora. Early versions of designs within the panel, like the 1930’s era ribbonwork skirts, had a geometric design in the form of diamonds:

Another style, it is lost, are the little diamonds. You very seldom see those. That’s an old style. I used to have one but when I was adopted I had to take it, I didn’t get to keep it. And it had just ribbon on the bottom. It didn’t have the panel all around. Just like I said that came in late. There have been lots of changes. (1)

The 1930 skirt (see fig. 3.18) shows a panel with the floral motifs, which may mean that geometric diamonds and floral motifs may have been made concurrently.
Current ribbonwork has a wide variety of colors, and participants now choose colors for their ribbonwork panels based on personal preference without mentioning the use of clan color symbolism. The participant who was 85 years at the time of this study preferred darker colors as opposed to the pastels:

To me, personally, the basic colors is [sic] what I use, like blue, dark blue, red, dark green, black, you know colors like that, sometimes purple. I don’t go for pink, light blue. The dark ones are really pretty. (1)

Other participants choose the colors for their ribbonwork simply because they like them.

One woman explained it in this way: “They just used the colors they have when they go uptown and buy material and they choose what color they think would be good with that color.” (2) Several other participants described their color choices similarly:

I usually go shopping, then I see a nice color and I buy several to match. (3)

I would just pick four of my favorite colors. Let’s see, I had thought about it, I like sort of a deep royal blue, and a deep red, not an orange red but a blue red. That would be one panel. The other panel would be maybe a fuchsia and purple or something like that. That’s my first inclination. (4)

Actually, I like reds, yellows, blues and bright colors, peacock blue, magenta and then, sometimes, it depends on what kind of pattern. I like greens, olive greens, light greens, fall colors and then sometimes someone would want a spring color. Spring colors, I always think of flowers, so there’ll be different shades of yellows and pinks and light blues and so on. (5)

There are certain colors I like to use. I like to use pastel colors, like lavender with a purple, and a pink with maybe, a deep rose or something, those kinds of colors. I like them to almost blend, you know, where it’s really close, I don’t like to get too wild because people aren’t ready for that yet. (6)

One participant described “modern” colors, which she refers to as contemporary colors, as brighter than the colors of older ribbonwork:

I have three skirts. I have a very old skirt that my grandmother gave me. I don’t know where she got it but I know it’s old because I’ve had it since I was like a teenager. Then I have more of a modern one. Then my mom gave me another one so
the latter two are much newer, within the past ten years. They look modern, too, the colors. The one I bought has a fuchsia and chartreuse together. It’s beautiful. I like it that’s why I bought it. And the other one is kind of a deep pink and a rose pink together. To me those are more contemporary colors. The other one that I have that my grandma gave me; it’s kind of a blue and a pink, light blue and a green. Not bright at all. I don’t remember our skirts being very bright like they are now. (4)

One participant attributed the change in the number of colors and color use as to the age of the individual. She stated that the younger women have different color preferences that the older women:

As long as it’s still around, it’s positive. As long as you have that ribbonwork around, it’s a positive thing. It just gets newer and more modern. Maybe the dancer only likes two colors or three colors. The people are younger and so their color preferences, the younger ones sometimes will only want three so I think age has a bearing on it too. Usually the older women that request ribbonwork want the four colors. (5)

Personal preference guided the participants in choosing colors for ribbonwork, and the selection from a wide variety of fabric colors led to innovation and experimentation in color combinations as one participant described: “I like to experiment with a few things and try that. I probably will, just for my own use, sometimes it depends on what mood I’m in.” (6)

Changes in availability of resources. Changes in availability of resources resulted in changes in how ribbons were used, and in how the panels appeared due to the sewing machine and the wide availability of fabrics.

Historically, the lack of monetary resources of the Meskwaki affected ribbon use because “ribbon was very expensive. They called it san nibah, it was wide ribbon,” (5) and “They didn’t have too much ribbonwork on the shirts. In those years, they didn’t have that much money to buy different colors. (2)

One participant, who is 85 years old at the time of this study, described the 1940’s Meskwaki women’s dress as simple, without the shawl, bag, or fans that are more common
today: “There’s not a lot to it, the Meskwaki outfit. No shawl, no bag, just a big handkerchief, no fan, no medallions. I saw an old picture and they had those white necklaces like the Winnebago wear. This was here a long time ago. I saw that in one of the old pictures. It’s very similar to Winnebago.” (1)

During our interview, this same participant showed me a ribbon shirt which she described as representative of the “old style.” The red satin shirt had double rows of various widths (1/4”, 1/2”, and 7/8”) of ribbons over the shoulders, across the front and back yoke, on either side of the center front neck placket, on the side placket, and along the hem. The ribbons dangled from the yoke, center front, and sides. What was most striking was the array of different colored ribbons:

Meskwaki shirts, [back] then, didn’t have to match. Elderly women would make them with just any color they had, since we didn’t have the resources, a long time ago, to buy certain kind of ribbons. They put any kind of ribbon on. It was pretty when they used them in that way. We had the shirt where ribbons didn’t match, an old shirt. That’s the way the ribbon shirts used to be; that’s the way they made them. You’d be surprised at how pretty they are. They had different colors and on the bottom they had two strips. This is what it looks like on the bottom [proceeds to draw two stripes representing the hem of a shirt]. Very few people know it. (1)

At this point of the interview, she sent her daughter to find the shirt:

See how it is, that is the old style. Nothing really matches. See how colorful it is? It doesn’t really match anything but it is pretty. They put that on me when they adopted me. It’s colorful.” (1)

The lack of monetary resources to purchase ribbons resulted in cost-effective, and often innovative, methods of ribbon use. According to Ferraro, cultures are subject to change as a result of internal or external forces (2006). As seen in ribbonwork, change can occur when material or economic resources become available to a given culture group.
Although not known why, the wide ribbon, called *sannibah*, used for creating ribbonwork became unavailable in fabric stores. Participants gave reasons for this change based on what they know or what they were told:

I guess long time ago they actually did use ribbon; this is what I was told, wide ribbon that apparently you can’t find anymore. I was visiting with my mom one time and she said that there used to be very wide ribbons and that she hasn’t seen them lately in fabric shops, I guess that’s where you would buy. (4)

I know long ago, maybe in the 1800’s, ribbons came in wide swatches that were very conducive to doing ribbonwork. They were wide enough. The ribbons began to shrink, so the widest maybe you have is about 2 inches now. There’s not much you can actually do with ribbons that small. (10)

A long time ago you could buy ribbon this wide [spans about 4”]. That’s what you used to make ribbonwork. You can’t find ribbon that wide anymore. That’s why they turned to satin material. So they probably changed it because it wasn’t available anymore. (3)

