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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
Creating the Future.

Rethinking Material Culture: Ugandan Bark Cloth

Lesli Robertson

I will open this paper with a quote from Dr. Venny Nakazibwe, a professor of art at Makerere University in Uganda. “...*in every place around the world there are lots of treasures that we have perhaps ignored, and there is need to revive aspects of the past in order to propel new develops into the present and in the future*” (Dr. Venny Nakazibwe). This clear statement of action has continued to shape my vision of material culture, the physical representation of an identity, place, and community. As a textile researcher, enthusiast, and artist, I have studied many culturally based textiles and textile processes. Their ties to culture can be incredibly strong, allowing these material objects to hold a deep place within a society.

The idea of material culture is centered on the relationship of not only the physical nature of a material, but the cultural associations it is connected to. It is both of these things in one form. Nakazibwe’s quote is a challenge to rethink our approach to the unique materials, processes, and resources that are a direct link to specific cultures around the world. Her urge to revive is a call to innovate.

The Material Culture of Bark Cloth

Ugandan bark cloth is a unique example of a material that has seen a resurgence beginning in Uganda and spreading to the international stage. Before I give a clear inclusive picture of what this material is, where it originates, and the process of making it, I want you to experience the material in the way it is being seen at design conventions, within interior spaces, on the runways, and through the lens of contemporary design, mostly originating in Europe. (*Figure 1*)

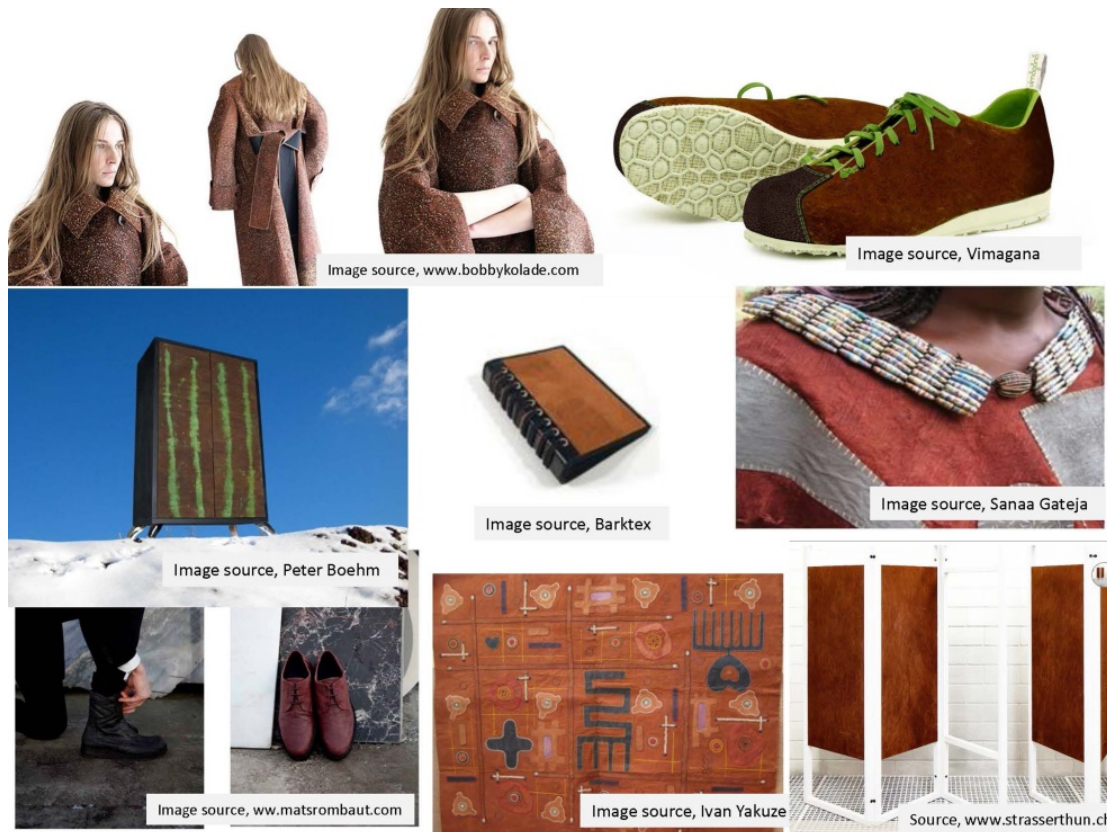


Figure 1. A selection of designs and artwork created from barkcloth, image sources listed

