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Craft as Cross-Cultural Communication and Exchange

The growing, global market for ethically-produced goods presents crafts practitioners – in both developed and developing countries – with multiple opportunities. Handcrafted objects or textiles in natural, unmediated materials can be a powerful articulation of the value of un-alienated labour. As consumers search for authenticity and meaning in a world dominated by mass-production, the handmade is strongly reasserting itself in the marketplaces of interior décor and of fashion. Many mid- to high-end stores sell ranges of artisanal products, including limited edition items created through collaborative projects between designers and artisans in developing countries, such as Habitat, Designer's Guild, the Conran Store and Anthropologie. High-profile exhibition opportunities for products made in this way include the New York Gifts Fair, Decorex and Made.

Seven years ago, in order to be able to source ethically-made, natural and sustainable millinery materials with specific aesthetic qualities (and for an identifiable niche market), I established an alternative production model: a micro-development project in Uganda that considers environmental issues, design and product development, fair pay and quality of life for the women makers. I am one of many exploring alternative ways of working within the arena of craft.

The project grew from a long-standing personal fascination with both a real and an imagined 'Africa'; from a love of making; and from a political strategy to build something that challenges accepted modes of practice and trade – in a post-colonial world – that have contributed to the impoverishment and disempowerment of African women.

Through my practice as a designer-maker, I wanted to explore my impressions of Africa – what was real, what was imagined, what authenticity might look like and how it might be communicated through craft. Ideas of 'otherness' (those often imperfect and culturally-biased perceptions of another's identity), of the purity of the handmade and of social justice have all informed this project.

My methods have evolved through years of trial and error, dictated less by pre-determined strategy and more by impulse and inspiration, consultation and response. They reflect my own background as a designer, craftsperson, teacher and mother, and my Christian faith. Through this micro-development project, my agency and the agency of the women makers in Uganda have been changed by the activities performed, by the relationships that have been generated and by the craft techniques we have exchanged: the collaboration has been dynamic. Serendipity, compromise, innovation and error – all integral to my creative practice – have in parts propelled, constrained, overcome and inspired the project and its outcomes.

The beginning

I fell in love with a romantic construct of 'Africa' as a child, seduced by an aesthetic drawn from fantasy and from those stereotypes originally formed in the colonial and pre-colonial eras (that continued to be propagated in the popular media). The television series *Daktari* in the 1960s, the many *Tarzan* films (1918 onwards, rarely filmed in Africa), *King Solomon's Mines* (1937, 1950, 1985), *Mogambo* (1953), *Hatari* (1962), *Out of Africa* (1985) and countless others; anthropological and wildlife documentaries; old *National Geographic* magazines; books by Rider Haggard, Buchan, Burroughs, Van Der Post, Conrad and Durrell, all contributed to a homogeneous mental picture of a diverse continent – which in turn formed an aesthetic imprint.

Similar impressions of 'Africa' have significantly influenced western designers throughout the twentieth century, and already in the twenty-first. Many have drawn inspiration from African aesthetics that have become codified for western audiences – an impression of an impression. For example, Yves Saint Laurent's celebrated 'African' collection of 1967 was inspired by the material culture of the Bambara people, primarily of Mali and Senegal. His use of raffia, flax, wooden beads and glass-beaded embroidery, and a rich palette of enhanced natural tones, was described rather regrettably by *Harper's*

Bazaar as 'a fantasy of primitive genius' (McDowell 2000: 337). Frequently western designers have found the borders between interpretation, stereotype and pastiche difficult to identify when drawing inspiration from the aesthetics of other cultures; some may have crossed them inadvertently. Visual characteristics that have become emblematic of this 'Africa' include natural colours and fabrics, khaki, animal skins and certain motifs.

The idea for the Pidgin Plait project crystallised just as an opportunity to visit Uganda was presented. As a maker, I knew that straw plait for hat making was becoming difficult to source and was convinced that the craft could be transported successfully to a rural community in the developing world to become a socially and environmentally sustainable source of income generation for the plaiters.

Mat making from braids of plaited vegetable fibre has been practised in East Africa for many centuries and continues to be an important cultural practice, so related skills were already embedded in the community. The idea was well received by local people in Bubutya, the village in south-eastern Uganda where the project is based. I began with a teaching programme for making a basic, narrow, decorative plait – substituting local palm leaves for straw; this was followed by an introduction to how the plait might be used, and later the development of more plaits and plaited products.

How it has evolved

Over the last seven years the project has evolved somewhat. It is still small-scale, built around (and constrained by) the challenging circumstances of the women makers and by their remote location. We have all been impacted one way or another by our engagement through craft.

