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A Textile Enterprise As a Tool of Economic Development: Part I

By
Haddy Prom
The Gambia, West Africa

This presentation describes how artisans in The Gambia, West Africa, continue to employ the cultural traditions of tie dye, batik, and embroidery in the patterning and construction of clothing in the modern global economy. I came to the United States to attend college where I majored in finance. After graduating, I chose to apply my knowledge and training as an entrepreneur first in the Washington, D.C. area where I operated several hair braiding salons. Later upon returning to The Gambia, I established a tailoring studio where I employ several tailors and embroiderers, about five on the average. I chose this enterprise because I have always loved fashion and had identified a potential customer base while residing in the United States. While I have total management responsibility doing all of the purchasing, marketing, supervision of production, and much of the design as required by the enterprise, I am fortunate to have the assistance of my husband, a computer specialist, in managing logistical arrangements.

With the exception of prints made in Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, most of the fabrics which I used are purchased and dyed in The Gambia. (Note: Numbers in parentheses in the text which follows correspond to the photo montage entitled "Contemporary Dyeing and Tailoring in The Gambia.") The undyed damask or brocade used for most tie-dye or batik in The Gambia is imported from the United Kingdom, China, or India and is retailed by citizens of Lebanese descent living in the Gambia. (1,2) The fabric used is generally 100 percent cotton. Dyers who usually purchase the damask for dyeing can tell if the fabric will take dye well by breathing through it: if condensation penetrates the reverse side, it means the cloth will dye well. Cotton fabrics retail from \$1.95 to \$12.00 per yard. The upper limit includes silk-cotton blends. These prices are negotiable and depend upon your bargaining skill.

There are two techniques mainly used by Gambian dyers to apply patterns to fabrics. To tie-dye fabric, an artist will stitch a pattern on the fabric and pull the threads tightly or wrap portions of the fabric with plastic or string. (3,4) In the case of batik, the design is drawn on the fabric and the area not to be dyed is coated with candle wax. (5) Each of these techniques prevents dye from penetrating the cloth in unwanted areas. The fabric is then dipped into the dye (6), usually synthetic dyes imported from Germany mixed with hot water, and sodium hydroxide in uncertain measures which makes it difficult to replicate the exact shades created. After soaking the fabric in the dye for a certain time--depending upon the intensity of the desired color--the fabric is then hung to drip-dry. Experienced dyers can tell what other colors can be added to the mixture in order to achieve a deeper color without soaking for a longer period.

In the batik or wax-resist process, the fabric after drying is taken to a table where the wax is scraped off and other portions are waxed for the next color. This process is repeated until the desired number of colors is achieved. "Hassi" is a particular type of batik pattern obtained by waxing the entire fabric with either flour paste or candle wax and using combs or shells to draw swirls into the wax or paste. When the whole process of dying is finished, the material is soaked in hot water to remove the leftover wax, washed with soap, and hung to dry. (7) Batiks are then ironed, usually with either flat irons heated on a charcoal stove or with an iron which contains a "goose-like" charcoal pot which sits above the flat surface. The supply of electricity is irregular and costly; therefore, nonelectric equipment is more accessible for finishing.

In the case of tie-dye, materials to be dyed are hand stitched with factory spun polyester yarns pulled tightly to prevent dye from penetrating the fabrics and then placed in the dye bath. Fabrics may be tie-dyed in several color combinations which are achieved by drip-drying between each color submersion to remove excess dye. (8) Tie dye requires two people to unwrap the cloth to prevent dyed areas from touching cloth not to be dyed. (9) When the dyeing process is completed, the dyed cloth is rinsed in cold water with soap, dipped in light cassava starch and hung to dry. (10) When dry, the tie-dyed fabric is pounded with wooden mallets to give it a shine and soften the fabric (which breaks the threads), a technique which dyers prefer to the iron. I always wonder why anyone would prefer such a labor intensive approach, but was told by an elderly dyer that the mallet gives a better shine that remains until the fabric is washed. (11,12) The fabric is then ready to be sold or to be sewn by tailors. (13,14)

Since dyeing is done out-of-doors, dyers can only work in dry months from December through May. Dyers are usually women because men can get higher paying jobs. Women take up dyeing as a profession to add to the little money received for household expenses from their husbands. Most dyers have limited education and do not have the skills to accurately compute their costs and profit margins. I show them how to calculate their selling price and I refuse to buy from dyers who do not charge so that they will make a profit. The dyes used and the cost of electricity drives up the price of the finished dyed fabric. Tailors work the year around but are rarely female because their family responsibilities make them less reliable as employees.

The type of embroidery to be used for clothing is usually decided before the garment is cut for sewing. The tailor is instructed on the style to be executed, cuts the fabric, gives pieces as required to the embroiderer. Two types of machine embroidery stitches are commonly used. "Dahomey" is a chain stitch named after the ethnic group who once did that work by hand and created the designs without a pattern. The designs are now accomplished by machine using a winding controller attachment. (15) This is the embroidery most commonly seen on goods in the marketplace. The second method is called the "dusand dusette" or "two hundred and seventeen" named after the French machine used for the designs in a satin stitch. The desired pattern is first drawn on a stabilizing backing and then attached to the reverse side of the garment piece with a warm iron. The fabric back is then embroidered following the drawn lines. (16) Experienced embroiderers are usually able to execute designs without using patterns. After the embroidery is completed, the neckline or sleeve is trimmed of excess fabric and the stiffening is removed. (17) The embroidered design is then ironed to give a better finish. Given the expense and unreliability of electricity, a propane gas iron is preferred. A tailor then takes the embroidered piece and assembles the specified garment. (18)

I have several retail merchants in the U.S. that I supply with merchandise made to their specifications. I also create garments that appeal to the taste of my own personal retail customer base that I have developed which includes both Americans and Gambians living in the United States. I personally deliver my merchandise two to three times a year, supplemented as needed by air freight. In the future, I expect to increase my merchant accounts to the level where I do not have to travel with my merchandise.

In summary, I am participating in a profitable enterprise that I enjoy and can operate independently with the flexibility to attend to my family as needed. It also provides employment for fellow Gambians and a business opportunity which my own children may choose to continue someday.