Bark cloth is a sustainable cloth that comes from the bark of the *mutuba* tree (*ficus natalensis*) found mostly in the Rakai and Masaka Districts of Uganda. It is a unique part of Ugandan culture and history since its beginning approximately three centuries ago. The process of making bark cloth is a skill that has traditionally been handed down from generation to generation. Each bark cloth maker has a set of specially designed grooved mallets called nsammo that are used to pound the bark, hit by hit, into a supple cloth. The process of making this cloth has changed little over its lifespan. The *mutuba* tree has its outer layer of bark stripped off, revealing an inner, moist bark. This bark is removed with a skillful vertical cut down the length of the trunk, with two horizontal cuts at the top and bottom. The bark is then boiled for a short length of time, some say to enrich the final color, others say it is to keep the moisture in. It is then folded and placed on a log in an open air structure, where over the next two to four hours, it is systematically pounded, folded, rolled, stretched, pounded some more, until the cloth is judged to be finished. The bark becomes cloth and is stretched one final time, and laid outside to dry and develop the signature rust color. What begins as a narrow strip of bark becomes a unique cloth that is over 4 times as wide. (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)

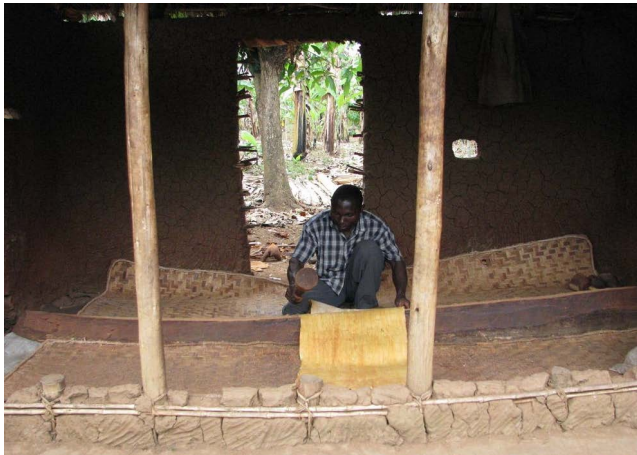


Figure 2-6. The bark cloth co-op, Bakomazi Agali Awamu Twesitule, of Mananma, Rakai District, Uganda, 2008. All photos courtesy of Lesli Robertson.

Manufacturing the handmade: Can bark from a tree make an impact?

With the call to innovate, there is the need to look at how, and if, these innovations can become solutions to issues within contemporary society. Can a certain textile, or specific material culture, focus on solving current issues surrounding the environment, sustainability, social welfare, and more? If so, who can lead the way to new approaches and new ways of utilizing these materials?

In 2013, a material called Barktex© was awarded a prestigious innovation award from LAUNCH, an open innovation platform founded by NIKE, NASA, USAID, and the US State Department. Alongside, other innovative fabrics such as milk fiber, gecko skin, mushroom materials, and biocouture, Barktex© was one of ten fabrics that was a part of the LAUNCH challenge to find an “innovation that will transform the system of fabrics to one that advances equitable global economic growth, drives human prosperity and replenishes the planet’s resources” (LAUNCH). The recognition by LAUNCH enabled bark cloth to be viewed alongside other materials that sit at the cusp of transforming where we source fibers and how we use them. This LAUNCH challenge was what Nakazibwe described; a way to help propel new developments, like Barktex©, into the present and future.

