

## *Kirsten Scott*

### ***Straw Into Gold: A Role for Craft in Fashion and Development***

"the way we make things underpins the structure of our society .....Commodities of any kind, their production and consumption, shape the human universe." (Greenhalgh, 2002: p18)

*Craft* has been defined as 'skill in doing or making something' and *crafted* 'to make by hand' (thefreedictionary.com). In pre-industrial societies, either consciously or unconsciously, craft has been a valued part of everyday life: objects made with care by hand, may be looked after and repaired when broken rather than being discarded and adjustments may easily be made in design and making to perfectly suit function. If we are to meet the challenges presented by the need for sustainable production methods, as well as sustainable consumption, the way that objects are made and the meaning they hold to us as producers and consumers must change; current relationships with objects should be reappraised in the context of the world we live in. Craft, with its traditional emphasis on the relationship between maker, materials, techniques and environment, as well as the intrinsic value traditionally placed upon crafted objects, must surely have a role to play.

There is a moral argument that in the developed world, we have become too used to buying what we want, when we want it, disposing of it quickly, compromising on quality and disregarding ethical manufacture. Concern raised over the mass-production and mass-consumption of throwaway garments in the fashion industry has incited much debate about the way we make things and patterns of consumption. The conditions in which cheap garments are produced and the unacceptably low wages paid to workers in the developing world- some of them children- have been well documented (Blood, Sweat and T-Shirts, 2008, BBC). Various fashion labels have emerged, such as Edun and People Tree, which provide consumers with wearable garments while ensuring that their products are ethically and sustainably produced. But can we 'change the shape of the human universe' by making and buying fewer and better objects? Can the places and ways in which these objects are made allow the marginalised of the developing world to participate in the global economy?

The impact on world economies of a wholesale change in the way we make and buy goods would be enormous and possibly catastrophic, but questions must still be asked about alternative approaches to production and consumption in the developed world, if any progress towards safeguarding our planet and ending poverty can be made. Craft may be ideally situated to contribute to a process of change and inclusion by providing a forum in which to ask questions about ways of engaging previously disadvantaged peoples in global trade.

Fashion's long history of craft is evidenced by the exquisite skill with which couture pieces are constructed, from Saville Row tailoring to gowns produced in the ateliers of Paris. Haute Couture garments and accessories are handcrafted, with care, to high standards of design and finish, to be preserved and valued over a long period of time. Only a handful of people in the world can afford to purchase these garments and their attitude to consumption is very different from that of the high street shopper: for a few, fashion becomes investment. But what can ordinary people do to change their approach to fashion? Must craft always be

equated with excessive expense in fashion, unless a workforce is exploited or quality compromised? Is there a role for craft in lower and mid-range fashion?

An area where craft is apparent in less exclusive fashion is in the production of bespoke accessories. Millinery is a traditional craft that combines textile manipulation with sculpture. Shapes can be fluid and delicate or more solid and functional, conservative or innovative. The plaiting of plant fibres to make hats, a craft itself, has been seen all over the world in various forms and styles. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this became an important industry for the rural poor of Europe, in particular those of Italy and Great Britain, where wheat straw was plaited into braid that was then sewn up into hats. In the south east of England alone, by 1871 nearly 40,000 people (<http://www.hertfordshire-geneology.co.uk/data/occupations/straw-plait.htm>) - predominantly women and children - were employed as straw plaiters, using the straw that grew locally in the chalky soil. This occupation was either full time, or built around other commitments in their lives and provided an invaluable income. Frequently a sociable activity, as women might chat and even walk while plaiting, it gave them some financial independence and allowed them to earn more than the men in agricultural communities. Wherever straw plaiting was practised, the middle classes complained that it was impossible to find domestic servants, as more money could be earned from plaiting and The Society for Bettering the Conditions of the Poor encouraged the teaching of straw plait techniques to the poor in order to alleviate poverty (Dony, 1942).

