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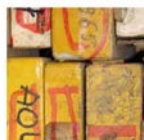
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## **Beyond 'Nourishing the Soul of a Nation':**

## **Craft in the Context of South Africa**

Making Futures Conference II



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## Abstract

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There has always been a close link between craft and the economic empowerment of marginalised people in developing world countries. However, the South African government has recently taken an explicit step forward in optimising the contribution of craft as a powerful engine of economic growth and promoting development in a globalising world. The traditional paradigm of NGOs working with community based organisations to instigate craft interventions is changing, no more so than in South Africa.

This paper gives a brief overview of the context of craft in South Africa, focusing on two current grassroots craft producer groups in the Kwa-Zulu Natal region - the Siyazama Project and Umcebo Trust - and discusses the future of craft in South Africa. It stems from my practice-based PhD researching the role of practice in collaboration between designers and craft producers in South Africa.

The Siyazama Project was founded in 1999 to inform and educate a small group of rural women traditional bead doll makers on the concerns and taboos surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Today the project functions as a bead craft collective. Umcebo Trust was set up in 2003 as a non-profit organisation and has recently taken the decision to revise this and become a 'for profit' business, although their core philosophy of empowering those marginalised in society to develop their creativity as a means of development and income generation stays the same.

This paper examines these current craft methodologies and investigates whether they are able to address the South African government's assertion that craft and the creative industries can move 'beyond nourishing the soul of a nation' (DAC 2011, p.7).

## **The South African Craft Sector**

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South Africa has a long tradition and history of craft varying from the ancient, utilitarian work of the San of the Kalahari, the high quality, established designer/makers selling in the chic boutiques of Sandton, to the contemporary, informal craft of Cape Town and a myriad between. In Africa, an array of different craft traditions exists and in South Africa this includes pottery, textiles, jewellery, metal work, basketry, wirework, beadwork and objects made from recycled materials.

The definition of 'craft' in South Africa is blurred with terms such as 'indigenous art', 'curio' and 'craft art', and traditionally there has been no clear distinction between fine art and craft (Sellschop et al., 2002, p.26). This lack of definition is informed by South Africa's history of apartheid that did not value indigenous craft and art. Ironically apartheid was also responsible for the preservation of traditional craft skills such as basket weaving in Kwa-Zulu Natal. In the 1950s and 1960s the 'native' education policy encouraged crafts such as basketry and pottery to be taught in rural schools (Nettleton 2010, p.56).

Joffe asserts that craft has a major contribution to make to South Africa and states that craft and visual arts in the Southern African Development Community [SADC] region play an important role in terms of employment and income generation and offer great potential for growth in local and international markets (2003, p.xi). The Department of Trade and Industry estimates that the South African craft sector contributes R1.1 billion to GDP, employing approximately 38,000 people<sup>□</sup> (DAC, 2011, p. 18). These statistics are widely quoted in literature published about South African craft however, as Elk points out in the 2004 CCDI report *The South African Craft Sector*, 'no one really knows for sure how accurate it is as there is no formal process to gather statistical data. This is perhaps the best indicator of the informal nature of the craft sector in South Africa and the road still to be travelled' (Elk, 2004, p. 1).

During the 1990s, the craft sector was identified as a priority growth area by the South African Government and has been a beneficiary of millions of Rands from poverty alleviation funds as well as the introduction of numerous craft-based initiatives including Creative SA,<sup>□</sup> the Legends Programme and the Handmade in South Africa brand to name a few.

As well as Government there are currently many agencies and organisations working directly with craft producers with, it could be argued, varying degrees of success. A notable example is the high profile 2002 London-South Africa [LOSA] project that partnered established UK designers with Kwa-Zulu Natal craft producers to make high-end products that sold at a one-off Sotheby's auction, but did not deliver the stated aim of 'creating a wider market for South African craft workers' (Sotheby's, 2002).

Although the national Craft Council of South Africa no longer exists regional organisations have been more successful in establishing themselves and actively participating in the sector. The Cape Craft and Design Institute (CCDI) supports craft producers with business training, market access, product development and helps to network all players in the product-to-market chain. They provide training and facilitate product support groups for networking. Another visibly active NGO is The Africa Craft Trust in Johannesburg that has recently developed out of a lengthy intervention by the American non-profit organisation, Aid to Artisans. Their mission is to implement programmes 'which enable the growth of commercially viable craft enterprises and invests in the holistic support of crafters and the sector' ([www.africacrafttrust.org.za](http://www.africacrafttrust.org.za)).

The education sector also provides support in this area, not only in the provision of formal education in the creative industries, but with initiatives such as the Cape Town based Fab Lab. Located at the CCDI and initially sponsored by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Fab Lab provides a platform for crafters and designers in skills upgrading, knowledge transfer and access to technology. The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is also active in this role, developing and testing new approaches to craft development in rural communities. Both of these organisations provide important, expensive resources that are invaluable to craft producers in developing their products and testing new ideas.