Barktex© is the collective effort of Mary Barongo Heintz and Oliver Heintz of Uganda and Germany. For over 15 years they have committed time, energy, equity, and a lot of passion into transforming the material culture of Uganda into an innovative product for designers who are focused on incorporating sustainable practices into their designs. Through their company, Bark Cloth Europe, Oliver and Mary have transformed the simple material of bark cloth into a material that can be fire resistant, abrasion resistant, dyed, resin-ed, hardened, bleached, rubberized, encased in glass, you name it. The focus of their venture is to exploit the physical properties of one material. Their business approach is to manufacture a cloth with unique surface properties that respond directly to the needs of designers and artists. Questions of how to create a vegan leather that is not plastic, create an abrasion resistant cloth to be use for shoes, manufacture a product that is renewable and environmentally friendly are being answered through the innovations that Bark Cloth Europe are developing. (Figures 7, 8)



Figure 7(lt). Bark Cloth Europe website home page, image source: www.barkcloth.de

Figure 8(rt). Individual wall coverings in Hamma Coffeshop - Ravensburg – Germany, Image source: www.barkcloth.de

The scale of their venture begs the question - how do you manufacture the handmade? With a limited amount of supply, resources, and individuals with the skills to create these objects, how can they develop to fulfill demand? Their manufacturing of this commodity remains in the realm of the handmade. They source cloth directly from individual farmers, who they have worked with for years, developing the cloth to their specifications. There is no *mutuba* tree farm, or manufacturing plant, it began as a handmade process, and to this day remains the same. Bark Cloth Europe is among many designers, artists, and artisans who are utilizing this material to its fullest by working with individuals in Uganda to create the best cloth from the best trees.

The role of artists and designers in innovation

It is not only the role of innovative companies to propel new developments, but the creative force of artists and designers to imagine possibilities that do not yet exist. The original functional uses of bark cloth as bedding, screening, window shades, room dividers, clothing, etc, have seen their own evolution. These bark cloth objects still exist, but in more innovative designs; pillow covers, wall paper, artworks, bicycles, shoes, furniture inlays, etc. The material's function in Ugandan culture continues to evolve, maintaining one foot in the tradition of bark cloth, and another in the innovative growth needed to see it remain.

Artist Dr. Lilian Nabulime reflected on this balanced position that bark cloth is finding itself in, "We are losing our cultural values, identity - maybe assuming products from the west are better. The production of Lubugo - bark cloth (from a *mutuba* tree, scientific name is *ficus natalensis* tree) is artistic and the material has lots of values. The lubugo embalms the dead. A body wrapped in a number of lubugo materials will be preserved for over a 100 years....." (Lillian Nabulime). Artists and designers are finding that the value of the material is its link to the

process, history, and society; in ways that do not exist with other manufactured materials. Ugandan artists, like Nabulime, are using bark cloth in the developments of new artworks, finding innovative material relationships between bark cloth and other media such as wood, metal, paint, etc. They have found a freedom with this material which propels artistic exploration and innovation; while at the same time, using a material that has symbolic significance to their cultural identity. (Figures 9,10)



Figure 9(lt). Sanaa Gateja, Untitled, mixed media on bark cloth, image by Lesli Robertson, 2008.
Figure 10(rt). Ivan Yakuze, Untitled, Found object and stitching on bark cloth, image courtesy of University of North Texas Art Gallery, 2011.

Many designers outside of Uganda are engaged with this material as a way to explore new ways of reinventing objects. Bicycle designer, Craig Calfee, designed a new approach to carbon bicycle frames (Craig Calfee). His invention and non-profit project, Bamboosera, involves combining bamboo with eco-resin coated bark cloth to create bicycles that rival their carbon counterparts. Bamboo and bark cloth exist as unique specimens for their innate strength and durability, allowing local craftsman easy access to materials, while creating bicycles for buyers from other parts of the world. Calfee's idea is one that initiates a unique relationship between materials, craftsmen, and empowering social change. (Figure 11)

This focus on combining art, design, and social change through the use of bark cloth has the ability to drive further innovations, not only in the physical properties and uses of bark cloth, as

with Calfee, but in how it can be a driving force used in creating unique initiatives that integrate art and society. In 2013, a project titled *Barkcloth to Artcloth* emerged out of the UK through the collaboration of Bobby Britnell and Jane Middleton (Bobby Britnell). This project rethinks the relationship between fundraising and artist networks, through the use of bark cloth. Their goal in this project was to take their own skill set, Britnell as a textile artist and Middleton as a shoe designer, and use these to find a unique way to raise support for Britnell's charity in Uganda, *Hands Up Uganda*. In the end, over 140 artists from across Europe and the US used their skills to transform an A4 size of bark cloth with stitch, paint, etc., any media of their choosing. Middleton constructed each cloth into a pair of tiny shoes for two exhibitions in London. In the end, these shoes were auctioned off via Facebook, raising funds to support specific projects through *Hands Up Uganda*. (Figure 12)

In their studios, in exhibitions, and through social media, artists and designers are broadening the reach of this one material. Their ability to transform, reinvent, and imagine is necessary in the evolution of bark cloth. Their innovations are only limited by their visions.