Ribbonwork today uses fabric to make ribbons, and fabric “ribbons” were substituted for the wide ribbon used to make ribbonwork because it was no longer available in stores, according to the participants. Taffeta fabric appeared in ribbonwork in 1970 as shown in a Meskwaki skirt (see fig. 3.20), but in the 1990’s, taffeta fabric became harder to find in fabric stores as described by the participants. Women would travel to surrounding cities to look for taffeta fabric only to find a limited selection:

Taffeta is harder and harder to get a hold of; sometimes they only have three colors. So then the one color would be on the bottom and then the two colors on top, whichever look better. I noticed a lot of people using three colors now. Taffeta is used in place of that ribbon. It’s getting harder and harder to get. You have to order it from the fabric store. A lot of the women could only get three colors from Iowa City and Cedar Rapids and Marshalltown, from the different surrounding towns. They were only able to get three colors. (5)

The transition of using ribbon to using fabric is an example of cultural authentication, a process of adaptation and a strategy of change. Eventually, further change was required by
the limited selection of taffeta and led to the adaptation of using a three-color scheme rather than the four-color scheme. It is interesting to note that the 1970 skirt (see fig. 3.20) used a taffeta fabric in a three-color scheme, which could suggest limited availability of taffeta as early as 1970.

Wide ribbon and taffeta fabric are now scarce, but participants described the wide availability of alternate fabrics currently in stores. Generally, satin fabric is used for modern ribbonwork strips. One participant described the wide selection:

I think there is a real availability of fabrics and colors, secondly, I think people like those colors so they pick them. (4)

Another participant suggested that the “popularity” of the machine-stitched ribbonwork was due to the wide selection of fabrics:

I think because of the availability of different materials now, the machine style has become more popular. You can go into any fabric store now and there are all kinds of material. I can go to a fabric store and spend hours there. (6)

The participant who is Omaha/Winnebago described the selection of fabrics as changing the meaning and symbolism of ribbonwork.

Ribbonwork now is utilizing satin, whatever, other kinds of material. I’ve seen some changes and there are a lot of different colors now that are not particularly tribal. That affords a person more latitude to be more creative and artistic in their application but it’s still native. (10)

It is not known precisely when sewing machines became available to Meskwaki women, but the participants offered some clues. When one participant (2) was a young mother in the 1960s, her grandmother told her that machine-sewn ribbonwork was not for ceremonies, and she explained that “this must’ve been the time that they started using sewing machines.” (2) While ribbonwork was typically done by hand, sewing machines became
available to some families at least by 1960 and were soon used to appliqué the designs.

Participants described the use of the sewing machine:

I would say that the appliqués made a long time ago would be hand sewn. Back then everything was hand sewn. Everything was done by hand. Nothing was made with a sewing machine until the 1960s or 1970s, and then everybody had sewing machines. They started making them on sewing machines. (9)

With the sewing machine, ribbonwork assembly became quicker, and participants described the speed and convenience of the sewing machine to make ribbonwork:

Sometimes, they want it right away, so I guess machine is faster. If they want it in a month, then it’s okay to hand appliqué. (3)

Machine stitch, I think, is a lot easier, a lot quicker. They come out usually looking equally as nice. (6)

It is convenient and easier to use, the machine. It must be just a changing of times because a lot of people like that. (7)

The machine stitching did somewhat change the look of the panel with the hand sewn ribbonwork having a smoother, more refined look, according to the participants. But, one participant described how the zigzag stitch of the sewing machine gave the motif a desirable three-dimensional look:

Nowadays, people tend to like the machine stitched better only because I think it’s different. Because for generations, it’s always been the hand stitched, and it has that one look. The machine stitched came along and it’s like a whole new look because of the thread; it gives it almost like a two dimensional or a three dimensional look, depending on what color thread you’re using to sew it down. (6)

The machine-stitched ribbonwork was a change that was viewed by some as “different” and is the adaptation or acceptance of a garment in the social structure thereby adapting change in new beliefs and values that give sanction to the newly acquired mode of dress (Hamilton 1987). Over time, machine-stitched ribbonwork was accepted more frequently and started to appear in ceremonies. The participant who is 71 years old described
earlier how her grandmother told her that machine-sewn ribbonwork was not for ceremonies, and she expressed her opinion of machine-sewn ribbonwork being used in ceremonial dress:

At ceremonies, I see skirts they had made with the new methods. They use some kind of iron-on. They glue it. It’s faster. They get done with it. I don’t want to learn it either. They cut up the material, then they cut the design and they iron it and I don’t know if they stitch it with a sewing machine on the edges. That doesn’t hang like a skirt. The ribbon doesn’t hang right. It’s too much like paper. It doesn’t sit in with the skirt. It’s too stiff. (2)

The sewing machine precipitated changes in ribbonwork panels in use and appearance, and although the hand sewn is preferred by all ten participants, they viewed the machine-stitched ribbonwork as acceptable:

My preference would be the traditional way that I know but I would wear it if it was machine stitched because the machines do a really nice job nowadays. (4)

The machine stitch is fairly new, so our people are just getting used to that and anymore in ceremonies it is mostly machine stitched. I don’t know, like I said it’s a lot quicker, it’s a lot easier. There are a few people that still do hand sewn but don’t use it as much as they used to. (6)

A participant from the older generation does not like the machine-stitched ribbonwork but does not force her opinions on others. She described how the machine-sewn ribbonwork is acceptable but not for her:

I am the type of person where you are you, I am me. You do what you want to do; the way you think it should be. I cannot change you. You are you; I am me. If I am old-fashioned and I want old-fashioned things; that is me. That is the way I was brought up. But nowadays, we are in a hurry, hurry world and it is easier to use a machine. That is what I think, so if I see you in a machine-stitched [ribbonwork]; that is you. That’s what you want to wear. If I want to wear old-fashioned, I can and I do. To me, as an older person who saw the old style, they [machine-stitched ribbonwork] are negative, the new style. But if that is what people want then that is it. (1)

One participant, who was 60 years old at the time of this study, described the machine-stitched ribbonwork as decreasing its value:
It just decreases the value, in my mind, because everything that I watched growing up was done by hand. I think it’s a cheap, fast way to get things done. There’s nothing wrong with it, it’s just not as valuable. (5)

Summary. The data indicated that ribbonwork was worn by few until the late 1930’s. Prior to that, the majority of Meskwaki women wore a simpler form of dress called the two-piece cloth. Then, in the early 1940s, ribbonwork skirts appeared more frequently and were worn by adult women, and, at that time, some wore the ribbonwork on the side rather than center front. According to one participant, a change in the design also took place around this time, from a narrow panel with geometric shapes to the current abstract flora of today’s motifs. In addition, change occurred in the skirt border, from a plain two ribbon border to the ribbonwork panel border. Participants also indicated that in the 1950’s, teenagers started to wear ribbonwork skirts, and, today, younger girls frequently wear ribbonwork skirts.

