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2010

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Alvic, Philis, "TEXTILES AND TRADITION IN THE MARKETPLACE" (2010). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 4.

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TEXTILES AND TRADITION IN THE MARKETPLACE

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On my first consulting trip to Peru in 1994, I told a group of assembled government dignitaries that my goal was that the child of a weaver would choose to become a weaver when offered the choice of a good factory job.¹ This means that the weaver should be elevated from the humble place he occupied and be compensated for his skills to at least the level of unskilled industrial labor. As a weaver myself, I wanted to see the long illustrious tradition of weaving in Peru continue and thrive. As a consultant in crafts development, I envisioned a variety of markets opening up for all Peruvian crafts as this country emerged from a period of isolation imposed by terrorists.

As I have worked with people in other counties, my belief has strengthened that traditional craft skills will only be preserved if craftspeople can sell what they make. While it may be nice to have objects preserved in museums, scholars studying the place of crafts in cultures, and craft artists in developed countries replicating techniques, I would like to have descendants making objects with their hands in the place where the skills originated. Continuation of textile techniques in the area where they began will only occur if craftspeople can make a decent living. Otherwise children will leave the rural countryside where most traditional crafts survive and will seek employment in the cities. For preservation to happen markets will need to be developed and products designed which utilize the traditional hand processes. While this will mean change, it can be change that honors and builds on past knowledge and the culture of the region.



Figure 1. Armenian dolls woven by Mariam Kaharazyan, left, and Mariam's page from "Crafts of Armenia.", right. Images by author.

On my first trip to Armenia in 2001, I encountered craftspeople selling their wares at an outside market. In February that meant that they were standing on ice trying to appeal to a stalwart group of bargain seekers. I bought a set of dolls woven in traditional Armenian dress from a man who told me his wife had made them. Mariam Karazyan had previously worked as a biophysist, but to earn her living now she revived childhood weaving skills learned from her family. (Fig. 1) Since the Armenian economy

¹ I have done consulting work mostly through USAID funded agencies. The first and most trips were arranged by the International Executive Service Corps (IESC). My qualifications are practical—existing as a weaver in the crafts world since I left college and theoretical—researching a book on the weaving centers in Appalachia at the early part of the twentieth century.

collapsed after independence from the Soviet Union and jobs evaporated, many people turned to making things to sell.

Realizing that the independent craftspeople in Armenia had does not have either capital or production capacity for anything but gradual development, my goal was to expand existing markets. They had been selling to consultants from international aid organizations and to tourists of Armenian descent. A rug company put together photo albums of their available products and then placed them at the helping agencies. This way the short term advisors could make direct contact with this small women's cooperative. I convinced the manager of my hotel to put a display case of Armenian crafts in the lobby. The goal was to place crafts within easy access of potential buyers.

On subsequent trips to Armenia, we worked on appealing to the increasing amount of tourists who were coming to the country. To enable Armenian craftspeople to raise their prices, we set about to bolster respect for their skills. A book about Armenian crafts became the vehicle for promoting their professionalism.² Each artist had a two page spread. The left-hand side presented a photograph of each craftsperson in the studio with 250 words of text on education, background, skills, and unique approach to artistry. The facing page contained two or three images of work. Good graphic design and scenic views of the different regions of the country made it a book that tourists would want to own. The back of the book contained lists of museums, galleries, and shops and contact information for all the artists.



Figure 2. Paytsar Avetisyan wove the rug that I bought. Also in the picture is Mamikon Mkhitarian, her husband, who is a silversmith. Image by author.

² Alvic, Philis, Ed. *Crafts of Armenia*. Yerevan, Armenia, International Executive Service Corps, Armenia, 2003.

Paytsar Avetisyan supported herself as a painter for two decades before turning her interests to weaving. She works at her loom seeking design inspiration in the long history of Armenian carpet weaving. (Fig. 2) I bought a rug from Paytsar because it symbolized Armenia to me. Tourists are an easy market. They arrive in the country with money in their pockets and a desire to find a memento of their trip and usually gifts for their friends and family. They seek out items of cultural significance. And they will gravitate towards items that will be conversation starters with their friends. On more than one occasion, I said, “Yes, I did get that rug on one of my trips to Armenia.” It leads very easily into a discussion of things I saw and people I met. Textiles appeal to tourists because they pack easily and don’t break in transit. The tourist market is usually a good place to test out the desirability of products with people who are not from that culture.



