

Katherine Ladd

“My Skill is Exhausted”: issues of authenticity and sustainability in the revival of West African strip weaving

In Ghana there is a pattern of kente¹ strip weaving, originally from imported silk yarns and now from rayon, called adwiniasa, which translates as ‘my skill is exhausted’ to convey the high level of expertise required to make it (Lamb 1975: 141; Picton and Mack 1979: 125). Narrow strips of woven cloth are sewn together to form the overall pattern of the larger cloth, and so the skill of weaver lies not only in producing the strip weave, but also in aligning this weaving so that the end product is a pleasing and coherent piece of work. How much of this amazing technique remains in West Africa is difficult to estimate, but one thing is patently clear, as a walk through any West African street market will testify: cheap, imported textiles far outnumber the locally spun, hand-woven, hand-dyed masterpieces that used to proliferate. Although there is still a strong demand in Ghana for the type of cloth described above, in other parts of West Africa, according to some, the skill of the weaver could indeed be described as ‘exhausted.’ This paper aims to debate how true this is and whether efforts to ‘revive’ the strip weaving in one particular country can be described as either authentic or sustainable.

Strip weaving in Burkina Faso

Over the last two years I have been following a new charity which is based in Burkina Faso, an impoverished, landlocked country in the heart of West Africa. This charity, which for the sake of discretion I will call Project X, has an ambition to revive the ancient craft of strip weaving by producing cotton interior accessories and fashion for the European and North American markets. Its wider remit is to save all the world’s traditional crafts from extinction, but has chosen Burkina Faso for the pilot project because of its status as one of Africa’s largest producers of cotton, although the bulk of the raw cotton is exported at little profit for the producers. The country is home to some 300,000 weavers who use the narrow, double-heddle loom that is so typical of the region. The width of the cloth they produce ranges from 8cm to 21cm, hence the term strip weaving, and is generally of raw, creamy cotton that is then sewn together and dyed in a variety of ways. The cloth either has motifs woven directly into it or the motifs are embroidered afterwards to simulate this more complicated kind of weave. This method of weaving is at least a thousand years old and has not changed in all that time, with the oldest archeological remains of similar cotton strip weaving found in caves in Mali (Bolland 1992: 62) being dated at around the 11th century² and the sun-Saharan trade of textiles is even more ancient (Gilfoy 1987: 18).

In some areas of West Africa strips of cloth were even used as currency, and it has a history that has been well-documented by scholars of African textiles (Lamb 1975; Picton and Mack 1979; Gilfoy 1987; Kriger 2006). Its importance within West African society in the past as a signifier of social status cannot be over-emphasised, although this has been mitigated over the last fifty years as Africa has embraced the kind of Americanisation that is found all over the world.

In terms of dress, however, West Africa is still conservative in its tastes and almost every woman on the streets of Burkina’s capital, Ouagadougou, is dressed

in the local style: long, tight skirt, bodice and headdress of contrasting fabrics and matching baby-tie. It is an elegant ensemble made from the distinctive imported printed cotton fabrics that have come to symbolise modern African textiles, and the men echo this taste for colour and pattern in shirts tailored from the same fabrics, but of western design. Richer members of Burkinabe society dress luxuriously; the men in tailored western suits, the women in hand-blocked silks. The only other mode of dress is second-hand western clothing that is the preserve of the very poor. No-one is dressed in the old-fashioned strip weaving. In the distant past strip weaving had been worn by many people until, as one weaver told me, 'the white people came and made us wear proper clothes.' Although rarely used as clothing in modern times, the exception being festivals and ritual occasions, the strip woven cloths made into wedding bankets are nonetheless highly prized amongst women in central Burkina Faso who collect them as gifts, or pass them through several generations of women in one family (Roy 2002) and one weaver I met in Kadougou³ told me that he could hardly keep up with the demand for these ceremonial couvertures.

The weavers

In the capital city of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, the ateliers of the weavers are the yards outside their homes where they set up their looms with the distinctive trailing metres of the warp threads, held in tension by a large stone that is dragged slowly towards the loom as the weaving progresses. The weavers in the city fall into two categories: professional males, who make the bespoke traditional couvertures for weddings and cloth lengths that will be coutured into an outfit by a client's personal tailor, or women who use a wider, metal upright loom and are generally working in co-operatives as a way to make money in difficult circumstances; as widows or divorcées. These women make a lighter, wider, more modern cloth using fine, machined yarn, in bright colours and often using imported Japanese lurex as a component, a very sought-after effect amongst their clients and generally used for evening dresses.