More women, especially young girls, are becoming interested in wearing ribbonwork skirts as indicated by the use of the ribbonwork skirt of young girls of today as compared to the young girls of 1930’s-1950’s, who did not wear the skirt. Also, change occurred in how the front panel was positioned from side to front, an example of cultural authentication where an idea can become transformed so that they become meaningful to a culture group and results in change in dress (Erekosima and Eicher 1981). Furthermore, today, ribbonwork is made with a wide variety of colors that are chosen based on personal preference, rather than using clan colors as was done in the past. In general, the younger participants, ages 31-49, indicated that color choice was based on personal preference in contrast to the older participants who preferred subdued, “traditional” colors. Participants also reported that sewing machines became available to some families by the 1960’s and machine-stitched appliquéd became a quick and convenient way to assemble ribbonwork and became more
accepted by the younger generation. The growing use of machine-stitched ribbonwork was a change that was viewed by some as “different” and machine-stitched ribbonwork has even started to appear in ceremonies. This change is the adaptation or acceptance of a garment in the social structure thereby adapting change in new beliefs and values that give sanction to the newly acquired mode of dress (Hamilton 1987). According to Ferraro, cultures are subject to change as a result of internal or external forces (2006), and change can occur when material or economic resources become available to a given culture group.

**Cultural Meanings**

The fifth theme that emerged from the data revealed cultural meanings of ribbonwork that followed from and are supported by the previous four themes. The cultural meanings generated from the previous themes include the following: characteristics of tradition, personal and social meanings of ribbonwork, communication of identity, and connecting the generations. It is pulling these cultural meanings together that reveals specific characteristics viewed by participants as tradition in Meskwaki ribbonwork.

**Characteristics of tradition.** Specific components of the ribbonwork define or delineate it as tradition for the Meskwaki. As described early in this chapter, the participants referred to ribbonwork as the panel but also used the term ribbonwork to refer to the skirt that has a panel. Based on the interview document (Appendix A), each participant was asked “In your opinion, what do you consider traditional ribbonwork?” The following are quotes from each participant as they described characteristics of tradition in ribbonwork and are summarized in Table 5.3:

I told you what I considered traditional appliqué. Has to be wool, ribbon, and you can use silver brooches and a small panel. If I was to buy one, I would like to have it hand appliquéd. (1)
Tradition is the hand appliqué and a created design. I think that more should wear it, because that’s the style over here. That’s what they should wear. If they wear those they are seen as being traditional. It’s the tradition; they should wear it. (2)

Traditional ribbon appliqué is hand sewn and just so you have a design. (3)

The hand one, but I think it depends on what you grew up with, what you would consider tradition in your time span. When I think of traditional ribbon appliqué, I am thinking about the designs that were cut out of material and were put on a skirt or a blanket. I am thinking about the item that the actual ribbon is on and how it is used. It is the ribbonwork skirt. (4)

Ribbonwork is either 3 or 4 colors of taffeta or ribbon which are sewn together by hand. The four colors would be traditional. It would be from a pattern that had flowers, vines, leaves and possibly whatever color the clan was, the person was from. Whatever color the clans have. Usually certain clans have certain color they use. Like I said, it would be the flowers, the vines, the four colors and then the whole bottom part, now sometimes when you’re a little girl like I said they only had the front panels and ribbons on the bottom, that’s ribbonwork but it really isn’t complete without that bottom piece. (5)

Traditional is hand sewn and using the more natural colors, like some of the colors we talked about earlier, to me, like a glow-in-the-dark orange would not be something I would want to have somebody wear in a ceremony. There is a time and a place for everything and ceremonies are not the place for something like that. So, traditional is more hand sewn in the more natural colors; the colors and the type of pattern that it has. Ours is more the vines and the flowers. (6)

It would be the colors, and definitely the pattern and it has to be all hand. The ones I always see go down the center and sometimes just two colored ribbons and silver brooches. (7)

We’re supposed to do it by hand. That’s the only way I was taught. You have to have black wool because that’s how they did it a long time ago. I don’t see everyone using the bottom panels either. I don’t. I just put like a ribbon, sometimes, my grandma used to put little bells on the bottom. Basically just have the front panel and you have to have a design in there. (8)

Participants who are not Meskwaki also described their views on what is considered tradition for their respective tribes:

I would say that, the colors of the clan; it tells you what clan they are from. It starts with the clan. Colors, hand sewn, on wool or heavy material. (9)
I think it is the methodology, the technique of going through the whole process. The hand sewn traditional way has more weight. That to me would be the traditional ribbonwork. I use taffeta for the traditional way of doing it. (10)

As summarized in Table 5.3, all ten participants referred to the skirt as ribbonwork tradition and that the ribbonwork must be sewn by hand (100%). Hand stitching the motif is preferred to the machine-stitch method of applying the motif because hand stitching gives the ribbonwork a refined look: “Ultimately they look more refined and graceful than the sewing machine.” (4) The importance of hand stitching was handed down from the past generations as stated by one participant: “We’re supposed to do it by hand. That’s the only way I was taught. (8) And another participant said, “I prefer the hand sewn because of how I was taught; I was told it should be sewn by hand instead of a sewing machine.” (2) Hand sewing motifs represents an investment of time, accomplishment, and expertise.

Change in technology came in the form of a sewing machine. However, while some participants mentioned resistance to this change, several others admitted that sewing ribbonwork is quicker and easier with the machine. So, participants would rather have hand stitched motifs, but would consider wearing machine-stitched motifs for social dances and not for ceremonies. On the other hand, ribbonwork for use in ceremonies is becoming more common as indicated by two participants (2, 6).

To be considered traditional, ribbonwork must have a design or motif (70%), which is the heart of ribbonwork and a symbol of ethnicity and marker of identity. The pattern should be a single motif and be used to form the repeating design within the panel. The pattern, cut from paper, could be saved for later use of for future generations. The folding of paper resulted in bilateral symmetry in motifs generally resembled abstract flora. Furthermore,
Table 5.3. Characteristics of tradition based on interview data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of tradition</th>
<th>Number of Mentions</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ribbonwork refers to the panel and skirt</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand sewn</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design or motif</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5, 6, 7, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front panel only /plain ribbon border</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floral design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver brooches</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front and bottom panel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
important features of ribbonwork are the visual figure/ground reversal and combination of contrasting colors that change with the shifting perception of the viewer.

Several participants described color as an important characteristic of tradition in ribbonwork (40%), even though traditional colors identifying clan affiliation are not as prevalent as they once were, and personal choice in color now takes precedence. This could be due to the wide range of color availability in fabrics as indicated by one participant. Though there is latitude of choice in color, they are chosen within the parameters of what is considered a characteristic of tradition, and participants indicated that colors that are subdued are considered a characteristic of tradition. As an example, one participant said that neon orange would not be considered a traditional color.