Hundreds of patterns of plait were produced with names often determined by their places of origin, such as *Dunstable Twist* and *Milan*. Even simple plaits, when stitched up, gave textural detail and interest to a hat shape but patterned plaits formed intensely rich surfaces. Some plaits were as fine as lace braid, with fancy edging and ornate scrolling, scallops or twists.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the first imports of plaits from China were introduced to Europe. These were much cheaper than the British plaits, if inferior in quality, and arrived at a time when demand for plait was high. The Japanese soon followed with the finest quality plaits, still cheaper than the British product, and thus the European plaiting trade was irrevocably undermined. Today, around the world, there are just a few, small manufacturing bases for straw plait. Other than a reduced trade in China, some simple straw plaiting for the hat trade is still done by hand in Vietnam, Romania, Belarus and the Ukraine (Main, V. 20/8/07). With the increasing industrialisation of China, the production of straw plait has significantly decreased and is now a relatively small industry. Emphasis is placed on producing materials that are assembled and shaped in great numbers and at speed. Plaited braid for millinery is now predominantly made by machine, often using paper, a manufacturing method that restricts the variety and texture of the end product. Innovations have been technological rather than design led, to meet a demand for cheapness, quantity and uniformity. Straw plaiting, historically the seasonal occupation of peasant farming families, does not fit the vision of twenty-first century industry, and stockists in the UK are finding it difficult to obtain. The craft must find a new home if it is to survive.

Africa has its own traditions in plaiting: the plaiting of plant materials to make functional, everyday items, as well as those denoting status and ritual, has been very much a part of traditional African craft. Items including baskets, mats, hats, screens or room dividers and garments, often use plaiting techniques of one sort to another. The plaiting of braid that is then sewn up into objects can be seen in many parts of Africa, but particularly in the production of sleeping mats in eastern African countries.

Making craft objects is traditionally an outdoor activity, usually in a shared compound (Sieber, 1980), using plant or animal material from the surrounding area with dyes made from locally occurring plants or other substances, such as mud. Connection to the surrounding environment is absolute, reinforced in every aspect of life, and dictates the types of indigenous crafts produced throughout the continent.

Grasses, bark, roots, reeds and rushes have been used in Africa since the earliest times to form domestic objects, with palms of one sort or another being prolific. Raphia palm is used to make baskets, garments and mats, and the tufted cut-pile cloth, frequently called Kuba cloth, from the Congo region; the leaves of dum and wild date palms are frequently used for mats. Mat making using a plaited braid of palm fibres has been part of Ugandan culture for hundreds of years, with raphia being used to sew up the strips. These techniques may have been introduced by Arab traders from the east (Trowell, 2003) or may have been part of a more ancient African craft tradition. There is evidence of exactly the same techniques being used in El Armana, Egypt, since at least 1580-1350 BC (Crowfoot, G. 1954), when migration of peoples from sub-Saharan Africa into the valley of the Nile had already taken place and informed much of Egyptian culture and technologies (Davidson, 1984). Five thousand years ago, the Sahara was green and well watered, not the physical barrier that it later became. Trans-Saharan trade routes were certainly well established by 500 BC (Davidson, 1984). Wherever its source of origin, plaiting palm fibres into braid has been embraced by central and east Africans for centuries, if not millennia, and is still widely practised today.

A relationship exists between the plaiting techniques used for the manipulation of hair and of plant fibres, other than mere process: a natural inclination to twist and fold lengths of matter to create sculptural forms of intricate texture. Surface interest is a key feature of almost all African crafts. As different patterns or motifs in African textiles or carvings reflect the work of particular makers or the identity of an ethnic group, so too have different hairstyles (Sieber and Herremon, 2000). Coloured patterns plaited into east African mats have also traditionally been indicators of different families or ethnicities, as designs were passed down through generations, with names such as *Cows in a Pen* and *Mama is Changing her Mind* (Warner Dendel, 1974). In countries such as Uganda, where different groups have intermarried significantly in recent years, designs have become more widespread and less specific to particular peoples. Plaiting as a 'craft' activity has also been taught in schools and many women will have plaited palm fibre for mat making at some point in their lives.



Fig 1

From my own experience as a practitioner and lecturer in millinery, I identified a need for new designs and a new source of 'straw' plait to invigorate a craft that has enjoyed little recent innovation in the development of natural materials. I aim to eventually establish a manufacturing base for straw plait that will provide an income for a community in rural Uganda. I wanted to find out whether this was possible, appropriate or even desirable to the people involved, to discover what might be produced, what natural materials might be used and potential markets.

One of the ways in which I am doing this is through fieldwork. I visited south-eastern Uganda in April 2007 to set up a project that would become my case study of a role for craft in development and the ethical sourcing of materials for the fashion industry. My concerns were to test the potential in Africa of recycling and developing a traditional European craft that might hold a relevant position in today's fashion market place. At the centre of the project was the hope that plaiting would be a craft that could be practised as a means of increasing the income of the makers, but which might be built around their lives and other commitments in a similar way to how it had been by the women of rural England in the past. The product must also be made in an environmentally sustainable way and pay the makers a more than fair price for their work. The therapeutic benefits of craft activity are recognised, but it is also hoped that being able to earn will improve the self-esteem of the women and their status within the community and that gathering as a group will help to build social capital. The women live in nearby villages; most are widows or single parents who survive on subsistence farming and very little money. A few are in polygamous marriages.

