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Interweaving answers and questions in Scottish vernacular basketry

Introduction

This paper, developed for *Making Futures* 2013, is a summary of some key issues related to problem solving which have developed through research conducted for the Woven Communities Project, a part of the AHRC Connected Communities Programme. Woven Communities is a collaboration between several Scottish basket makers (see Figure 1) from the Scottish Basketmakers Circle and the author, an anthropologist at the University of St Andrews – an academic, albeit a basket-making, willow-working one.

Figure 1 Scottish basketeers with creels. Credit: Scottish Basketmakers Circle

The project follows Scottish basket makers' autodidactic research into the social history of Scottish vernacular basketry. The anthropological input has raised questions about processes of learning, enskillment (including problem solving) and intergenerational communication. The basketry input has raised questions about practice as a means of generating talk and thought, and as an engaged way of coming to know a subject. The project has involved working together at all levels, including on museum research; replica making; attending regional events such as the Royal Highland Show and local agricultural shows; demonstrating and teaching making baskets, which in itself elicits a public response; and constructing an interactive website of the project. Through our work we have found that there has long been a pattern of interdisciplinary basketry culture 'transmission' in Scotland, synthesising the practical and the conceptual – an overlap between basket makers old and new, collectors, academics, autodidacts, social reformists, botanists, curators – all with an interest in this subject. We have found ourselves members of just one very recent stage of an ongoing, overlapping, interconnected, interwoven basketry community.

The Scottish vernacular basket

For the benefits of this paper, I take basketry to include baskets, mats, rope making, traps, screens and other related artefacts woven from plant material. As such, basketry is a technique for making baskets and beyond. This technique involves incorporating tension into diverse plant materials to produce a range of constructed textiles which, while using stranded, linear or threadlike materials for their construction, become transformed through weaving, coiling, plaiting or twining into structured two- or three-dimensional forms (see Figure 2) (Ellen 2009; Wendrich 1991, 1999).

Figure 2 Knitting basket from grass and willow from Arachle or Argyle. Credit: Highland Folk Museum.

On initial assessment, Scottish vernacular basketry seems to be a straightforwardly utilitarian practice. There is usually little added colour or decoration, nor is it directly linked to any obvious contemporary meaning system or aesthetic such as one might find in other parts of the world, such as, for example, Yekuana baskets as discussed by Guss (1989), or Dogon baskets as discussed by Griaule (1965). For these latter groups, basketry is woven into social mythology, linking person, body and cosmos through creation myths and cultural action. For Scottish basketry, while until recently interwoven with all manner of social and cultural practices, its role as container or other domestic artefact, drawing on local plant ecology and responding to social and economic needs, is what shines through.

At a pragmatic level, basketry is itself a solution to several problems linked to human domestic and economic activities, most particularly containing and carrying things. I would argue that it is a uniquely human solution. Indeed, I have only come across one animal, the fairy lamp spider, which makes structures for containment and transport, as opposed to nests, shelters or traps, which are far more ubiquitous woven forms across the animal kingdom.

Basketry is a tremendously old human solution to this problem. The technique is probably older than that used in any other textile (Mellaart 1966; Wendrich 1999). As a form of weaving technique, it is arguably close to our gestural system. And it is a true fabric of society, providing solutions to problems of transport and containment, along with matting, trapping, shelter and bodily protection across the world, long before we had mechanised systems for making carrier bags, cardboard boxes or shopping trolleys. In Scotland, until recently, baskets provided an interface between people and so many aspects of domestic, social and economic life, from fishing to farming, crofting to home-building, from industry to the military – indeed baskets did not immediately become obsolete with the onset of the industrial revolution, rather they were initially essential for its development.

What is problem solving in basketry?

Problem solving often suggests something out of the ordinary, going about one's work and encountering awkward or tricky moments, focusing on difficulties that need to be resolved. Problem solving can also be a critical part of the design process, where there is a block on making progress or a new development, which can be solved, suggests Sennett (2009[2008]: 280), by alternating between trying to approach the problem head-on and 'going with the flow', or also by stepping sideways, trying new materials or new skills, and then switching back, comparing and changing. Furthermore says Sennett, while 'studies of ability often dwell on problem-solving … that act … is intimately connected to problem finding'.

I would suggest that, in contrast to this 'one-off' kind of problem solving, in basketry, problem solving is a part of the process of the work, not something exceptional. Basketry technique is quite standardised and formalised for specific basket forms. For example, for Scottish creels, quarter crans and some line baskets, the maker will often specify precisely the numbers and sizes of stakes and/or strands required (see Figure 3), along with the exact height and depth of the basket. Yet despite this apparent uniformity, the maker is nevertheless solving problems from moment to moment in basketwork, drawing on basketry practices and techniques to do so, techniques which are a part of the process. As such, basketry problem solving is therefore a part of the rhythm, the weave, the aesthetic, the tension of basketwork.

