

Pidgin Plait: fashioning cross-cultural communication
through craft

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Pidgin Plait: fashioning cross-cultural communication through craft

Abstract:

Through this research, I examine how new, natural, socially and environmentally sustainable materials for western couture millinery may be sourced from a group of marginalized women in south-eastern Uganda, underlining the continued relevance of craft as a mode of production that is both flexible and inclusive.

Post-colonial, western perceptions of 'African' aesthetics are deconstructed and reconstructed through plaited, palm leaf braids that reflect the irregular surface texture found in traditional African artefacts. These create both a metaphorical and visual 'pidgin' language that holds meaning for craftspeople in the developed world as well as for the makers. In the process, questions have been asked about western requirements for product uniformity and how the 'hand of the maker' - as signified by irregularity – may be positioned in the markets of industrialized and post-industrialized societies. By creating a product with the potential for longevity and versatility, I have attempted to minimize some problems inherent in sourcing from small-scale craft development projects.

The research has been practice-led and is supported by this written dissertation. My own craft practice as a millinery designer and field trips to Uganda - in order to establish a working relationship with the makers, understand their circumstances and to develop the Pidgin Plaits - has been at the core of a process of exchange. Cultural and industrial networks have also been developed in Uganda that may support the longer-term sustainability of the project.

Through my research, I identify the considerations confronting the designer seeking to establish such a project and explore the multiple social, cultural and economic factors that impact upon the makers in Uganda, in a project with the potential to transform lives and cultures.

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ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