In the countryside the system of weaving is altogether different as the weavers are predominantly male, women being relegated to processing the cotton fibre: carding and spinning by hand. People living here are amongst the poorest in the world, with no electricity or sanitation, dependent on unreliable harvests and with little or no schooling after the age of 10 or 11 years. Only the young boys from about 10 years old start their apprenticeships with local weaving masters, their simple looms of local wood arranged in lines under the shade of trees. The girls are occupied with domestic chores from a very young age, with little time for activities such as weaving, but learn to spin the yarn and have their own hierarchy within village life (Aronson 1991). The girls also tend to marry young⁴. The robust, *ecru*, narrow strip weaving produced in the countryside is wound into large reels and sold wholesale almost exclusively to traders who then sell on the cloth to be sewn into pagnes⁵ and either intricately tie-dyed with indigo or painted with mud, known as bogolan⁶.

On a visit to the state-sponsored Village Artisanale, a large complex of shops and ateliers in the centre of Ouagadougou devoted to the promotion of Burkina Faso's artisans, one can buy basketry, metalwork, pottery, woodwork, jewellery and weaving, whilst viewing the artisans as they work in their ateliers. All of these crafts are squarely aimed at the tourist trade but many of them are imported from other areas and are of varying quality, some with little connection to Burkina's indigenous craft traditions. In the middle of the complex there is a large, air-conditioned shop that also contains indigo-dyed strip cloth, leather bags and sandals. Places in the workshops are in high demand amongst the local

Burkinabé artisans, due to what they consider to be the hugely inflated prices that can be charged, and the goods that are produced here find their way all over the world. The weavers in the centre are all female and use the metal upright looms that produce the lighter, wider cloth.

Bringing strip weave to the west

The challenges for Project X were manifold: to come up with new ways to use the strip weaving that would be appealing to western consumers and thus generate income amongst the weavers, to nurture a sense of cultural pride in the producers that would lead to higher levels of quality, and to develop a contemporary collection of fashion and interior furnishings that could be entirely manufactured in Burkina Faso from its own, locally grown, organic cotton. Project X decided to establish a high-end brand that celebrated the 'purity' of the strip weaving – presenting it as an expensive and luxurious commodity, entirely hand-spun, hand-woven and subsequently hand-sewn into various fashion and interior products.

As a designer it seemed to me that re-inventing this material was a tricky proposition. Although I had seen at close quarters how the cloth had been laboriously made entirely by hand from the field to the loom, I was intrigued as to how to re-work something that was so utterly alien to me as a cultural object, whilst keeping some sense of its original function or value. How was it possible to achieve this without taking the textiles out of their local context, making them a mere 'visual statement of...past glory' ? (Jaitly 1989: 170) One of the stipulations placed on the development of the luxury brand was that everything had to be 'authentic' and 'traditional' so that it could be marketed as an example of genuine African craft that had not been tainted by any mechanical process. Project X wanted to emphasise the labour intensive element, from planting the cotton and weaving on simple stick looms to the final hand-stitched clothes and couvertures. There was also a heavy emphasis placed on the need for good quality and controls to ensure this quality remained as high as possible. To that end Project X began a systematic yarn calibration exercise, monitoring the strip weaving weight and evenness over a period of time, and introducing incentives for consistent, 'good' quality cloth production amongst the rural weavers and spinners, paying only for what Project X considered to be high quality and rejecting any inferior cloth. The idea was that this would engender good practice amongst the weavers and would eventually lead to an autonomous, self-regulated system of quality checking without the need for supervision.

When I visited the atelier of a young urban weaver called Tebi in Ouagadougou I saw samples of strip weaving that had very simple animal motifs woven directly into the cloth. He explained that these motifs were very old traditional weaving patterns adopted by various families as their 'totems' but that he could not remember their significance. Tebi also showed me some samples where he had obviously made an attempt to innovate, having been asked by Project X to produce weaving with horse motifs, but his efforts (although admittedly I thought them humorous, charming and a perfect example of modern Burkinabé weaving) were unfortunately deemed unacceptable. The result was, as the Project X director wryly commented, "more reminiscent of a donkey than a stallion."