Figure 3. Traditional Ethiopian patterns collected by Sara Abera and used to make pillow cushions, left. The redesigned brochure with separate pages that depict the history of Ethiopian weaving, the techniques used, and several product pages, right. Images by author.

At the airport in Ethiopia, I was very impressed with large patterned woven banners hanging in the atrium space. And as I walked to my room in a beautiful new hotel in Addis Ababa, framed intricately patterned fabrics lined the walls. Much to my delight, the first company requesting my assistance had produced these items. In her business Abyssinian Crafts, Sara Abera practiced one of the major tenants that I encourage all craftspeople to follow—develop a domestic market. (Fig. 3)

Even though most of the people that I have worked with claim that it is impossible to sell crafts locally, they need to cultivate the wealthy in their own country because they set style and policy. Sara had benefitted from local recognition by a government subsidy to encourage local businesses and provide new markets for Ethiopian weaving. When I was there, Sara had just moved her company into the estate of an official of a previous government, where she had two buildings to expand her weaving staff and a showroom and offices in the main house.

Sara collected hundreds of geometric pick-up patterns used in traditional Ethiopian weaving and applied them to contemporary household textiles. Although she had been advised to make things cheaper, I felt she should build on her strengths in the time-consuming pattern weaving and aim for a high end market. Better promotional materials would help with the expansion into exporting to wealthy countries. A few months after my African visit, I assisted several companies at a trade show in New York City. By that time, Sara had produced a professional handout that presented her items in good photographs and tied them to the strong tradition of Ethiopian weaving.

By cultivating a domestic market, Sara had been able to increase her product line and her production ability enabling easy entrance into the export market. Positioning a company within a market is a factor in success. A business must decide what type of customer will be most attracted to their products and then present themselves in the format best suited to attract those customers.



Figure 4. Janet Nkubana in her shipping building, left. Women in the training program who have moved outside to enjoy the nice weather while working, right. Images by author.

Gahaya Links, a company in Rwanda, is successfully exporting baskets. (Fig. 4) On my first trip to Rwanda I met Janet Nkubana, who owns this company with her sister Joy. Because of the 1994 genocide, I was reluctant to go to Rwanda. Surprisingly I found people that believed their country supported some progressive initiatives and a general feeling of hope for the future. (Kigali has the best Internet connectivity that I have experienced in Africa and I have been to eight countries on the continent.)

During my initial visit to Rwanda, Janet showed me around her shop. Besides selling a variety of crafts, she supervised the production of baskets done in the traditional styles and techniques of her country. She realized while working within the heritage, she could bring new designs to the surface of the vessel. Confidentially Janet produced a very bad duplicated copy of some South African beer-type baskets, and confessed that she had stolen designs from them. Since these containers presented a very different concept, I thought “inspired by” rather than “stolen from” better described the new creations. Also, I observed that bold statements attracted Janet, rather than the complex all-over patterning that typified most of the South African baskets.

Janet informed me that she had women weaving the baskets in several villages. She had tackled the ever present problem of quality control by having her best basket makers produce samples. She then visited the producers and said that she would pay for baskets of the quality exhibited.

When I next visited Rwanda two and a half years later, the transformation in Gahaya Links was amazing. Largely in response to orders from Macy’s, this company now occupied a compound with several buildings. While production is still carried on in the rural areas, the main business is run from Kigali, with buildings devoted to shipping, materials dyeing and storage, and training. In 2007, the USAID sponsored East and Central Africa Global Competitiveness Trade Hub in Nairobi, Kenya, identified Gahaya Links as the largest employer in Rwanda.

Over dinner in her home, Joy explained to me that when the large orders came, they knew they had grown the capacity to fill them. Many village women had basket making skills and could devote more time to the pursuit when the demand increased. Gahaya Links made contact with the women and conveyed their designs and standards to them. This company continues to train more women. At the time of my visit in 2007, sixty women were enrolled in a basket making course. Thirty women lived at the center, while another thirty came in during the day.

Macy's showed sensitivity to working with hand produced products, that I had not expected from a very large American corporation. I cynically thought that they wanted to showcase Rwandan baskets in a Christmas promotion only to enhance Macy's image. However, the Macy's website continued to carry the baskets after that first Christmas in 2006.³ With the production capacity expanded and able to deliver consistently to the website, in 2009 Macy's continued to feature the baskets in special promotions in half a dozen major cities in the USA.

