

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2000

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

June Pearson Bland

Textile Society of America

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Pearson Bland, June, "A Textile Enterprise As a Tool of Economic Development: Part II" (2000). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 768.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/768>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

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

by
June Pearson Bland

The production and trade of handwoven textiles were well established in West Africa when the Europeans arrived in the fifteenth century; however, the use of handwoven cloth, except for ceremonial purposes, was soon replaced by imported manufactured cloth. The volume of less expensive fabric from Europe influenced this change, which coincided with the Islamic tradition of voluminous gowns, the aesthetic qualities of cloth created by foreign technology, and the alteration of the economic structure as a result of colonialism. Although textile manufacturing is now established to some degree in West African countries in the forty years since the countries' independence, the major textile product in The Gambia is patterning imported cloth, using resist methods of tie and dye, or drawing or stamping techniques as described by Haddy Prom in Part I of our presentation. These resist-patterns became popular in the U.S. when introduced by returning Peace Corps volunteers and African-American tourists from newly independent African nations. Although not as visible as in the sixties and seventies, African textiles and clothing have remained popular with those African Americans, who want to identify their ethnic heritage and among the designers of high fashion who look to Africa for inspiration in recurring cycles.

The focus of this presentation, however, examines handcrafted clothing as a model for economic development advocated by the Kenyan economist, Ali Mazrui (1980), among others, who encouraged low tech, culturally relevant enterprises that will make a respectable contribution to the gross national product of developing countries while providing a sustainable income to the participants. Mazrui's concept of the social benefits of private enterprise and the opportunity to buy textiles for pleasure and profit really appealed to me. My mother and I co-founded our company, *Originally Africa*, after our first trip to Africa in 1987 and informally sold the surplus purchases from our travel and additional inventory procured from contacts made during subsequent visits.

During my dissertation research in 1995, I found that producing and/or selling resist-dyed textiles were an important source of income, particularly for women with limited educations (Bland, 1995). As an occupation for females, it was second only to employment as domestics. Handwoven cloth, produced exclusively by men in The Gambia, is less commonly used for clothing. Both the female and male producers of textiles and clothing that I interviewed were acutely aware that they had to expand their markets beyond the tourist trade and the mercurial interest of the local clientele.

After several years of direct marketing such as vendoring and private sales, I feel very fortunate to have linked with Haddy Prom, who I first met when she was a college student and newly married into the Gambian family who introduced me to Africa. At a young age, she had already developed a steady clientele in the U.S. and at my age, I was no longer interested in the physical expenditure of energy required for direct sales. So I approached her about developing limited line of clothing designs that would (1) appeal to both ethnic and contemporary interests of potential customers and (2) could be sold by mail order and online. Both of us saw this as a way to increase our customer base and decrease the expenditure of time and energy required for direct sales.

In our initial catalog, mailed in April 2000, we selected three products which are popular items sold in the tourist markets. The numbers in the parentheses which follow correspond to the montage captioned: "*Originally Africa Presents . . .* "

- Two styles of caftans, (1) in a polyester/cotton blend and (2) in 100% cotton.
- A roomy tote bag (3) made from scraps of leftover machine printed fabrics from Senegal

I selected the second group of clothing from Haddy's own line because they were popular items among her own customers:

- Unisex loose tops in tie-dye (4) or paste resist patterns of cotton damask (5) and a handwoven cotton with embroidered trim (6).
- Two caftan and pants sets, (7) worn primarily by men and (8) designed for women, both custom-dyed in several color options and made to order in a combination of solid and the hassi patterned cotton damask.

Haddy and I collaborated in the design of the remaining items which are custom made to be sold exclusively through the catalog:

- Two ensembles for women, each including a skirt, pants, and blouse, one set in calico cotton dyed in solid and tie-dyed, patterned indigo (9, 10, and 11) and the other in cotton damask in solid brown overdyed over grey and in the hassi paste resist-pattern (12 and 13). Each ensemble includes a vest and jacket reversible from solid to pattern. These ensembles were designed in response to specific requests for African fabrics in western styles.