The data also revealed other characteristics of tradition in ribbonwork. Three participants (30%) considered the center front panel of a skirt with a plain ribbon border as traditional; whereas, one participant (10%) considered front and bottom panels of a skirt to be tradition. Moreover, two participants (20%) stated that flora motifs resembling flowers, leaves, and vines were considered traditional, and two participants (20%) described German silver brooches as traditional. German silver brooches are used to embellish skirts, as well as shirts, in a decorative fashion.

*Personal meanings.* Participants described what wearing and making ribbonwork means for them. For instance, making ribbonwork can be used as a time for meditation, serve as a connection to others in the community, and channel affection from the maker to the wearer.

Hand sewing the motifs is tedious and time consuming, so it takes a long time to create a panel. For many of the participants, this time factor was used for solitude and
meditation, a time for reflection and relaxation. They saw making ribbonwork as therapeutic: it provided a way to clear the mind. Several participants described ribbonwork as a time for meditation:

I enjoy sewing. I enjoy the solitude of it. You can daydream, you can let your mind wander and you think about a lot of other things. You can just look at everything, look at your life, look at what’s going on and it’s almost like a meditative kind of process for me. I just feel good about sewing. When I start sewing, I get into that mood and nobody’s bothering me. I can just sew and think and you know that’s when I come up with some of my best ideas. (6)

I found out that when you are in good frame of mind to do things, it becomes easier. If you are bothered by something and you’re doing beadwork or ribbonwork to release that, it will clear the mind and become relaxed. That’s how I see it. When grandma did it, she would be sitting there, I never used to bother her when she was in that sewing mood and it was something that you knew. She was quiet. She looked happy doing it. Then when grandpa would need her, she would just put it away, get up, and tend to him. Then she would come back to it. (7)

Ribbonwork also functions as a connection to others in the community. For the participants, making ribbonwork brings to mind memories of grandparents and, thus, forms a link to the previous generation:

I think about my grandmother, how patient she was. It’s a gift she left us. A gift she left me because my little sister is gone now but it was a gift being able to watch her, starting from scratch and what the end of her work was, it was this beautiful piece and to me that’s what…. there’s a lot of pride there. (5)

When I do it I think about my grandparents because they introduced me to what I do. Grandma, that’s who I mainly see doing this kind of stuff. I was so intrigued when she did her beadwork and her ribbonwork that I picked up on it. (7)

Participants reported that hand sewing the ribbonwork is a way to show love from the maker to the wearer. One participant compared hand sewn ribbonwork with her quilting; it is a legacy she will leave for her children and grandchildren to remember her by:

I feel I have to touch things, for me, when I sew. I got a machine. I could sew my quilts with the machine but I do it the slow way. It takes time but when I finish it, I made it for my grandchild with my hands. This is what I think; part of me is in that to
leave for my grandchildren. To have them have part of me with them. That is me. Machine-sewn ribbonwork, to me, they made it in a hurry. To me, ribbonwork is very original. It is something you are proud to wear when it is hand made. Just like my quilts. Most of them I sew by hand, and I tell my daughter and my grandkids, every stitch is made with love. That is why I sew them by hand. That is what I think. (1)

Hand sewn ribbonwork has become a channel to transfer emotion from the maker to the wearer. For instance, when making ribbonwork for her father’s adoption ceremony, the youngest participant, age 31 years old at the time of this study, related how her feelings for her father were embedded into and transferred through ribbonwork:

My uncle and grandpa told us that everything comes from the family or yourself. Then you are showing that person how much you feel for them, how much you cared about them, how much they meant to you. You are doing it yourself; you are doing it by hand. They tell us that when you are sewing by hand you are supposed to have good thoughts because whatever you are doing, it is going to be in that outfit and whoever is going to wear that is going to feel that way whenever they are using it. So if you are mad or something, that person is just going to be mad whenever they are wearing it. Or if you feel happy and you think good thoughts about that person, whoever is going to wear it, they will feel all that. That’s why they tell you to take your time when you are doing the hand stitch if you want to look the way you want it to look. We’re supposed to do it by hand. That’s how you put your heart into it. (8)

Ribbonwork functions as a personal connection to others, and it is a source of meditation, pride, and a conduit for emotion.

Social meanings. The data revealed that ribbonwork plays an important role in the way of life of the Meskwaki people. Participants described the uses of ribbonwork decorated garments in the Meskwaki cultural setting and that cultural practices require the use of ribbonwork for ceremonies, funereal dress, and social dancing as indicated by the data:

Ribbonwork is mostly worn by the Meskwaki. They use it for the social dancing and for ceremonial purposes. (2)

As mentioned previously, culture is learned and shared by groups as members of their society (Ferraro 2006). Likewise, ribbonwork is learned and shared and establishes a
connection between community members. Ribbonwork itself represents a way of life as described by participants:

It’s really important because they use it for powwows and ceremonies; it’s a part of our life, part of our culture. (5)

I usually wear it to powwows to dance. It’s used in various ceremonies or different types of ceremonies and religion is, well, I don’t even know if you want to call it religion, it’s just like a way of life. (6)

**Communication of identity.** Participants described ribbonwork as a form of non-verbal communication that communicates identity for the individual and differentiates them from other tribes. Ribbonwork also serves as an expression of spirituality and connection to the Manitou, or the Great Spirit. Neill (2000) described ribbonwork as an emblem of ethnicity and a significant marker of ethnic identity, and, similarly, participants expressed a need to identify with their own tribe and distinguish themselves from other tribes, especially when attending powwows. Participants recognized the Meskwaki style motif as floral, simple, and less elaborate than other tribes who use ribbonwork. In addition, participants described that wearing ribbonwork gives them a sense of self identity and communicates to others where they came from:

When wearing my outfit, it is showing something that Meskwaki wear. (1)

To me the ribbonwork skirt said more Meskwaki and I wanted people to know that I was Meskwaki when I danced. (6)

Participants indicated that it is the motif with the ribbonwork panel that identifies them as Meskwaki. One participant reported that she has used a pattern similar to the one she used for ribbonwork and transferred the pattern to a garment that was non-Meskwaki; it was an abstract flora pattern. It is this pattern or motif that identified her daughter as Meskwaki. She described this transfer:
[My daughter] wanted something Meskwaki; she said she wanted appliqué and something Meskwaki. I created a little appliqué pattern for her, and I beaded that design on her cape. She said, “I want people to know I’m Meskwaki”, so that’s what I did. I beaded for her a little Meskwaki style appliqué. (6)

The male participant described the ribbonwork design or motif as distinct and that it serves as a form of identity for Meskwaki women:

> It is true that some of the designs are distinct to this tribe. If you look closely they are. And it would show you where you are from. The design is unique. Just like when they use the Meskwaki pattern, that is one of our identities for our womenfolk, it is their style. (7)

The belief is that the Great Spirit recognizes the Meskwaki if they are in traditional dress which is why the deceased are dressed in ribbonwork decorated garments.