A separate volume of Field Journals 1-5

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Figure 1: Map of Uganda

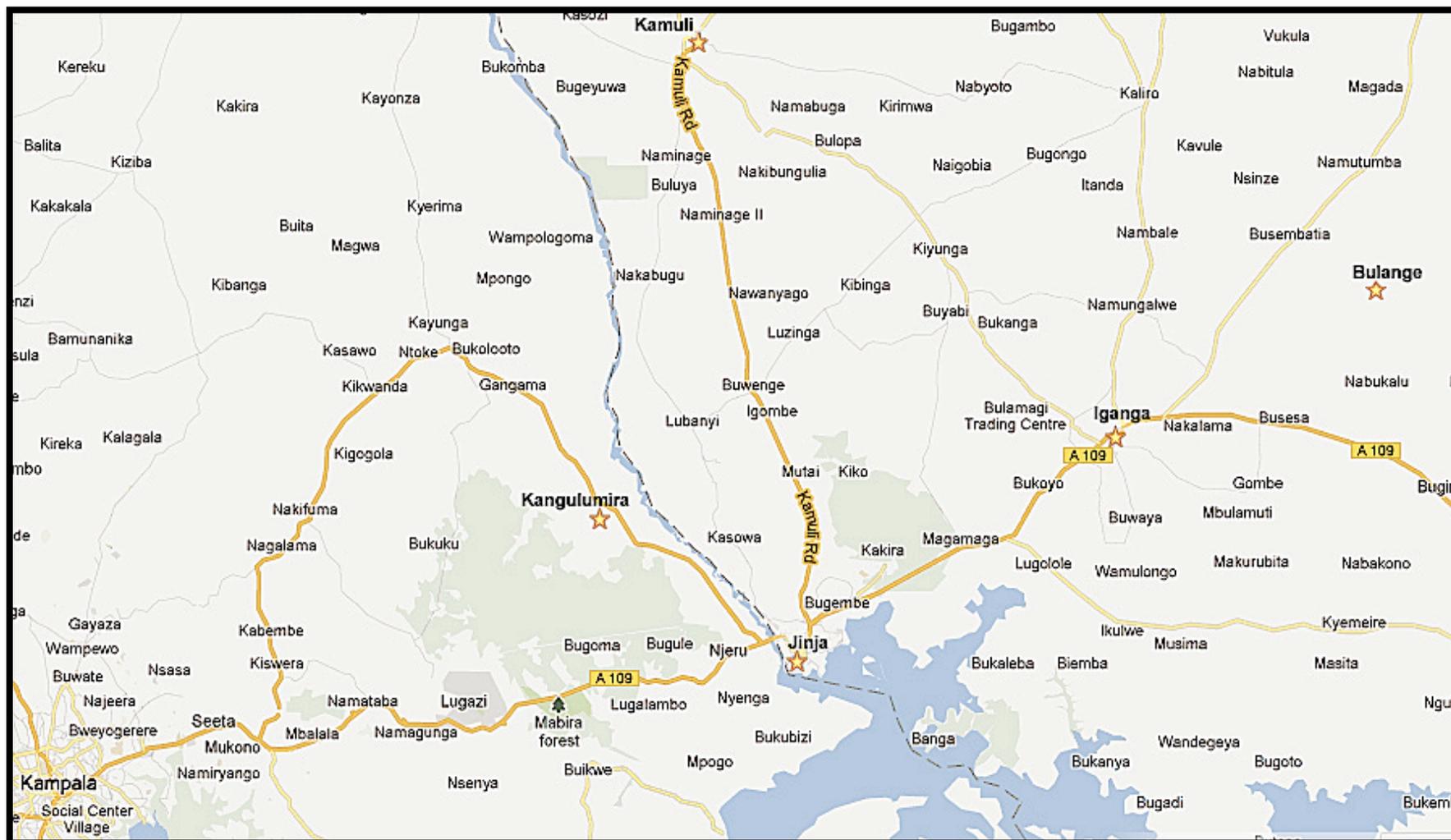


Figure 2: Map of the area of operations for the project

Introduction

Through this thesis, I demonstrate how a natural, ethically produced¹, couture millinery material has been developed in a way that aims to provide a sustainable income for a group of women in south-eastern Uganda (Figure 1)². Integrating European and Ugandan plaiting techniques and some aesthetic characteristics of traditional African craft, Pidgin Plait weaves together the idea of language with that of the material. This hybrid product is formed as a visual, economic and cultural communication, in the belief that such communication can build community across national and continental boundaries.

An initial research title of ‘Straw Into Gold’ failed to convey accurately the layers of meaning or the scope of the research project. It suggested an emphasis on income generation, which – although important - is not the primary focus of the project in Uganda. Of equal importance is the establishment of collective activities that build social capital amongst the women makers, such as meeting regularly as a group, learning new skills, and the development of a craft culture that incorporates both indigenous and innovatory handcraft techniques.

The title ‘Pidgin Plait’ conveys the hybrid languages formed by English and a ‘native’ tongue as a means of communication between diverse cultures and carries historic connotations of Empire, colonization and the ‘perversion’ of English language. Through this research I have described elements of traditional African material culture as a means of communication – a visual language – and have brought together aspects of both Ugandan and British craft heritage to form a new visual language. ‘Plait’ holds some profound meanings and forms a powerful metaphor or analogy for this practice-led research, the shared collectivity of the group in Uganda, working together with their hands, the product developed, and the benefits achieved.

The role of irregularity in African craft has been of particular interest, as I discuss its function as a signifier of the hand-made and the commerciality of this aesthetic trait within industrialized and post-industrialized markets that have become accustomed to the uniformity of mass-produced goods. The politics and potential of craft as a mode of production are examined, contrasting its meaning within contemporary

¹ Ethical manufacture, in my definition, means the making of goods in a way that benefits the makers as much as possible and causes no environmental harm.

² At this stage in the development of the project a number of factors have yet to be fully resolved, therefore long-term sustainability is not yet assured. A detailed account of these is given in Chapter Six and in the accompanying Field Journals, and summarised in Chapter Seven.

African and western European societies. The plaiting traditions of Africa and Britain are discussed in order to position Pidgin Plait in its historic context as a process that has been practised by women for decorative, social, functional and economic purposes.

The first of my six field trips to Uganda was conducted in April 2007 in order to explore a role for craft as a way of ethically sourcing new materials for the millinery industry. My work is located in Namutumba district, in the kingdom of Busoga, based at Bushfire Children's Home in Bulange sub-county³, south-eastern Uganda (Figure 1). Working with women from local villages, I planned to test the potential of recycling and adapting a traditional European craft that might regain relevance in today's fashion market place. At the centre of the project was the hope that plaiting could be practised as an income-generating activity by the makers which could be built around their other commitments, possibly in a parallel manner to that of women in rural England in the past, as described in Chapter Two. The plait should also be made in an environmentally sustainable way and reward the makers with the maximum possible price for their work. I have underpinned the establishment of the development project in Uganda with research into development theory, alternative economics and feminist discourses, while examining and recording the activities, motivations and effectiveness of some change agents that are impacting upon some craft projects and communities there.

Background

Before the 1960s, a great variety of hand and machine-crafted millinery materials was available, but today's milliner is generally reduced to three basic choices: felt, straw and sinamay⁴. Sinamay has saturated the lucrative spring/summer hat market for the last 20 years, being inexpensive to produce and a very versatile medium. However, overuse and over-familiarity with both its relatively smooth texture and its transparent nature have diluted its attraction for more directional milliners. Other natural 'straw' hat materials such as parasisal⁵ and panama⁶ are still obtainable, but most of these have limited textural qualities. As a practitioner and lecturer in millinery, I am convinced that there is a need for versatile materials to be developed that offer different aesthetic qualities to those currently available, such as rich surface texture.