In extending their skills set and selling work that they have made – and to some extent in the kudos and the premium attached to selling overseas – the women have grown in confidence and in stature within their community. There have been many unexpected outcomes from the project – for example the strengthening of marriages: in a staunchly patriarchal community, women who are able to contribute to household income are valued much more by their husbands. A third of the group are married (polygamously); the fact that they are able to earn makes it much less likely that they and their children will be abandoned or neglected. The women are able to manage more easily the payment of school fees and the purchase of household necessities such as paraffin and soap. Through growing in self-assurance and in bonding as a group, these women – previously isolated and lacking in confidence – have begun to make collective decisions and to take active agency over their futures. For example, they have invested a percentage of their income from the plait in goats; at last count they had nine goats, to be used as breeding stock for further income generation.

Local customers have emerged for sun hats, bags and baskets made from the plaits. Although the makers get a much lower return for their work in the local market, it is important that they are not dependent on the vagaries of overseas trade.

Through networks developed in the capital, Kampala, I became aware of a Ugandan market for occasion headwear. I worked with the plait group to create small, quirky hats in simple, accessible shapes that aimed to embody an urban Ugandan take on contemporary western millinery. These hats were designed to be worn at weddings or the 'Royal Ascot' Goat Race in Kampala, and were made from plaits based on indigenous patterns, trimmed with local materials. However, they have yet to be reliably re-produced in my absence and therefore more training is needed to develop the women's confidence in shape-making with the braids.

Overall, the project is doing well and has been beneficial to all parties: women who were previously mocked by their neighbours for wasting time plaiting are now recognised as industrious and better able to provide for their dependants. They have become good role models for other women and girls in their community.

Issues

Before I visited Uganda, I had naively assumed that natural dye processes would still be widely in use. While I was keen to use natural dyes for the plaited braids, this has not proved possible for all. Chemical dyes (often Azo dyes) have been almost universally adopted by Ugandan artisans in preference to natural dyes, because of the speed of their take up by the normally resistant palm leaves and the brightness of the colours achieved. The group and I have spent many days experimenting with local plant matter in order to rediscover natural dyes, but with very mixed results. Annatto, tomato leaves and turmeric have been quite successful, but most things we have tried yield various shades of beige. Much more work needs to be done to find local plant matter than can effectively and sustainably be used for dyeing palm.

I have found that very fixed deadlines for plait orders may be unrealistic, as they fail to take account of the daily challenges faced by the artisans. Women in rural areas of Uganda shoulder enormous responsibilities: planting, weeding, harvesting, cooking, collecting firewood and water, giving birth to and caring for many children and other dependants, managing regular bouts of malaria, etc. Eighty per cent of Ugandan agricultural labour is performed by unpaid women (Tuyizere 2007: 49).

> Women are seen as workers who were married so that they could labour in homes and in the fields, or as a necessary source of wealth, as they bring bride price on marriage, or they are perceived as mere reproduction agents. Traditionally, they are expected to fulfil the roles of mother, housewife, family worker and agricultural labourer. (Tuyizere 2007: 49)

They frequently live in precarious circumstances. For example, some 73 per cent of women and girls in the kingdom of Busoga – where the project is based – suffer domestic violence in their lives. They may not see the importance of a timely start to a meeting or an order deadline because it is of less urgency to them in a given moment than taking advantage of rain-softened soil to plant, or tending to a sick child. To those of us from north-western Europe – where punctuality is culturally important – this can be problematic. I have had had to factor in potential delays in my ordering.

Communication with the group, and with local agents trying to help, has been one of the biggest challenges. I speak a very small amount of the local Lusoga language and – although some local people speak good English – there are cultural differences, nuances and habits in the ways that we express ourselves. What I (or they) hear is not necessarily what is being said.

When I am there I have found that showing what I mean (for example, a technique, colour or a style detail) is better than just saying it; therefore experience as a designer, teacher and maker has been extremely useful. But that doesn't help me when I am trying to place an order from the UK. Even when corresponding with local agents that have a (more or less) regular phone signal or internet access, communication has been a challenge. In order to have a question answered I have learned to include only one question per message. One cannot be clear enough.

Misunderstandings can mean that artisans lose valuable time by making the wrong goods for an order. On several occasions my conscience has prompted me to pay for things that I neither asked for nor wanted, but which have been made in good faith or out of real need; this is unsustainable. As a result, I have had to limit the types of plait we offer in order to ensure clarity and consistency. Communication has improved recently, since I engaged someone from a crafts organisation in Kampala to manage checking orders, packing and shipping.