Figure 11(lt). US based Bamboosero bicycles, shown in Uganda, Developed by Craig Calfee, image source www.bamboosero.com.

*Figure 12(rt). UK based collaboration, Barkcloth to Artcloth, Developed by Bobby Britnell and Janet Middleton
Image courtesy of Britnell and Middleton.*

Teaching towards innovation

Companies, artists, and designers have continued to propel innovations with Ugandan bark cloth. Their innovations have had a great impact on the ability of bark cloth to evolve in ways it has not before, opening up new conversations about the importance of material to artistic practice. In an experimental course at the University of North Texas, students were given the opportunity to

become innovators with bark cloth, preparing the next generation of artists and designers to think about materials in a new way. Through a course called Topics in Fibers: Community, Culture and Art, students were challenged to learn as much as possible about the history, process of making, and current trends of bark cloth. They were tasked with considering their place in a larger system of art, design and material use, then given an opportunity to apply skills they were learning in their studio courses to develop an interesting approach to designing with bark cloth. Their project results varied, several took to task the ability to discover something new, several went down well-travelled paths, but in the end they were given the chance to think in a new way about a material. This group will become the designers and artists of tomorrow, their ability to consider the entire life of a material, including the cultural and physical properties, will open their eyes to possibilities that exist in others. (Figure 13, 14)



Figure 13(lt). Fibers course, Topics in Fiber: Community Culture and Art, Student project by Sarah Poppelwell, Image courtesy of Lesli Robertson, 2014.

Figure 14(rt). Fibers course, Topics in Fiber: Community Culture and Art, Student project by Rebecca Ladeau, Image courtesy of Rebecca LaDeau, 2014.

Students, design companies, and artists have a strong role in propelling innovations with bark cloth. Yet, they are not the only key to its future growth and evolution. These innovators are directly tied to the makers, and without the makers, there would be no future for bark cloth. To fully talk about the future, one must look at the present to see what efforts are being made to continue the production of bark cloth in Uganda. A unique project funded by the US Embassy in Kampala is the team effort of brothers, Fred Mutebi a well-regarded printmaker and art activist, and Stephen Kamya, a community organizer who works in rural Uganda. (6) These two men are not the typical idea of a material innovator, yet their perspective on bark cloth is what drives an important innovation. Their project, Revitalization of the Craft of Bark Cloth Making in Kibinge Sub-County, Bukomansimbi District, focuses on training the next generation of bark cloth makers. This new generation of makers will be the next set of innovators, whether through

developing new ideas to improve the process, the planting of trees, new co-op models, or new systems that improve the chain from tree to finished design. (Figure 15, 16)



Figure 15(lt) and 16(rt). Project, REVITALIZATION OF THE CRAFT OF BARK CLOTH MAKING IN KIBINGE SUB-COUNTY, BUKOMANSIMBI DISTRICT, Image Courtesy of Fred Mutebi, 2014.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on a small group of bark cloth innovators; the companies, artists, designers, and activists who are taking this material to new places. These are only a small representation of those who have found a treasure in using this material to influence their own practice while at the same time, allowing the traditional material of bark cloth to function in the realm of contemporary art, design, and social practice. In order to propel innovations with material culture, a myriad of people are needed with their unique visions and motivations, each contributing little by little to bark cloth's transformation and future. As Dr. Nakaziwe wrote, "around the world there are lots of treasures that we have perhaps ignored..." – with bark cloth as a model for transformation, it can be time to propel other cultural materials into the 21st century.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the generous scholars, artists, educators, and makers in Uganda and abroad who have opened amazing doors of learning and interacting with Ugandan bark cloth. I would also like to thank the University of North Texas, Dallas Museum of Art, Surface Design Association, among others who have funded five research trips to Uganda to study the cultural arts.

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