During my first fieldtrip, I taught a group of twenty-five women a traditional European plait called the Four Strand Rustic. It was simple to master, but had a zigzag edge, so would be a departure from the much wider, flat-edged local plaits that were used to make sleeping mats. I also showed them how to sew up this braid into a simple hat shape, a process that many found more difficult.



Fig 2



Fig 3

One of the problematic issues within the project is the role of the western designer/maker, who understands the market in the developed world, and the imposition of a western aesthetic on a group of non-western makers. I felt quite strongly that there was a need for more texture in plait for the market in which I work, rather than coloured pattern that might restrict what items made of it could be worn with. The local Ugandan aesthetic was for pattern to be introduced to plait through the insertion of bright colours to contrast with the natural palm, rather than in textural effects, and many women chose brighter coloured palm from the bale of options supplied. Pastel shades did not appear to be available. However, through my research into African crafts and African aesthetics, I felt that texture within the plait would, on some level, be compatible with local tastes.

The impact of this intervention on the local aesthetic and vice versa is being recorded, as well as its impact on the lives of the group.

While the paternalistic approach of imposing designs upon a community of makers, for a market they cannot comprehend, may appear arrogant (similar approaches have been criticised over the years), I have found that the women are so eager to learn anything that might provide them with some form of income that the understanding of the end use of the product, insisted upon by many working in or theorising about development, has not been an issue so far. The insistence on the makers' understanding of context for the end product is a concept that may be argued in the relative luxury of the developed world, but the most important issue for the makers I am working with is to feed their children and be able to send them to school.

On the other hand, I have felt it important to be sensitive to the individuals that I am working with: their personal circumstances, their way of life, their personalities and abilities. What is being built must be built at a realistic pace, in recognition of its local context. Western approaches to production, with a uniform product, firm lead times and small margins cannot be part of this project, nor should they be.

Another area of enquiry is the availability of other plant fibres, occurring locally, that might be used. The leaves of elephant grass and sugar cane, as well as various other grasses grow in the vicinity and some initial sampling has been done. However, the women are adamant that these materials are too brittle and that palm is the best thing to use. Some further experimentation is planned with these other materials though, as time of harvesting is likely to be an important factor in how supple they are. Some plaiting has been done with banana fibre, although it needs scraping in preparation and has dark speckles that do not take dye well, so is less versatile than palm.

Creating different colours in the palm using natural dye has also been explored. Many of the women claimed to know someone who used it, but no one had the knowledge them self or seemed able to access it. Many experiments were performed with local plants, with mixed results. More research is need for this and the environmental impact of dyes used to colour the palm must be considered.

One of the issues to be established is how the plait might sit within the local marketplace. Some research was undertaken at the nearest big town of Jinja, to discover any potential local market for products developed from the plait, as well as competition. Tourists apparently always want things in natural colours, which they perceive as authentically African, although the local people prefer a much more vivid palette and imported chemical dyes rather than natural dyes. Prices for plaited or woven craft objects were extremely low and it was hard to see how the women could earn enough to make production worthwhile, although any income at all would be welcome. As a result of this, efforts were renewed to develop plaits for the millinery trade of the developed world, where a much better financial return for the group's work might be achieved, even after factoring in other costs.

Returning to Uganda later that year, I taught the group a new plait that I had developed. This plait has since turned out to be very similar to a traditional one produced in nineteenth century Nova Scotia (Gordon, 1981). The plait introduced a twist of the palm on one edge that forms an unusual spiky texture when sewn up into a hat or other object. As well as being made up into lengths, the plait was used to make a cap prototype for the group, which they could copy and might be

able to sell locally at a premium as it was unlike anything else found there but, because of its textural qualities and natural colour, felt authentic. Since the first trip, one of the group had made six hats and sold some to tourists. I bought another from her as a sample, as well as some bundles of plait from her and others. After some market research among milliners, it was provisionally decided that the plait should be made in twenty metre lengths, European plaits having traditionally been sold in twenty-yard lengths.