The first strip weaving fashion show

In order to demonstrate the suitability of the fabric, strip-woven natural cotton was the choice of the Project X director for a collection of conceptual fashion that was to be presented to a Burkinabé audience for the first time. The fashion collection had been sewn entirely by hand at a women's artisanal training college in Ouagadougou under the supervision of the charity's Creative Director, a talented fashion designer from Martinique, and featured accessories made from cowrie shells and skeins of cotton.

The 4 star Hotel Mercure in Ouagadougou is an air-conditioned haven of palm trees, bars, restaurants and large, blue swimming pool in a firecely hot, humid and chokingly polluted city. This was the venue for the fashion show, with an impressive, western-style catwalk constructed over the pool, and tables on all sides where a four course dinner for 400 guests, complete with champagne, would be served. The show was funded by the organisers of a major cotton policy conference and was timed to coincide with the last day, so that foreign delegates and a slice of Ouagadougou's elite could appreciate an interpretation of Burkina Faso's cotton heritage. Project X transported weavers from the villages to the capital to be guests at the banquet so that they could see how their weaving was being used, and to gain an understanding of the market. The contrast between the villages, without electricity, running water and sanitation, and the luxurious surroundings of the hotel was stark; a perfect metaphor for the enormous divide between rich and poor that affects Burkina Faso just as it does developed countries.

The first model out onto the catwalk was a young boy of about 13 years old, wearing nothing but a short froufrou skirt of strip weaving and pompoms around his ankles. The subsequent clothes and accessories were perfectly simple and unaffected, with a definite European aesthetic of rough-edged insouciance that was more art than fashion, and even included a spectacular, Caribbean-inspired wedding dress made entirely from lengths of strip weaving. The models walked slowly down the catwalk accompanied by traditional village music from Burkina Faso, holding lengths of cotton yarn as bouquets. The men's fashion referenced the simple blousons and knee-length trousers that used to be worn in rural areas before colonial times and the overall impression was that of some delightful African idyll. With a fashion photographer recording the entire show, and following up with stunning studio shots, the charity's director decided that the entire collection would be taken to Paris Fashion Week as an example of traditional African style.

Modernity in Africa, just like everywhere else

The charge that modernity is somehow inappropriate to the well-being of pre-industrial societies can perhaps be levelled at Project X through its insistence on 'authentic' weaving practices, and in its prescriptive attitude towards modern African fashion, or the local taste. There is little appreciation of how the Burkinabé consume a mixture of cultures in a globalised world. It is as though the 'real' Africa is somehow pure and unadulterated, unlike the modernity of the west that presumedly seeks to undermine it. Rousseau's novel *Émile* begins with the words, 'Everything is good as it comes from the hand of the Author of nature, but everything degenerates in the hands of man.' (Cranston 1991; 175) Rousseau argues for the seclusion of the 'innocent' from the corrupting influences of society and from the colonial patronage of Christian missionaries to the modern aid agencies this attitude, albeit couched in politically correct terms, is found even

today, combined with a western notion of progress as a continuous timeline of improvement. The eurocentricity of development ideology conveys the evolutionist paradigms of culture, technology and economics as foundations for 'improvement' of what is by definition 'backward' (Mehmet, 1995), a post-colonial conceit that reinforces the notion of Africa as being both innocent and dependent.

The issue is how to assess the real needs of the local people and how this can be linked to their societal norms, which includes modernity. The anthropologist Charles Piot, having lived in villages in Togo, articulates this intertwining of modernity with tradition by describing how the so-called primitive societies are perfectly capable of balancing the local with the national and the global. They may be remote but they are not unconnected to the world, and this is reflected in everything they consume.

What, for instance, is the identity of a piece of cloth that is manufactured in Holland, but designed by African women (the "Nanas Benz" who run the cloth market in Lomé, and whose name derives from the cars they purchase with money made in the lucrative cloth trade, travel to Holland each year to select the patterns) and universally thought of as "African"? (Piot 1999: 198)

It is worth pointing out here that, in contrast to the critical stance taken by Project X, a multi-billion dollar fashion industry already exists in Africa, a flourishing industry that encompasses trade in both traditional crafts and contemporary design and which is consumed globally.