The expansion of the craft sector in South Africa, along with the growth of design, has led to an increase in exhibition platforms in the country and includes the annual Design Expo at the Design Indaba Conference in Cape Town, Decorex, SARCEA and South Africa Handmade Collection in Johannesburg. These are growing each year and report an increase in international visitors and export orders.

## **The Changing Landscape of South African Craft**

There has always been a close link between craft and the economic empowerment of marginalised people in developing world countries. In 2008 the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD) identified that there is:

'A new development paradigm emerging that links the economy and culture, embracing economic, cultural, technological and social aspects of development at both the macro and micro levels. Central to the new paradigm is the fact that creativity, knowledge and access to information are increasingly recognised as powerful engines driving economic growth and promoting development in a globalising world' (UNCTD 2008, p.3).

The South African government has recently taken an explicit step forward in optimising the contribution of craft to economic growth and development. As Paul Mashatile, Minister of Arts & Culture, said at a recent consultative conference<sup>□</sup> on the South African creative economy:

The new vision of arts and culture goes beyond social cohesion and nourishing the soul of the nation. We believe that arts, culture and heritage play a pivotal role in the economic empowerment and skills development of a people. (DAC 2011, p.7)

Historically, international development agencies and NGOs [particularly church based] were key instigators in many craft projects in South Africa, especially in rural areas. In Kwa-Zulu Natal the Lutheran Church established the African Art Centre at Rorke's Drift and the Reverend Lofroth initiated the Vukani Arts Association of basket weavers. White women founded many others, for example Aardmore Ceramics, Monkeybiz and Kaross Embroidery. Alison Coutras set up Kunye, a project whose women make craft from recycled materials, in 1995 in Cape Town as 'a personal contribution to unemployment' ([www.kunye.org](http://www.kunye.org)).

However, the traditional paradigm of development agencies and NGOs implementing craft interventions with grassroots projects in the developing world seems to be changing. More recently, with the 'emergence of transnational craft practices, there is increasing "outsourcing" of craft techniques from consumer societies to the Global South' (Murray, 2010). The rise of interest in 'authenticity' to combat the homogenizing effects of globalization and the increase of high profile designers, such as Prada, working with craft producers in India, Peru and Japan for their 'Made in ...' collection has also contributed to this change. Most notably, the American non-profit organization Aid to Artisans has implemented several different designer interventions. In 2007 the ceramicist Hella Jongerius and Peruvian potters produced the 'Beads and Pieces'

collection and designer Stephen Burks worked with Feeling African in Cape Town to produce the 'Ta Tu' table retailed by Artecnic.

## **Two Craft Project Models**

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Based in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province, the Siyazama Project and Umcebo Trust are two craft models with similar objectives although structured differently. Kwa-Zulu Natal is an area with a longstanding history and tradition of craft production, predominantly beadwork, basketry and woodcarving. This mainly rural province in the East is beset with widespread poverty and burdened with the affects of HIV/AIDS.

The Siyazama Project was founded in 1999, through the Durban Institute of Technology and initially funded by the Department for International Development (DfID).<sup>□</sup> The women of the Siyazama Project use the traditional Kwa-Zulu craft of beadwork and doll making to communicate their concerns about the previously taboo subject of HIV and AIDS. Traditionally in Kwa-Zulu Natal beadwork and doll making were used as ways of visually recording experiences. The Siyazama Project women utilise this tradition by developing contemporary works to communicate their understanding and concerns regarding HIV/AIDS. The titles of these works – for example, *The Coffin Story*, *AIDS Orphans*, *Unsafe Sex* and *Virginity Testing* - depict the narrative of the pieces.

As Professor Kate Wells who implemented the project reports the women used the medium of beadwork communication passed down to them by their mothers and grandmothers to express their new understanding of sex and HIV/AIDS. They have addressed a cultural taboo and effected socio-cultural transformation, thus 'quite literally changing themselves and the world in which they live' (Wells et al. 2004, p.88).

Originally a simple proposition to upgrade craft techniques, the project has now established itself as an effective HIV/AIDS intervention within development. In recent years, the methodologies within the project have been trialed in rural Uganda and a book about the Siyazama project is published later this year by UKZN Press. The women's work has been exhibited internationally and the economic benefits to them have been considerable (Guille 2007, p.62). These were developed further in 2009 and 2010 through workshops with the European design collectives Front<sup>□</sup> and BCXSY<sup>□</sup> who, with the women, developed a series of beaded vases, which were favourably reviewed when launched at Milan earlier this year.