Fig 4

Another concern has been how methods of ordering and transportation could be established to test the viability of the project in manufacturing plait for export. Following the second field trip, I placed an order for bundles of plait, and some other items, with the group via email through a contact in Uganda. Deciding on price has been difficult: a provisional price has been arrived at after research among milliners into how much they already paid for plait from the Far East and then allowing a small cushion for when transportation costs would need to be added. As a non-profit making venture, I decided to pay the women as much as possible for the plait, but not to out-price the market. Whether this is sustainable long term is unclear: the current price may be too high to maintain, if exchange rates fluctuate too much or shipping costs rise. The western market may pay a premium for the plait because of how and where it is made, but of course it must suit that market aesthetically too. If the price to the group does have to drop, what problems might that cause?

A third field trip took place in November 2008. I was able to interview the group, through an interpreter, about how the project was affecting their lives: they felt that it gave them more value in the community, not just sitting back and waiting for men to do everything, they were building relationships with one another, able

to support each other – particularly in hard times- and hoped that they might be able to support themselves better financially in the future. Money earned was most likely to be spent on sending their children to school and in paying for household necessities. Many of the group were breadwinners for at least six children; some of them are HIV positive. Local observers of the group said that there was something about them coming together, making together, that helped them to forget about their problems.

From the outside, and a position of extreme relative affluence, it might seem that any extra income would be a good thing for people living in poverty: it is certainly welcomed. But the project is an intervention into the lives of others and has a responsibility to ensure that results are beneficial to the women and to their community. Robert Chambers (1983, p141) suggests that

A decision not to act is itself an action. A person who withdraws or who abstains from intervening, is by that withdrawal or abstention still intervening by default.

There are all sorts of questions about what the short and long term impact of this intervention might be: how will women having more money affect power structures within the community? What will happen to their status? Will men feel threatened and could the consequences of this be harmful to the women? Will the married women be allowed to keep the money they earn? Might it go to another wife? How is extra money spent? Is that any of my business?

Ensuring the sustainability of the project in terms of providing an income for the women over the long term is another goal. Producing items of continued relevance to markets in Uganda or the developed world that have no detrimental environmental impact is another essential element of the project and one that will be carefully monitored and evaluated. On the next trip, an attempt will be made to discover the feasibility of using leaves that are waste products from the palm oil industry. Refining the plait, developing more designs and more products, establishing shipping methods and ensuring delivery must all be resolved. Much still needs to be done.

So far, in its small way, it has been successful and is gathering interest in the western millinery world. Marketing the plait must now be considered. In the last year, the plait had been selected as the compulsory component for the Hat Designer of the Year Competition. This international competition attracts entries from all over the world. The 6 finalists will be showing their work in a prominent area of Premiere Classe, Paris, in September 2009: an opportunity for promotion to the industry. A website and methods of ordering must not be far behind this or any momentum will be lost.

One of the factors that may have contributed to the success of this project, at least in these very early stages, might be the involvement of a craftsperson: enabling the product to develop fluidly in response to information received. Identifying new possibilities for the product, as well as for indigenous techniques and aesthetics, how they may be modified for other markets, both practically and in design, is a contribution that a craft practitioner is well suited to make: using skill to resolve technical and material challenges in the creation of objects is what craftspeople do. Other helpful factors may be that related technical skills were already embedded in the community, aiding the assimilation of new ways of working with the palm; materials used are locally occurring, low cost and easily accessible, so minimal investment is needed by the makers, making plaiting a low risk enterprise; work of this sort may be carried out around essential daily activities and social obligations.



Fig 5

There may be a future for the ancient craft of straw plaiting. If milliners and other product designers can be persuaded that the time it takes to sew up plait to their designs is more than repaid in the beauty and texture of the finished product, more of them will want to use it. If, on top of these qualities, the plait is known to be ethically made and to generate a fair income for a community in the developing world, made from natural and sustainable materials, consumers may be persuaded to pay a premium for a product that is hand crafted in every respect. This will not be enough to 'shape the human universe' (Greenhalgh, 2002, p18) but may add to a continuing debate about the ethical sourcing of materials and products, where craft is able to make a contribution.

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### Photographs:

- Fig 1. Scott, K. (April, 2007) Sleeping mats in Jinja craft shop, Uganda
- Fig 2. Scott, K. (April, 2007) Four strand rustic plait, Bulange, Uganda
- Fig 3. Scott, K. (November, 2007) Ruth's hat
- Fig 4. Scott, K. (November, 2007) New spiky plait made by group members, Bulange, Uganda
- Fig 5. Scott, K. (November, 2008) Group members with plait bundles, Bulange, Uganda

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