Participants described how ribbonwork served as a connection to Manitou:

> They say that Manitou can see. He sees you dressed up when you go dance, “I see my relative dancing” [He recognizes you]. And that gives you strength and life because he sees you as a person who is going to dress up for a ceremony. There is a good feeling in that when you go to dance. So that is why I put on my ribbonwork when I dance. That’s the only place I wear it now. (1)

Ethnic dress in the form of ribbonwork serves as a way to distinguish both men and women as members of a group and communicated identity.

*Connecting the generations.* Ribbonwork is a link between the past and future: it connects participants to their ancestors through the motif in paper patterns or handed down ribbonwork pieces. Ribbonwork can be passed down to future generations in both handing down ribbonwork pieces and the technique of ribbonwork assembly.

Ribbonwork pattern pieces serve as a link to the past because motif sources that come from existing patterns or ribbonwork samples that were handed down from the previous generation hold special meaning as a remembrance of a previous generation. One participant described how she keeps her grandmother’s and aunt’s patterns:
I use my grandma’s old patterns, or my aunt’s old patterns. I try to keep them in the family or something because we have pictures of my grandma in some of her appliqués; I just copy them because they are meaningful to me. (8)

Another participant described hand sewn ribbonwork as something you could leave for future generations, as an heirloom. She describes it in this way:

**Before, they were all hand sewn because they felt that it was most authentic work done by Ho Chunk women. If a person has time to sit and make that by hand that would become a very special item that could be passed down. (9)**

Handing down the skill and technique to the younger generation is also a way to preserve the culture. Participants expressed the importance teaching the younger generation in order to preserve ribbonwork techniques and dress:

**I thought this was something I could learn, that I could be helpful and plus I have three daughters. They could learn how to do this. This is something that I think as Meskwaki women, we need to be teaching our kids. (6)**

**Summary.** This section described cultural meanings supported from the first four themes: characteristics of tradition, personal and social meanings of ribbonwork, communication of identity, and connecting the generations.

Characteristics of tradition in ribbonwork are revealed through the data. According to the data, tradition in ribbonwork is a skirt with a matching pair of panels with a double row of plain ribbon. The hand sewn motif of ribbonwork is an abstract representation of flora that is bilaterally symmetrical. Other elements of tradition are German silver brooches attached to the skirt or a panel parallel to the bottom of a skirt. Participants described what making ribbonwork means for them, including a time for meditation, a connection to others in the community, and channeling strong emotions from the maker to the wearer. In addition, when ribbonwork with the trademark Meskwaki abstract flora motif is worn within
and beyond the Meskwaki Settlement, it is an expression of ethnic identity and creates pride, as described by the participants.

Last, ribbonwork connects the generations. Cut-paper patterns, ribbonwork panels, and the skill itself are handed down from previous generations and can be passed on to the next. Ribbonwork is a gift of heritage received from previous generations and a legacy for the future generations.
CHAPTER SIX: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of the tradition and function of applied decoration called ribbonwork and to ascertain the perception of tradition and change in ribbonwork from the perspective of the Meskwaki. As the literature review showed, scholars used the term ribbonwork to describe an historic tradition in the contemporary lives of Native American people, refering to the art form and tradition of the past and not to any specific application technique. The term ribbonwork style was generally used to refer to the technical process of appliquing cut fabric strips to form a design that resembles those historic designs made with ribbons. In this study I have primarily used the term ribbonwork in a more general way, referring not only to the art form and tradition of the past made with “true” ribbons but including subsequent forms based on these historic traditions and made with strips or “ribbons” of fabric.

The study focused on the importance of ribbonwork to the Meskwaki people and the cultural meanings of ribbonwork as perceived by those who make and wear it. Research questions asked what the Meskwaki perceived as defining characteristics of ribbonwork, what role ribbonwork has in the Meskwaki culture, and how the Meskwaki define tradition in ribbonwork. The objective of this study was to explore and interpret factors related to the cultural meanings of Meskwaki ribbonwork. Interview data was collected and analyzed, generating five major themes.

The first theme related to the process of creating ribbonwork, information that described and discussed the technical aspects of panel construction and assembly, and placement in garments. Changing techniques show how ribbonwork style has become a
creative and innovative response to culture change because participants were able to express creativity and individual preferences by changing the processes of construction and assembly. Even though there are no prescribed ribbonwork production techniques, in the end, today’s panel placement and skirt structure has a strong resemblance to skirts of the past.

The second theme, related to the practices and experiences, yielded information about personal and social experiences and cultural practices. Ribbonwork continues to play an important role in the way of life of the Meskwaki people. Ribbonwork decorated garments are closely tied to the Meskwaki cultural setting where cultural practices require wearing ribbonwork for ceremonies, funereal dress, and social dancing. The third theme focused on the sources, inspiration and shape of the design and motifs within ribbonwork. Trademark Meskwaki motifs were described as simple, with curves resembling stylized flora, and these characteristics set them apart from other tribes. Motif pattern sources came from reworked existing patterns or from ribbonwork samples, both of which were handed down from previous generations. Motif patterns could also be created from scratch. Any of these motif patterns can be manipulated into many configurations to create new patterns. The recycling of old family patterns held special meaning for those who used them.

The fourth theme related to changes in construction and use of ribbonwork, motifs, and availability of resources. Although hand sewn ribbonwork was preferred the machine-stitched ribbonwork became acceptable through a process of adaptation to the ever-changing environment of the Meskwaki people. The transition from using ribbons to using fabric along with the introduction of the sewing machine precipitated changes in ribbonwork panels in use and appearance. Changes over a long period of time occurred in both panel and
motifs: from a narrow panel with geometric shapes to the current abstract flora of today’s motifs; from a narrow, two-ribbon border in skirts to the bottom and center-front ribbonwork panels; and from predominant use of clan colors to color use based on personal preference. These changes have been the result of changing technology, changes in availability of material resources, and of innovation in response to change.

A fifth and final theme emerged from the previous four themes and illustrated several cultural meanings of ribbonwork as part of the tradition and dress of the Meskwaki. On an individual level, creating ribbonwork was a time for meditation, a connection to others in the community, and a way to channel strong emotions from the maker to the wearer. On a group level, when ribbonwork with the trademark Meskwaki abstract flora motif was worn within and beyond the Meskwaki Settlement, it is an expression of identity and creates pride. Furthermore, ribbonwork is a significant visible mark of ethnicity and communicates to other tribes that the wearers of the ribbonwork are Meskwaki. As these five themes showed, ribbonwork represents a significant investment of time and emotion, a highly skilled art form, a creative response to change, and an important embodiment of Meskwaki culture.