Umcebo<sup>□</sup> Trust was set up in 2003 as a non-profit organisation, in much the same way as many NGOs in South Africa, with the aim of empowering those marginalised in society to use their creativity as a means of development and income generation through craft and design. Umcebo is an isiZulu word meaning 'treasure' and The Paradise Project is a typical Umcebo intervention. Working with the Diakonia Refugee Social Services in Durban, Umcebo is facilitating a series of needlework workshops for a group of African refugees, mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe.<sup>□</sup> Using off-cuts donated by a local fashion designer, they translate their images into textile decoration using applique and beads to make decorative wall hangings, bags and mobile phone holders. The products will be launched at an exhibition later this year and sold to make money for the group. The wall hangings tell the story of how the refugees came to be in South Africa and what the future, their 'paradise', would look like. Umcebo 'believes that helping people develop, create and earn money inevitably benefits us all by building a society based on mutual respect and positive activity, and not poverty and despair' (2010).

After eight years struggling to source donor funding and subsidising a retail outlet for the craftwork, Umcebo has taken the decision to change into a 'for profit' business, although their core philosophy of empowering those marginalised in society remains. In this way Umcebo's founder Robin Opperman believes they will be obliged to work in a much more business-like way, moving out of the dependency culture that a non-profit traditionally

engenders. Tellingly, this new business model, Umcebo Design, has meant the closure of their unprofitable shop.

This transition sees an interesting move by craft based non-profit and NGOs, and is becoming increasingly common in South Africa, with many established craft-based projects set up as non-profits with a for profit angle to their business or vice versa. To be competitive within the market place and therefore sustainable, this two-pronged approach is an important one. If these projects are to survive, moving 'beyond nourishing the soul of a nation', it is crucial that a sustainable, effective working methodology is established. Previous research (Craft Revival Trust et al. 2005, Murray 2010) advocates that this should be a holistic framework, encompassing craft skills, design and business. Whilst this binary strategy now being adopted by craft organisations would seem to be contradictory, it may rather be the logical approach to both developing a successful business and at the same time growing a social enterprise.

Whilst the objectives of both the Siyazama Project and Umcebo are similar, their organizational structures are quite different. Both projects initially stemmed from developing craft skills for economic empowerment for marginalized groups; rural women bead workers in the case of Siyazama and disadvantaged members of society in Durban for Umcebo. However, whilst the Durban University of Technology loosely supports the Siyazama women, they take responsibility for selling their products themselves. Umcebo takes a much more formal role in selling their craft producers goods. Since the closure of their shop, they have recently joined forces with another Durban based NGO Woza Moya to run a small retail outlet together.

I would argue that the differences in organisational structure have influenced the development and varying levels of success of both projects. The involvement in the Siyazama Project of the Durban University of Technology has meant a steady stream of research, exhibitions, papers, conference involvement and designer interventions over the years. In contrast to this flow of energy, ideas and development, Umcebo has one director who, until recently, was dependent on donors and other outside agencies for funding and development. However, with the transition from Umcebo Trust to Umcebo Design this is changing and fine art students from the Durban University of Technology are also involved in the new retail outlet, along with Woza Moya. It will be interesting to see the outcome of these new relationships.

## Concluding Remarks

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Earlier this year the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) stated that:

Our culture and heritage are key to social cohesion and nation building, and these are the ingredients for creating a climate of social stability and economic growth; [And also that,]

The creative economy of South Africa has the potential to be a leading sector in generating economic growth, employment and trade as in many advanced economies. (2011).

These are high expectations to place on an already saturated craft industry, which is beginning to be permeated by 'South African' craft made in China.

The current Government emphasis for craft development is on entrepreneurship, so much so that the Cape Town Small Business Week has recently changed its name to Cape Town Entrepreneurship Week. This stress on entrepreneurship could be a cause for concern; not everyone who works in craft production wants to be an entrepreneur, some would prefer to be employees; not all craft producers have the skills and the capacity to be an entrepreneur and the question needs to be asked is the market big enough for a greater craft production, particularly with the rise in DIY craft and easier market access through the internet? As Robin Opperman recently wrote to me 'so many organisations are in a fight for survival. A lot of the larger enterprises have break evens of between R200,000 and R300,000 per month, so they are under huge pressure just to meet those financial demands.' During my research, I am regularly asked if I know possible new UK customers and markets.

The Government is placing huge emphasis on the ability of craft to transform the lives of South Africans, particularly those in marginalised areas of society. Because of this, and the recent rise of interest in craft in consumer societies, it would seem that the future will bring many changes to craft in South Africa, not only in the structure of craft organisations. I believe these changes will involve design, which has also seen significant change in South Africa over the last few years so I'd like to leave you with a quote about South African craft from Marissa Fick-Jordaan, founder of the design-led craft business Zen Zulu, based in Durban:

Although art, craft and design are historically seen as separate disciplines, our contemporary world is increasingly turning towards a fusion of the traditional with the modern, resulting in an exciting new hybrid pushing the boundaries of new forms, materials, techniques, functions and technologies... Rigid categories carry ideological and cultural baggage and are in constant flux, but what remains a constant is that human skill, invention and handwork infuses life into products. (2009)

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