Figure 3 Detail of frame basket showing range of strands. Credit: Highland Folk Museum.

As an illustration, the skilled practitioner, who is highly aware of the subtleties of tension involved in building up a basket, might use a different thickness of material from strand to newly introduced strand, just to introduce a different pressure and change the shape a fraction if a willow stake in the structure is uneven and could alter the form of the basket. Or the maker might use a different degree of hand-pressure to similar effect. This is a result of working with plant materials which are of their nature uneven to the extent that they can disrupt the form of the outcome from moment to moment. A second, and the most fundamental, illustration of continued problem solving in basketry is that in weaving a basket the maker is creating a three-dimensional structure at the same time as using it as the frame or 'loom' on which they are weaving (see Figure 4). The basket acts therefore as both product and technology, both form and frame on which it is made. This integrated technology and form, and basketry's associated need for continued problem solving and attendance to the work explains why no basket can be made by machine (Mason 1895).

Figure 4 Kishie making at Woven Communities symposium with Ewen Balfour. Credit: Scottish Basketmakers Circle

Aside from these two core practical factors, three further aspects of problem solving illustrated through Scottish vernacular basketry are materials, adaptation to change and mending.

Materials

Materials are inextricably linked with the technique and final form of baskets. In the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, there is one very famous museum case containing string and basketry artefacts from around the world, several examples of which use quite different materials and techniques while producing similar final results. This display evokes a 'chicken and egg' question of whether any of these three aspects of the basketry process (that is materials, technique or form) directed the development and use of the other.

Decisions involved in material use for Scottish baskets are closely linked to local plant ecology, but historical and cultural factors also play a part. Considering the decisions made in choice of materials for baskets suggests that the resistance created through limitations of materials in some regions of Scotland are a linked aspect of the dynamic, improvisatory, flexible and iterative process of basketry problem solving. People think laterally and use what is at hand, adapting technique where necessary, while being immersed in specific socio-cultural contexts.

In the Scottish Highlands and Northern and Western Isles, access to basketry materials varies widely. Arguably the two most usual British basketry materials are willow, and then rush. These plants do not grow so well in the more extreme mountain or island regions of Scotland so that, of necessity, Scottish vernacular basketry is integrally bound up with plant ecology. Aside from rush and willow, plants that are used in Scottish basket-making practice include heather, straw, moorland rush (*floss*), marram grass (*bent*) and docks (*dockens*). Hairmoss was also used in the past. The use of plants is also bound up with historical connections to both Ireland and also Scandinavia and Viking culture. Thus creels on the Western Isles – Lewis, Harris, the Uists and Skye – are more likely to be similar to the Irish creel and made from willow, hazel or heather (see Figure 5). One Skye basket maker[1] told me of two postmen from Harris who travelled to Skye each year to collect hazel for baskets. On Shetland and Orkney, the influence is more Viking, and straw or *dockens* are often used for back baskets, which here are called *kishies* or *caisies*. The weaving technique for these latter materials is quite different from that on back creels from other regions, although the form is similar. The curator of Shetland museum[2] told me that even from one coast to another, materials might vary from bent grass to *dockens* or straw for one basket form, depending on availability, yet the strokes remained similar (see Figure 6). When new materials such as rattan were introduced across the UK, a specific new technique was essential, however (see Figure 7). Yet some people from the Islands did try to weave this material in local strokes, and also many kept to the old materials, although they were less durable than rattan.

Figure 5 Heather back creel, Badenoch. Credit: Highland Folk Museum.

Figure 6 Shetland Museum, straw. Credit: Highland Folk Museum.

Figure 7 East coast creel from rattan. Credit: Highland Folk Museum.

Adaptation to change

Perhaps indicative of basketry's pervasiveness as an accepted fabric of society in Scotland was its adaptations to economic change as new forms of work and uses came along. Its success as a living craft may also have been reflected in its adaptable character and the range of possible uses and forms it afforded (Gibson 1966) along with the flexibility, improvisatory and dynamic nature of the practice.

Thus, with the development of the herring industry alongside regional line fishing in the nineteenth century, came the introduction of woven herring quarter crans (see Figure 8), an official royal herring measure certified by inspector's stamp. This was a stake and strand rather than a frame basket, which was historically more common. Less well-made crans could be adapted as general working fish baskets and larger, more developed, forms also came to be used as great line baskets. Their capacity to draw on local use of materials also contributed to their adaptive quality. With the Highland clearances, where people were often moved to the extreme limits of Scottish land such as the remote Monach Islands off Uist, where there were almost no raw materials available, bent (marram) grass was woven into waterproof grain bags to transport grain across the sea to the mill.