Finally, our "piece de resistance" (we thought):

- An ensemble (14) in the finest damask of cotton and a silk blend executed in a handsome lattice embroidered caftan, with pants and shirt edged in a satin stitch worn by the male model. The woman's ensemble is in the same fabric, styled in a simple loose blouse with a neckline edged in the satin stitch and the blouse and sleeve hems beautifully embroidered in the lattice pattern which are interspersed with hearts in pale blue and pink that are repeated at the side split of the skirt.

While we have received very favorable reviews, the response to the catalog and website has not been overwhelming-- although I was forewarned of that possibility. Obviously, just because you open a store does not mean customers will flock to your door and the same is true of a website or catalog. Of particular concern is the lost advantage of direct sales: to educate the customer. Appreciation of handcrafted products is an acquired taste made possible by exposure and education and the elimination of arts and home economics in our school curriculum means that often that content is not imparted in a meaningful way. Then there is another group of potential customers who cannot distinguish between authentic African goods and imitations from non-African countries or goods of poor quality created for the unsuspecting consumer. Museums can hopefully fulfill part of the void by helping the novice to identify how textiles are made, by whom, and for what purpose, a strategy used by the Textile Museum (Washington, D.C.) which as a docent, I find particularly helpful in introducing novices to textiles. The bottom line is that I have to target more precisely the audience already appreciative of handcrafted textiles and introduce and educate the uninformed.

There are successful examples in both developed and developing countries where culturally based, artistic producers and private enterprise, such as the *Peruvian Connection* and *The Body Shop*, have connected and contributed to the economic sustainability of the participants. National governments often overlook small, cottage industries. While being overlooked by the public sector can be of some benefit (no taxes), it also means crafters do not receive the support they need to increase their customer base because their governments are more focused on attracting foreign investment from large multinational corporations. Some international lending institutions are just recently discovering these artisans and are now considering strategies for supporting indigenous enterprises heretofore supported by nongovernment agencies with their meager funds. Reliable energy sources, transportation and communications, training programs, and the consumption of locally made products also play a roll in the productive employment of youth and adults. In the case of The Gambia and most African counties, citizens must be encouraged by their respective governments to reduce their reliance on imports which render goods made locally more expensive and less competitive in world markets.

The international community, particularly lending agencies, has a critical role in the survival of indigenous crafts. Although we cannot get into a discussion here about the detrimental effects of bad loans and unscrupulous leaders, nevertheless, the financial burden required by the repayment of outstanding debt makes it virtually impossible for governments of developing countries to meet the social needs of their citizenry in the areas of education, health, and housing - critical requirements if the population is going to be economically productive. Secondly, industrialized nations often impose trade restrictions on handcrafted products from developing nations, yet require the exporting nation to open its markets to importers. This is really a two-edged sword giving industrialized nations a distinct advantage. Case in point: The recent U.S. trade bill contains limited textile exceptions for exports from African and Caribbean nations which had to be negotiated with U.S.American textile interests who really needed no protection, not from those regions.

Originally Africa does not promote catalog items as “authentic” and “traditional” and tries to avoid the entanglements created by the use of those terms (Picton, 1992). Instead, we emphasize “quality,” “handcrafted,” “cultural heritage,” and “artistic integrity.” It is appropriate to direct attention to traditional influences where the textile artist obviously draws upon his or her “cultural history” and combines those elements with contemporary images and products to create a design that will excite today’s customer.

Endnotes

Mazrui, Ali A. “Beyond Dependency in the Black World: Five Strategies for Decolonization.” Decolonization and Dependency: Problems of Development of African Societies. Edited by Aguibou Y. Yansane. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980.

Picton, John. “Tradition, Technology, and Lurex: Some Comments on Textile History and Design in West Africa.” History, Design, and Craft in West African Strip-Woven Cloth. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992.

(alternate layout - 7 +7, pg. 1)



(alternate layout - 7+7, pg. 2)



(8)



(9)



(10)



(11)



(12)



(13)



(14)