Authenticity of African craft

The balsa wood elephants and portable versions of traditional ritual masks on sale at the Village Artisanale in Ouagadougou can be found on many retailers' websites that specialise in African craft, and which almost always seem to adopt a stereotyped African persona when presenting their wares. What Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka described as 'neo-Tarzanism' (Soyinka 1975: 38) seems to be a prevailing characteristic; an oversimplified, fictionalised meta-narrative of Africa which must include leopard skins, zebra stripes, dark wood and tall thin women. Craft goods from Africa are often encouraged to conform to this stereotype and as a result a kind of pseudo-primitive aesthetic has been firmly entrenched in the imaginations of western consumers.

Project X is determined to challenge these stereotypes, but although they have a good understanding of the history of weaving in the region and display an undisputed commitment to preserving these traditions, it was as though some arbitrary point in that history has been chosen as being somehow more representative of the 'real' Africa than the present, and that objects that reflect this period are deemed to be 'authentic' whilst objects that reveal any evidence of modernity are somehow polluted or 'inauthentic.' It would appear that, echoing Bourdieu's arguments about how aesthetic evaluation is determined by social class (Bourdieu 1984), there is a degree of *connaissance* at work here, and one that perhaps excludes the interplay of modernity and tradition which can result in new and exciting oeuvres.

The Village Artisanale in central Ouagadougou has quite a few artisans that are attempting to produce modern craft rather than replicas of historical objects. They also manufacture copious examples of identical, carved wooden animals and ceremonial masks. Project X does indeed dismiss these tourist products as having little artistic merit; that they are not authentic artefacts. However, Christopher

Steiner argues that this repetition creates a "...self-referential discourse of cultural reality..." (Steiner 1999: 95) in which tourist art establishes its own canons of authenticity, just as mass-produced prints, texts and illustrations from the past are highly valued today. These examples of African craft cannot be dismissed as 'bad taste' or worthless simply because they are made in large quantities; they simply reflect the selling success of a particular artefact, which when transported to its new home in the west takes on the aura of authenticity to which Steiner refers. He further argues that if we are to accept that these mass produced objects are "legitimate forms of cultural expression" then we must regard them with the same attention and intellectual respect that is accorded to other such categories of 'art' (Steiner 1999: 89). They do not ask for authenticity; they simply exist as products of a particular culture.

Repeatedly, throughout all three of my trips to Burkina Faso, I listened to Project X personnel lamenting the 'poor taste' of the locals; that they had to be trained to understand 'good' taste before they could truly compete in the design markets of Europe and North America, and that the standardisation of quality control was vital in order to encourage the artisans to produce consistently 'good quality' artefacts. Jaya Jaitly, writing about values in craft development, articulates my own misgivings when she quotes the words of Canadian artist Harley Parker: 'Good taste is the anaesthetic of the public.' (Jaitly 1989: 170) This imposition of quality control implies that the existing system is in some way deficient, that the weavers have to be guided towards an improved version of their craft that will then satisfy western consumers' demand for good quality in hand-made goods, much as UK supermarkets insist on clean, unblemished vegetables that will not offend their customers. What is also implicit is the idea that a western development charity, albeit it one with design credentials, has more knowledge of what constitutes 'good quality' African craft than the very craftsmen themselves.

Long term sustainability

The sustainability of their project is essential to the success of the pilot scheme, claiming as it does to have the highest ethical credentials. Firmly committed to organic cotton production, natural dyes, hand-spinning, hand-weaving and hand-sewing, each stage in making the range of interior accessories and fashion has been carefully monitored to ensure that nothing 'unnatural' strays into the production line. The production of organic cotton is not only addressing environmental issues; it is also a tool for social change. What has to be debated is how cultural development is balanced with environmental issues in a global context, and how this development affects indigenous peoples on many levels (Haenn and Wilk, 2006). Some argue that corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development are actually damaging (Ehrenfeld, 2009) and that a more integrated approach is needed that concentrates on changing behaviours rather than attempting to 'solve' problems. What is certain is that many craft projects in Africa are sponsored by CSR divisions of the world's biggest mineral extraction companies such as Shell⁷ and BP, and this activity serves to improve their standing with investors and hence their share prices⁸ which in turn allows them to explore for more fossil fuels.