Janet and Joy understand working with a major retail establishment. They offer new designs and work with Macy's designers. They have plans for expanding into different craft skills and ideas for new products. Both sisters are fluent in English and have knowledge of business practices in the USA. They deliver on time and air freight guarantees reliability of transit.

At the rural outside markets that reconstitute on designated days throughout rural Africa, plastic bowls and buckets have replaced baskets as the container of choice for most functions. Without the tourist and export markets, basket making skills would not be kept alive and passed down to the next generation.

All of the above businesses started with a technique with a firm basis in the textile heritage of their countries. The products utilized the traditional skills. Miriam's dolls employed a flat rug technique of weaving to depict traditional dress of Armenia. Sara sought out an amazing quantity of traditional patterns and the weaving process followed the Ethiopian method. The Rwandan baskets built on a traditional shape and a long used technique. With all of the examples above, the companies had already perfected products that found a market. The companies wanted to sell more items. So, the main challenge was promotion, expanding existing markets, and creating new sales opportunities. They had good stories for marketing drawn from their cultural heritage, knowledge of their crafts, and engaging personal tales of new possibilities for people in their countries.

When evaluating products, I repeat over and over again, "Good design, good quality." In selling hand crafted goods, one of the prime elements offered to the consumer is the care and attention to detail with which the item was made. Machines replicate objects with speed and precision. Since the handmade cannot compete on price, it must present unique design, excellent craftsmanship, and a link to a person and a culture. Increasingly the buyer wants a human connection when purchasing products either in or from another country.

Unfortunately many times, I have to deliver the message that the craftsperson has not come up with a product that is likely to find a market. Of course, they know that what they currently offer is not selling, but hope that the items will have more appeal to a different set of customers. While sometimes an object that comes out of a specific culture will be attractive to people leading very different lifestyles in other countries, most of the time this does not happen. Rugs and baskets transcend cultures because of the universal nature of their basic functions. For wider attraction, skills may be applied to uses not practiced in the area of production, such as Sara making placemats, table runners, and napkins in Ethiopia.

³ This is the Macy's website for the baskets from Rwanda -- <http://www1.macys.com/campaign/rwanda/index.jsp>



Figure 5. Embroidered Mexican blouses—the one on the left is an old one from the 1950s with small careful stitches, while the other is from the 1990s done with heavy yarn and without the detail of the earlier work. Image by author.

Good quality needs to be maintained, even after an item has gained acceptance within another country. When I was a teenager I so admired an embroidered Mexican blouse owned by a friend of my mother's that she finally gave it to me. (Fig. 5) This friend had purchased it during a trip to Oaxaca. Not too many years after accepting my gift, Mexican blouses became very popular with young women. Within the next ten year I observed the decline of quality, although the basic design had remained very much the same. The small stitches in the embroidery became increasingly larger and the quality of the fabric became courser and often dyes would run or fade. Since most of us owned more than one Mexican blouse and it didn't take too many disasters for us to not trust the quality and tell our friends.

Ronald Waterbury researched why the sales declined.⁴ He identified middlemen who lacked respect for the embroiderers and did not pay them for their skill as the major villains in killing the market. They constantly pressured the craftswomen to increase their speed. The women who actually made the blouses did not benefit from the popularity of the item. The brokers became rich, but their quick wealth blinded them to their long term self-interest in maintaining quality and a continuing market. The USA has a new crop of young women each year who would find embroidered Mexican blouse paired very well with jeans and would be a renewing buying public.

⁴ Waterbury, Ronald. "Embroidery for Tourists: A Contemporary Putting-Out System in Oaxaca, Mexico." in *Cloth and Human Experience*. edited by Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider. Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989. 243-271.



Figure 6. Dorinda Dutcher, who helps a cooperative in Bolivia. The bag hanging on the chair is an example of their main product.