The Importance of Ribbonwork

1) *What do the Meskwaki perceive as defining characteristics of their ribbonwork?*

The defining characteristics of ribbonwork as perceived by the Meskwaki people are based on the processes, motifs, and materials used to make ribbonwork and the final use in garments. First, today, ribbonwork most often refers to the skirt that is embellished with the appliquéd panels, though there are other types of garments that traditionally used ribbonwork panels such as blankets, shawls, bags, leggings. In this context, ribbonwork is a wool skirt with a matching pair of panels placed center front, and the repeating motif within the panel is
an abstract representation of flora in a simple curvilinear style that is bilaterally symmetrical or a mirror image. Bordering the hem of the skirt is a single ribbonwork panel parallel to the bottom or a double row of plain, wide ribbon with German silver brooches placed between the ribbons. Second, ribbonwork motifs are hand sewn with invisible or decorative cross stitches. Machine appliquéd motifs are seen as having less value but are considered acceptable for use in cultural practices.

A third noteworthy characteristic is an innate quality that comes from the process of making ribbonwork. Hand sewing the panels is a long process often taking two weeks to a month depending on the schedule of the maker, and during the process, the maker’s ideas and thoughts became imbued or instilled into the ribbonwork panels. Elder women have instructed the ribbonwork makers to be in a good state of mind when sewing ribbonwork because those thoughts and feelings are ultimately transferred to the person who will be wearing the garment. This innate quality becomes lost with machine-stitched appliquéd motifs.

Within these defining parameters, room still exists for innovation and experimentation in making ribbonwork. There are no prescribed processes of assembly and each person develops their own method of assembly based on what they learned, what is easiest and what is most comfortable, whether hand-sewing or machine-sewing. Also, while some motifs start with tried and true paper patterns others are created from scratch, and motifs can also be manipulated by combining isolated parts of old patterns, thus creating new patterns. Due to current availability of resources, materials used for ribbonwork are wool for the skirt and primarily polyester satin to make the ribbon strips. The colors chosen for ribbonwork panels, once strictly guided by clan color designations, are now based on
The varying ribbonwork styles and fabric choices are examples of a creative and innovative response to culture change. This type of change can occur when new or differing material or economic resources become available to any given culture group. Through the process of cultural authentication items are selected and transformed so that they become meaningful to the borrowing culture group. Indeed, the selection of construction materials or fabrics has been transformed and incorporated into a distinct and unique cultural item embedded with cultural meaning for the Meskwaki. In the end though, the motifs, ribbonwork panels, panel placement and skirt structure still have a strong resemblance to ribbonwork skirts of the past.

2) **What role does ribbonwork play in the Meskwaki culture?**

Ribbonwork plays multiple roles and is closely tied with the continuing cultural practices of the Meskwaki people on personal, social and spiritual levels. The Meskwaki belief system and way of life necessitates the use of ribbonwork in the continued customs of ceremonies, funereal rituals, and social dancing at local and regional powwows.

One important cultural role served by ribbonwork is as a channel between Manitou and his people. Wearing ribbonwork-decorated garments is a way to pay respect and honor the Manitou and a means to express spirituality. In fact, ribbonwork symbolizes a direct path to the creator, as suggested by the belief that Manitou recognizes his people through traditional dress. This is the reason ribbonwork is used for funereal dress.
Making ribbonwork fulfills several individual and social roles. The construction process functions as a personal time for meditation, to remember family members of the past and present, and to embed thoughts and affection into work that will ultimately be transferred to the wearer. Value is added to ribbonwork because of the investment of time, skill, and hard work and these innate qualities are recognized by others in the community because of shared feelings, beliefs, and experiences in the Meskwaki culture. Making ribbonwork is also a highly specialized skill that requires not only the technical knowledge but also cultural knowledge. Ribbonwork is used in ceremonies but not everyone knows how to make it and as a result ribbonwork makers are held in high esteem and their work is highly valued and is an important vehicle to display specialized and artistic skills appreciated. Making ribbonwork for others fulfills a social role that provides personal satisfaction. Moreover, over time, ribbonwork has provided a cohesive social function that enabled community members to not only share their skills with others but to satisfy cultural norms and expectations. An example of this social role is providing ribbonwork for funereal and adoption ceremonies.

Finally, ribbonwork functions as an expression of ethnic identity and represents cultural pride. The abstract flora motif is not only used on Meskwaki ribbonwork but is quickly recognized as such by non-Meskwaki peoples. It therefore serves as a symbol for Meskwaki identity. This role could also be shown in the transfer of the motif to other non-traditional Meskwaki garments. The motif conveys self and group identity and serves as a means of non-verbal communication to distinguish the Meskwaki from others by focusing on differentiation. The curvilinear nature, the abstract flora, and the simplicity of the motifs
differentiate the Meskwaki from other Native American groups who also use ribbonwork with very different styles of motifs.

Ribbonwork is learned and shared between generations and within the community, taking on an important role in the process of enculturation and transferring cultural knowledge. In this way, the role of ribbonwork as heritage correlates with the cultural practices of the Meskwaki and bonds the people through personal, social, and spiritual experiences. In all of these roles, ribbonwork represents a material and visual embodiment of many aspects of the Meskwaki culture.

3) How do the Meskwaki define the tradition of ribbonwork?

According to scholars, tradition is a symbolic act that carries meanings for the people in the present while the object, behavior, or beliefs from the past may change. Tradition is a body of customs and beliefs, not handed down from the past but symbolically re-invented in an ongoing present encompassing both continuity and change.

Historically, the Meskwaki have always used some form of applied decoration on their garments—from the pre-European contact era of porcupine quills to the post-contact era of European trade in beads, ribbon, or cloth—and applied decoration to garments has been handed down from generation to generation through the process of learning and interaction. The Meskwaki have adapted to changes in technology and resources through the strategy of cultural authentication, and innovations and transformations have occurred in the use of media and processes of making ribbonwork. In spite of the changes, continuity is still reflected in cultural meanings, motifs, and panel placement on the skirt.

The concept of tradition, like culture, is a transmitted, learned knowledge or behavior of a group and encompasses material objects as well. Tradition is continually assessed and
reconstructed depending on the course of events. The Meskwaki are a distinct culture group possessing a culturally-constructed system of organization, based on religious ideologies, that has established roles and functions for members. Many of these cultural practices require the use of ribbonwork decorated garments. The Meskwaki have assigned many cultural meanings to the characteristics and roles of ribbonwork. For generations, ribbonwork-decorated dress has been a way to communicate ethnic identity, a means of spiritual expression, a display of highly specialized skills, and the embodiment of a unique bond between members of the tribal community in their shared cultural experiences. Patterns for motifs were handed down from previous generations either in cut-paper form or in the panel itself. These heirloom motifs that came from grandmothers hold significance for the people who use them because it is a way to remember ancestors and keep a tradition alive within the family. Patterns have become a record of previous generations and provide a link to future generations in the motif and in the methods of ribbonwork processes.