Figure 8 Quarter cran, other fishing baskets and frame basket. Credit: Scottish Fisheries Museum, Anstruther.

With the industrial revolution, baskets were at first essential for containing and transporting goods and materials in Scottish mills, factories and distilleries, as well as for use in hospitals and the military. Mechanization did not make basketry obsolete, rather there was an explosion in the need for new forms to transport the expanding products of new industry. Such a demand for baskets led to the development of basketworks and the growth of blind asylums where basketry became a source of income for the disenfranchised. The Highland Home Industries also fostered new developments and training of crofters and Highland housewives in the use of new forms and technique. Baskets were made for hot air balloons, hospital cots, surgical dressings, factory skips and post vans, and were used in all means of travel.

Mending

The kind of heavy work for which baskets were used on crofts from Shetland to Lewis meant that baskets such as woven straw *kishies* or heather creels often lasted little more than one season, or a year at most. Similarly in the fishing industry, the life span of a quarter cran was very short, often just a few months. Baskets are not easy to mend because new strands have to be inserted into what has become a quite rigid structure, so it is often easier to use them until they fall apart and then to throw them away, and start again. Since they biodegrade, there is a quite sustainable aspect to this. Nevertheless, it was all more work and, in the domestic sphere, for the housewife who may have paid cash for her basket and was not able to mend it, a broken basket handle was a loss. Scottish travellers saw this as one problem they could solve and make a living

from and thus by mending the baskets, whether through adding new struts or just a piece of wire, the householders' problem became a partial solution to their own means of subsistence.

Baskets as solutions to questions not asked

Aside from these aspects to basketry problem solving, there is the question of basketry answers – at times excessively wonderful basketry solutions – which appear to have arisen without obvious stimulation from any problem, even in the face of adversity or hardship. Most particularly, the question arises about the reason for making delightful, beautiful, even marvellous baskets, showing developments in dexterity and skill, and which seem to be artefacts of quality which came about through no impetus other than a need to find the best possible solution for a specific task. These are answers in search of a question, perhaps revealing a necessity not articulated.

Such unprompted solutions include variation and seeking after perfection. If Scottish vernacular baskets were just 'homely Highland things', utilitarian and made for use until worn out and unmendable, why was there an impetus or 'need' for variation and for the pursuit of excellence as there so clearly has been among some basket makers (Grant 2007)?

Illustrations here include the diverse forms of the line basket or scull which vary around the Scottish coast despite being made of quite similar materials and for similar use throughout Scotland. Thus while most line baskets developed from the use of willow to rattan over the last century or more, they did so in many different ways. Contrast the deep, bowl-shaped line sculls from Cromarty with flattened-out line sculls just a short distance around the coast from Arbroath, as made by Peter Lindsay, for example. Lindsay's work is also a case in point in regard to the pursuit of excellence in Scottish vernacular basketry. He is one of the few named basket makers we have discovered from the past, and he did this work in his spare time from working at an Arbroath mill during the day. His work suggests the use of boat-building equipment for creating laminated frames for the sculls, as opposed to bent hazel or willow. The attention to detail in the finish and the evenness of the weave suggests a maker who was concerned to develop his work as finely as possible, which probably explains its collection by the National Museum of Scotland and presence in the 1951 *Living Traditions Exhibition* part of the Festival of Britain (HMSO 1951).

Other remarkable, beautiful, apparently unnecessary solutions to this kind of unnamed problem, made far from the demands of mainstream use, include the Monach Isles grain basket, Western Isles straw horse collars, and simple bait cubbies from Shetland, made from heather or floss. In all cases, it is difficult to explain the reasons for creating such beautiful work in situations of such restraint, utilitarian necessity and short artefact lifespan.

Figure 9 Fine horse collar from bent (marram) grass, North Uist. Credit: Highland Folk Museum.

This final section provokes reflection on human motivations in craft rather than providing solutions. At the panel discussion in *Making Futures*, proposals ranged from suggesting that such aims for perfection are an inherent aspect of handwork to more nihilistic views. Gareth Neal suggested that restraint is often a feature of such a striving for excellence, a view which resonates with the concerns of design philosopher Wilhelm Flusser (1999), and to a degree

my own. All contributions to the debate gave only partial solutions to this question, however. As human beings, such efforts at improvement in our work are both a feature of our development as a species, and are important motivations for new developments in design and technology more specifically. For now, we can just puzzle on this while continuing to be content that some craft workers, at least, see the need both to work to solve existing problems and provide answers to problems which are not always evidently there.

Notes

. I am indebted to Skye basket maker and artist Caroline Dear for telling me this.

[2.] Thanks to Dr Ian Tait, Curator of Collections at Shetland Museum, for this information.

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