Most crafts business in developing countries need more than just a short term consultants to mediate between them and their potential customers. A small remote village in Bolivia is fortunate to have Dorinda Dutcher. (Fig. 6) She came as a Peace Corps volunteer and stayed. With her help the women organized into a cooperative and have improved their local sales and are exploring new venues for their products. She encourages good craftsmanship and is working to reintroduce native natural dyes. I met Dorinda at a recent conference of Weave A Real Peace (WARP), an organization interested in textiles and in development.⁵

One afternoon of the conference was devoted to exploring galleries in Scottsdale, Arizona. While resting on an outside bench in the art district, Dorinda exchanged comments with a young tourist. I asked her to write down the exchange for me because it typifies so many misconceptions about crafts in developing countries.

The feller (F) was tall, short-haired, athletic-looking wearing fashion outdoor wear. He was probably late 20's with classic good looks. The conversation went something like:

F: (Walking past without stopping): Nice bag, where's it from?

D: Thanks, I work with the weavers in Bolivia

F: (Stops and turns back to look at me, but doesn't come close enough for a close examination of the bag): You know that bag would sell for \$1,500 back East. Can you mass produce it?

D: No, there isn't much production, because of the rural farmer lifestyle it's not possible for the

⁵ WARP <http://www.weavearealpeace.org>

weaving to be top priority. To raise the price to \$1,500 would create instant social upheaval, including within the family dynamics.

F: How much did you pay for that bag?

D: Our market is in Bolivia, and we have pushed the price up to as high as that market will bear which is \$16/bag

F: You are raping the women.....

He walked off, alas, so young and so close-minded.⁶

I could write an essay about the assumptions and misunderstandings in this short conversation, but will save my commentary for the book I am currently writing on crafts development. Including it here makes the point that a group of rural women from Bolivia definitely need a mediator between them and a larger international market.



Figure 7. A Dream Weaver of Lake Sebu, Philippines, left, Village children and a glimpse of the life to be sustained, right. Images courtesy of Charles Bodwell.

Through WARP, I became aware of the T'boli weavers of the Philippines. (Fig. 7) Charles Bodwell of the International Labor Organization (ILO), a United Nations agency, found WARP while surfing the Internet looking for information on crafts development. The T'boli 'dream weavers' continue to practice a warp tie-dye technique that has been handed down through the generations. The abaca fabrics, known as t'nalak, employs natural dyes in black, brown and rust colors and have cultural significance for many progressive stages of life. They are especially known for intricate patterns that come to the individual weaver in a dream. Charlie travelled to the Philippines and suggested actions for craftspeople of the Lake Sebu area to improve promotion, management, and marketing.⁷

Charlie and I communicated by e-mail from his home base in Thailand. He usually deals with working conditions in large factories throughout Southeast Asia. After his trip to the Philippines, he wrote, "I can tell you, while I was interested in this work and what could be done before my visit, after meeting these people, seeing their lives, the changes taking place around them and to them, I came away more dedicated to providing whatever help I can."⁸

⁶ Dutcher, Dorinda. E-Mail communication about man in Scottsdale. May 24, 2010.

⁷ Bodwell, C. *Mission Report: Manila and Lake Sebu, Mindanao, Philippines*. Bangkok, International Labor Organization (ILO), a United Nations agency. 2009.

⁸ Bodwell, Charles. E-mail communication. July 9, 2009.

The craftspeople of this area already have formed a cooperative. This group organization offers a vehicle for providing training and services to the craftspeople and for promotion and marketing of items. Charlie readily picked up on the idea of giving more status to the weavers and their work. He initiated a film and a coffee-table book about the Dream Weavers and liked my suggestion for a certification system for the weavers. They have a very good story that can be enlisted to sell their work.

The weavers produce yardage that is sold to middlemen by the length. The fabric is taken to the cities where it is made into a variety of products. Some pieces even find their way to Japan, where they are valued as art items. Unfortunately the weavers sell their yardage at a very low price. They should be turning their work into products themselves. While those of us fascinated by textiles will happily hang a piece of fabric on the wall to admire, most people chose functional items over purely decorative ones.

Charlie's report concentrated mostly on management and marketing, but I feel the people need a strong dose of product development. Beside their tie-dye weavings, their clothing shows they have mastered other textile skills in embroidery and intricate fabric piecing. Items utilizing these techniques could be developed.

Most of the local craftspeople and their family exist with subsistence farming and fishing and the small income from crafts. They face problems of other indigenous people—significantly the loss of children to jobs in cities. More of the next generation would chose to remain in this beautiful area if they could derive more income from crafts production. With some help, the t'nakal weaving will continue to be made in the place where it originated with skills passed down from mother to child.

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