According to scholars, invented traditions use references to the past for group cohesion and legitimizing actions, and the use of ancient elements can be adapted in newer contexts using old traditions for new purposes. Likewise, ribbonwork-decorated garments are closely tied to a wide range of Meskwaki cultural practices that come from and give reference to their past even with innovations and changes. Ribbonwork as dress meets cultural needs and is a way to participate in various activities of the group. Ribbonwork is a Meskwaki tradition, and though the form has changed, it is still a reflection of earlier forms of dress. By attributing cultural meanings to ribbonwork, the Meskwaki have accepted and sanctioned this form of dress for use in cultural practices. Continuity of ribbonwork was and continues to be dependent on teaching the younger generation the meanings and the methods
in order to preserve the culture, including dress. The meanings, processes, motifs, and panels of ribbonwork are the heritage received from previous generations and by teaching the younger generation it can be a legacy for future generations. However, each generation experienced changes due to material resource availability and adapted to change with innovative creativity. And further, the adaptation to change resulted in the acceptance of change.

Changes that have occurred in Meskwaki dress can be traced to the introduction of late 17th century European trade, which had a profound influence in the construction of garments. Early applied decoration of garments of porcupine quills and painted animal hides used for centuries changed to cloth, trade beads and ribbons when those materials became available in the late 17th century. More recently, the use of the sewing machine has also contributed to change in the process of making ribbonwork. Using the sewing machine to construct and appliqué the motifs is a quicker way to make ribbonwork for those who may have many demands on their time. As new technology has become available, machine-sewn ribbonwork was assessed and deemed acceptable for cultural use by the younger generation although reluctantly accepted by the older generation. Though the majority of participants prefer the hand sewn method of motif and panel assembly, the machine-sewn method has become an acceptable substitute when hand sewing cannot be done. Tradition in ribbonwork, as a method of applied decoration, has specific meaning for Meskwaki people though the materials used have changed over time.

Cultural authentication occurs where materials are selected, incorporated and transformed and become meaningful for a cultural group. Meskwaki ribbonwork is now made from carefully selected non-indigenous fabrics, and these fabrics are creatively
modified and transformed into a unique style of cut-and-sewn ribbon panels. Ribbonwork has specific uses and functions in the Meskwaki culture and has been incorporated as a major part of ethnic dress. The level of characterization, describes the process in which a selected item is characterized in some symbolic form within the meaning of the receiving society and may be re-named by members of the culture, in their own language (Eicher and Erekosima 1998). Ribbonwork has its own name in the Meskwaki language; the Meskwaki word for ribbon is pronounced phonetically as sannibah (the actual Meskwaki spelling is se ni ba). The Meskwaki word for ribbonwork pronounced phonetically is sannibah eegwaday, and the actual Meskwaki spelling for ribbonwork is se ni ba i ga te. Thus, ribbonwork is a culturally authenticated tradition of applied embellishment for the Meskwaki people. Since the beginning, the Meskwaki people made their garments by adapting to their surrounding environment—whether by use of porcupine quills, trade ribbon, polyester satin or sewing machines—the Meskwaki continue to creatively adapt to changes under their own terms and meet their cultural needs through the invention of important traditions in the embellishment and construction of dress.

Significance of Research

This study is beneficial to scholars interested in dress and Native American ribbonwork. Scholars have had to rely on historical documents and surviving examples to study ribbonwork, but this study adds the perspectives of those who currently make and wear ribbonwork in one culture group, the Meskwaki of Iowa. This study revealed the uses of and changes in ribbonwork in the Meskwaki cultural experiences and practices from the perspective of the people who make and use it, highlighting the cultural definitions and meanings assigned to ribbonwork from an insider’s perspective. A related area of
significance in this study is that the data contribute to the history and study of ribbonwork from an oral history perspective that has not yet been accessed by scholars. Such an interpretive study adds a great deal to the literature by incorporating the voices and words of participants and experts who have, to date, not been consulted.

The analysis and interpretation of the data in this study through the concepts of tradition and cultural authentication add a deeper level of understanding to ribbonwork as a long-term cultural practice that has changed significantly through time yet is still very much alive in Meskwaki culture. The concept of cultural authentication is significant to study such a topic because it highlights the creativity and innovation that can come from cultural change. It sheds light on the positive sides of change and illustrates positive responses like empowerment and the continuation of meaningful practices rather than cultural loss and destruction. The study also adds to the significance of the concept of tradition as invention, highlighting how many elements and aspects of ribbonwork, from construction through use, have remained meaningful within a context of long-term cultural change.

As a Meskwaki who makes ribbonwork, I do not place myself on the same level as the ribbonworkers that I interviewed because I do not hand sew the motifs. Nonetheless, I discovered new perspectives from this study. First, tradition is not necessarily tangible. The innate qualities of ribbonwork are missing from the machine-sewn appliqué that I produce, but I was taught by my grandmother that making ceremonial garments required good thoughts and feelings, which I do practice even though my investment of time is shorter. As a result, my business goals will change by reserving prepared ribbonwork panels for ceremonial use from the fully finished ribbonwork skirts used for social dancing. Second, I learned that the concept of tradition is subject to change and that discovery allows me to
experiment with different methods and materials to make ribbonwork within certain
terms of what is considered traditional by the Meskwaki. And finally, this newfound
understanding of the tradition of ribbonwork will allow me to maintain, and thus aid in,
preservation of the Meskwaki culture and dress.

Future Research

Additional research and study is needed to illustrate the importance of different forms
of applied decoration of the Native American people and the meanings that they have for
them. Additional research is also needed to define the different ways that Native Americans
dress, the functions of their dress, and the significance of their dress in a cultural context.
Future research could examine the following:

- A comparative study on the meanings and importance of ribbonwork in a broader
demographic group, that include men and women from different tribes
- A comparative study of generational differences on the meanings and importance of
ribbonwork of different tribes
- A study on the benefits of making ribbonwork based on a personal perspectives
- The functions of Native American dress as channels of communication
- The use of trade beads as a primary medium of decoration before and after European
contact and it’s influence on ribbonwork
- The effects of using the sewing machine on motif design choice, in other words does
the sewing machine affect how the pattern is created? Are they more or less
complicated in design?
- A historical study that focuses on the apparent lack of ribbonwork garments prior to
the 1930’s and what caused the shift from using ribbons to fabric.
• A study of extant garments and examples of ribbonwork in museum and private collections

Summary

The purpose of this interpretive study was to gain a deeper understanding of the tradition and function of applied decoration called ribbonwork and to ascertain the perception of tradition from the perspective of the Meskwaki. Research questions asked what the Meskwaki perceived as defining characteristics of ribbonwork, what role ribbonwork has in the Meskwaki culture, and how the Meskwaki define tradition in ribbonwork. The objective of this study was to explore and interpret factors related to the cultural meanings of ribbonwork. Five major themes were generated from interviews that include: process, practices and experiences, designs and motifs, changes, and cultural meanings.