However, the move towards organic cotton is hugely beneficial to the weavers of Burkina Faso in a number of ways. Pollution of water supplies by chemical pesticides used in cotton production is widespread, as is the misuse of these chemicals on other crops, such as vegetables. Poisoning from pesticides occurs regularly, as the farmers rarely have enough money to buy safety equipment and spraying the chemicals several times a year accounts for a large percentage of the farmers' costs. The farmers only receive about \$0.30 per kilo for the raw

cotton so there is a considerable incentive to add value to their crop by turning it into marketable goods for export, especially important in rural areas where many weavers are cotton farmers who turn to their craft during the dry season. However, there are some serious questions about the long-term effects of turning land that was growing food over to a crop such as cotton, especially in the face of predicted food shortages.

Project X is also working tirelessly to encourage the planting of organic indigo to replace the synthetic, chemical indigo that has crept into use over the last ten years due to its colour fastness and relatively quick processing. In one dyeing village called Sawana, which used to be a thriving indigo production centre, we saw that from over 90 indigo pits only one or two were still in use and those were using chemical dyes. I toured Sawana with an indigo artist from Mali, Aboubacar Fofana, whose work sells in galleries in Paris and who had trained in Tokyo. He became very depressed as he talked with the one dyer we could find about the state of the pits. Now derelict and full of rubbish, these deep pits had taken a long time to establish and in their heyday would have produced large quantities of indigo-dyed cloth. Project X intends to introduce training to re-start both the cultivation of organic indigo and the specialist tie-dyeing techniques so that all stages of the process are kept within the locality.

But is the reliance on an export market really sustainable? There is already a specialised market within Burkina Faso for the heirloom blankets and ceremonial cloths, which although small, is relatively steady and it would be logical to try and expand this particular market to other parts of West Africa. In a Euro-American market that is familiar with 'ethnic' products there is perhaps always room for another novelty, and the style magazines will fall on the Burkinabé textiles with relish. What is needed is the development of a coherent and classic collection that will withstand the fluctuations of fashion. There is some sense in targeting the luxury end of the market for these products which will reward slow, painstaking handiwork with high financial returns that go much further in Africa than they do elsewhere. It may be that Europe and North America, with their appreciation of craft as 'art' rather than an everyday commodity (and with the commensurate price tags) will prove to be the ideal territory for preserving Burkina's master artisans, as long as they are also permitted to explore their creativity in a contemporary context, and on their own terms, rather than reproducing 'tradition' that can only be authenticated by an outside agency.

Endnotes

¹ Kente is an intricately woven, expensive cloth from Ghana that is highly prized not only in West Africa but also amongst the African-American communities in the US. Once strictly the preserve of kings and chiefs, it is worn as a ceremonial costume for weddings and other ceremonial occasions.

² Research on textiles found in caves in Mali by the University of Utrecht between 1964 and 1971. These caves were inhabited by a mysterious people known as the Tellem, which in the local Dogon language means "we found them." The Tellem left many examples of strip woven cloth which were also expertly dyed with indigo and appeared to have been woven on the narrow strip loom that is found throughout West Africa.

³ Major town about 100km east of Ouagadougou. Kadougou has many narrow loom weavers and a new textiles factory that manufactures cheap cotton fabrics in large quantities.

⁴ About 35% of girls between 15 and 19 years are married, divorced or widowed, and although it is becoming more common for women to refuse marriages arranged for them, forced marriage is frequently accepted due to a fear of remaining single in a country that has high esteem for women with large families. (Social Institutions and Gender Index)

⁵ A pagne is a women's wrap that measures about 1 metre x 2 metres. In the Ouagadougou markets the wider strip woven cloth is sold by the pagne, not by the metre as one would expect. Thus, each

length of cloth is calculated to make so many pagnes when it is sewn together to form a larger piece of material.

⁶ Bogolanfini is a traditional Malian technique of dyeing fabric with fermented mud. The cloth is painted with intricate designs, sometimes taking days or even weeks, and areas of the cloth are then treated with caustic soda to bleach them white, for greater contrast. Typically, the colours produced are browns and yellows.

⁷ Project X has received initial funding from Shell Foundation for the establishment of their Africa-based brand to market the goods in Europe and North America. BP is funding UK based Illizi Home, a design company that employs artisans in Algeria, to offset its drilling activities in the Illizi Basin in the south of the country.

⁸ A 2007 study by Goldman Sachs found that companies scoring highest on Economic, Social and Governance factors (e.g. corporate responsibility) also had the best share price performance, although it could be that the largest companies have more disposable profits for this activity.

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