The materials the plaiters use may be under threat. For example, in the Masaka district of south-western Uganda, some palm trees whose leaves have been sustainably harvested for many decades have been cut down so that their trunks may be used as fence posts – often illegally, but little enforced. As a result, women in that region have been told that they may no longer harvest palm leaves from trees on 'public' land, even though doing so need not harm the remaining trees.

Another threat to Ugandan wild date palms is the clearance of the swamps they grow in for agriculture, to feed a growing population. The price of palm leaves is therefore higher in the markets and there are fewer opportunities to self-harvest. I have been considering ways in which to incentivise the growing of these palms, but from a distance and with limited resources this is a challenge.

Impact on my practice

In terms of my own practice, the project has had – and continues to have – an enormous impact. I initially set out to develop a sustainable material for western couture millinery that would generate an income for some women in rural Uganda. Through the process of learning new skills in plaiting plant fibres, adapting historic patterns to new contexts, creating new plaits and other textiles – and through immersion in a real 'Africa' – my creative practice has been enriched and has taken new directions.

This Immersion in everyday colours and textures on my field trips to Uganda has fed my obsession with irregular surface and a specific palette. From the original, highly textural plaits and from other textile techniques – adopted in response to visual stimuli and local materials – I developed a series of head sculptures derived from historic African hair forms through abstraction and distortion. These entirely handmade pieces – as well as films, textiles and photography – were produced for an exhibition

called ‘Pidgin Plait’ that explored ideas of ‘artefact’, ‘authenticity’, ‘mission’ and ‘otherness’ and represent part of my ongoing dialogue with these subjects.

Initially, I had not factored in the impact that indigenous Ugandan plaits would have on my work and on the project itself. Through spending time with women mat makers on a series of field trips to Uganda, I learned about local techniques and designs before experimenting to discover how to reproduce and then adapt the traditional wide, multi-stranded braids (used for mat making) into narrower, more flexible braids for accessories. It was a challenge to retain the key elements of certain patterns while using fewer strands – those developed to date are far less complex than most indigenous plaits. However, they are already finding markets in the UK.

In recent years I have become acquainted with some particularly skilled mat makers in the southwest of Uganda, who plait text into their braids. I hope to learn these techniques from them in the near future, to incorporate in my own work and to help them to find new applications and new markets for theirs.

Craft research is a dynamic force: each new understanding opens up new ideas and new possibilities. I had not anticipated becoming fascinated with the history of mat making in East Africa, but my research in this area has become part of my life. Another unpredicted outcome is that – as I have come to comprehend the circumstances of the women makers and to empathise with them in the daily hardships they face – I have been considering ways in which craft may be used to vocalise and in part address issues such as domestic violence and the value placed upon women in such patriarchal communities. I am currently drafting a proposal for a project that will use craft, in partnership with other programmes, as an agent for activism and social change.

Conclusion

To summarise, at this point in time the Pidgin Plait project comprises three tangible strands: the production of environmentally-friendly plaited braids; the production of relatively accessible fashion hats for the Ugandan and possibly UK markets; and my own practice as a craftsperson, textile artist and researcher.

Through this project a series of plaits have been created that form a means of communication between the women makers in rural south-eastern Uganda and the western couture fashion world.

In the process of bringing together some historic craft traditions of both cultures I have worked independently in the UK and collaboratively in Uganda to develop textiles and products that represent aesthetic, technical and cultural amalgams. I have chosen – and often been forced – to act spontaneously, embracing serendipity, responding to events in Uganda, and rejoicing as group members have produced work that had not been anticipated but has had great merit of its own. This is one of the joys of collaboration: an exchange of the unknown and the unforeseen. If I went into the project with the initial aim to develop new, ethically-produced millinery materials through a development project in Uganda, I have discovered and learned more than I could ever have imagined.

This project is not solely a design, a development or a craft project, or only about sourcing new materials overseas; it is not just about ‘doing good’ or only about revisioning indigenous craft. It comprises all of these things and more. While many grassroots design-for-development projects are formed (or otherwise supported) by various organisations or institutions, the Pidgin Plait project differs in being established by a solo agent – a designer-maker identifying a market need, then working in a collaborative, holistic, adaptive and mutually beneficial way with a remote community in order to create new materials for a specific market. It shows how design and handicraft have been used not only in the inspiration for and creation of a product but in the formation of the project itself. It therefore suggests an alternative model for ways in which designers and craftspeople can work.

The materials and the artifacts produced through the project (and alongside the project) articulate aspects of our separate and shared histories and our current status quos. Through the process of our interaction, an exchange of related, heritage craft skills from two very different cultures has taken place, in the development of hybrid or ‘pidgin’ techniques and patterns with applications for local and overseas markets.

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