Data was collected from a purposive sample of ten Native Americans participants, eight from the Meskwaki tribe and two from non-Meskwaki tribes. Participants have either made ribbonwork, have worn ribbonwork skirts, or were familiar with the cultural practices that required the use of ribbonwork-decorated garments. The interview document gathered information on the personal and cultural meanings of ribbonwork and why ribbonwork was important, and the data collected from the interviews facilitated the discovery of themes as related to the research questions presented in this study. Data analysis procedures were based on the open coding, focused coding, axial coding, and constant comparative methods (Esterberg 2002; Merriam 2000; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Major themes that emerged from the data included process, practices and experiences, design and motifs, and changes, which generated a fifth overarching theme of cultural meanings. Results identified the roles of ribbonwork in continuing cultural practices of the
Meskwaki, and the cultural practices provide the background or set the stage for ribbonwork creation and use as established by cultural norms. Ribbonwork has a cohesive function that bonds tribal members and is a source of cultural identity, and ribbonwork validates the maker and the wearer as Meskwaki. Results highlighted characteristics of the ribbonwork tradition that identified the importance of hand sewing the design to create panels. Other characteristics include color, front panel only, flora design, silver brooches, and front and bottom panels. Furthermore, results revealed that it is the process of creation or construction that gives ribbonwork intrinsic qualities and adds value.

This study showed that ribbonwork is an example of tradition that is very much alive and exemplifies the cultural heritage of the Meskwaki. Ribbonwork is a reflection of the past in how it symbolically carries on the meanings of the culture while the actual form in material goods and details of construction has changed over time. Ribbonwork garments signify cultural authentication in the discriminate selection of materials, and ribbons acquired through trade were adopted and transformed in appearance by cut and sewn methods. The tradition of ribbonwork as a method of applied decoration has specific meanings and plays important roles for the Meskwaki people as ethnic dress and to communicate aspects of individual expression and artistic skill and group identity.
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW DOCUMENT

Interview Questions

Name:
Age:
Tribal affiliation:

Meanings of Ribbon Appliqué

Define or explain ribbon appliqué in your own words.
Define or explain ribbon work in your own words.
When did you start making ribbon appliqué?
How did you learn?
Why do you make it?
Do you wear ribbon appliqué? If so, where and why do you wear it?
In your own words, what does making or wearing ribbon appliqué mean for you?
How do you feel when you make ribbon appliqué?
How do you feel when you wear ribbon appliqué?

Design, Color, and Motif

Where do you get your appliqué patterns?
How do you choose colors? Do you have color preferences?
How do you construct the skirt? Why?
Can you tell the difference between tribes through ribbon appliqué? If so, explain what these differences are.
Have you witnessed changes in the way ribbon appliqué is constructed or presented? In your opinion, are these positive or negative changes?

Tradition of Ribbon Appliqué

Do you know of any specific meanings/stories in regards to ribbon appliqué? If so, explain. Where did you get this information?
In your opinion, what do you consider traditional ribbon appliqué? Traditional ribbonwork?
What elements of the skirt are necessary to be considered traditional ribbon appliqué?
How important is ribbon appliqué to the tribe as a whole?
Do you see ribbon appliqué as continuing into the future?
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: The Tradition of Native American Ribbonwork
Investigator: Brenda Ackerman
28 MacKay Hall, Ames, Iowa 50014
515-294-8239
e-mail: bpacker@iastate.edu

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to define and understand the tradition of ribbonwork and ribbon appliqué through design, color and motifs. This study seeks to understand the tradition of ribbonwork and to ascertain the perception of tradition from the perspective of Native American women. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are familiar with ribbonwork in producing or wearing ribbonwork garments.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will be in the form of an interview that will last for one hour. During the study you may expect the following procedures to be followed. You will be asked questions about the tradition of ribbonwork in regards to design, color, and motifs. In addition, you may be asked to view samples of ribbonwork and discuss specific meanings that ribbonwork has for you.

Your interview will be recorded using an audio device. You may choose to omit any questions. Audio recordings will be erased after transcription. Transcription will use pseudonyms.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks from participating in this study.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit the community by providing valuable information about ribbonwork and to gain a better understanding of the cultural aspects that define ribbonwork.
COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide not to participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. Names will not be used; instead a pseudonym or fictitious name will be assigned. All data will be stored in a password protected computer file. Only the interviewer will have access to names which will be locked in a file cabinet and will not be kept with the data. Files will be erased 08/01/07. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, contact Brenda Ackerman, (515-294-8239) or Dr. Jean Parsons, Ph. D. or Dr. Susan Tomtore, Ph. D. (515-294-3826).

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, jcs1959@iastate.edu or Diane Ament, Director, Office of Research Assurances (515) 294-3115, dament@iastate.edu.

**************************************************************************
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) ____________________________

(Participant’s Signature) ____________________ (Date)  

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

______________________________ (Date)

Brenda Ackerman
APPENDIX C: CODING GUIDE FOR THEMES

CODING GUIDE FOR THEMES

1. Process
   1.1 Ribbonwork construction
   1.2 Hand sewn process

2. Practices and Experiences
   2.1 Uses
   2.2 Religion
   2.3 Clan colors
   2.4 Identity
   2.5 Handing down

3. Design and Motifs
   3.1 Source
   3.2 Shapes
   3.3 Identification

4. Change
   4.1 Dress
   4.2 Color
   4.3 Structure
   4.4 Availability of resources
   4.5 Using the sewing machine

5. Cultural Meanings
   5.1 Freedom to choose
   5.2 Feelings when making/wearing
   5.3 Characteristics of tradition
   5.4 Time factor
APPENDIX D: HUMAN SUBJECT APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

DATE: 11 October 2006
TO: Brenda Ackerman
28 MacKay Hall

CC: Dr. Susan Tornatore
1060 LeBaron Hall

FROM: Jan Canny, IRB Administrator
Office of Research Assurances

SUBJECT: IRB ID 06-464

Approval Date: 9 October 2006
Date for Continuing Review: 8 October 2007

The Co-Chair of the Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University has reviewed and approved the protocol entitled: “The Tradition of Native American Ribbonwork.” The protocol has been assigned the following ID Number: 06-464. Please refer to this number in all correspondence regarding the protocol.

Your study has been approved from 9 October 2006 to 8 October 2007. The continuing review date for this study is no later than 8 October 2007. Federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time (i.e. three to four weeks) for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date.

Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. All research related activities involving the participants must stop on the continuing review date, until approval can be re-established, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard to research participants. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review prior to this date.

Please remember that any changes in the protocol or consent form may not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the “Continuing Review and/or Modification” form. Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515) 294-4568, www.compliance.iastate.edu.

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.
Green, M. 1983. We dance in opposite directions. In *Ethnohistory* 30 (3): 129-140.