³ Bush Fire Community was established in 2002: initially a children's home and Bush Fire Community Church, later a primary school, a health clinic, a farm and a vocational training centre. Bush Fire offers the local community education on growing nutritious food, economic advancement and sustainability (acquiring and using land and livestock effectively), abuse, family planning and HIV/AIDS. The church responds in practical ways to meet the needs of the community, including medical needs, home construction or repair (<http://www.bushfireproject.org/community.html>).

⁴ Sinamay is a loosely woven, flat material in abaca fibre, produced in China and the Philippines and purchased by the metre or roll.

⁵ The quality of parasisal cones and capelines (hat bodies) has noticeably deteriorated in recent years, becoming much coarser and often flawed.

⁶ The production of panama straws involves many hours, or even days, of skilled, back-breaking work as workers bend over a mould to weave a capeline.

Awareness of the negative impacts on our planet and its people from unsustainable patterns of production and consumption within the industrialized world has led to a demand in some quarters for ethically manufactured materials and products. Within millinery, however, few materials are ethically produced: working conditions may be poor and wages are often low. I have established an alternative production model for millinery materials: a small development project that considers environmental issues, design and product development, fair pay and quality of life for the women makers (within the context of their lives and the western millinery industry). This interests me as part of a political strategy to make something that challenges the accepted modes of practice, trade and academic knowledge - in a post-colonial world - that have contributed to the impoverishment and disempowerment of African women.

The ethos of craft is ideally suited to small-scale, development initiatives, incorporating an appreciation of materials, maker, labour and artefact and sitting comfortably within an agenda to encourage the consumption of fewer and better, ethically-made products. In the design and manufacture of craft materials that embody hybrid or 'pidgin' aesthetics and meanings, I have navigated a holistic approach to development that considers multiple and diverse factors, and the wider implications of such an intervention.

Methods

My methods have evolved through years of trial and error: less ones of pre-determined strategy applied to research data and more ones of process. They reflect my own background as a designer, craftsperson, teacher and mother, and my Christian faith. The research aims not to produce a disinterested or scientific study, but to work creatively to see what can be achieved through and by design. Practice-led research is rarely systematic and unchanging; creative practice differs from the prescribed processes of empirical science. Through the creative process, the agency of the subject is changed by the activity and the relationships that are generated. Serendipity, compromise, innovation and error – all integral to my creative practice – have in parts propelled, constrained, overcome and inspired the outcomes.

I initially set out to develop a sustainable material for western couture millinery that would generate an income for some women in rural Uganda. In the process of establishing a small development project there the research journey has brought my focus as much on the social relations that can be created through work. As a result, this thesis is something of a hybrid of many different agencies and intentionalities. My project is not solely a design, development or a craft project, or only about sourcing new materials overseas; it is not just about 'doing good' or only about documenting and revising indigenous craft. It comprises all of these things and more. While the majority of grassroots

design-for-development projects are formed with the support of various organisations or institutions, my project differs in being established by a solo agent – a designer-maker⁷ identifying a market need, then working in a collaborative, holistic, sensitive and mutually beneficial way with a remote community in order to create new materials for a specific market. It shows how design has been used not only in the inspiration for and creation of a product but in the formation of the project itself. It therefore suggests an alternative model for ways in which designers can work and has generated a detailed account of how the realities of the field impact upon such an endeavour.

In the context of the current discourse on design for development, my work addresses the widely acknowledged problem of remote artisans' ability to comprehend distant and fluctuating market requirements (Grobler 2005:15, 17-19, Jaitly 1989: 172-4, Rosenbaum 2000: 97-9) by creating a craft material rather than a finished product: a series of plaited braids that may be sewn into a range of items and may therefore be easily adapted to changing fashions both locally and globally. I could perhaps have gone to a factory in China to develop new millinery materials, but rather chose a path that reflected my own values and beliefs. Although the artisans' need to be able to innovate independently for given markets - in order to ensure the sustainability of their practice - has yet to be fully addressed, I would argue that other capabilities⁸ have been engendered in the makers through their participation in this project, such as their ability to gather as a group of women, to make decisions and to act both collectively and independently in ways that should continue to benefit them socially, spiritually and financially in the longer-term (described in Chapter Six).

'Pidgin' indicates the multi-disciplinary hybridization that forms my 'method' or process: a multiplicity of perspectives and concepts that I combine in order to express the complexity of the project – a methodological 'bricolage' (Levi-Strauss 1962:17). As a pre-industrial, pre-mechanized weaving process, using fingers and hands, 'Plait' combines separate strands - each of perhaps limited tensile strength - to form a strong and pliable whole with multiple uses. 'Plait' also reflects the method and structure of my research: the multiplicity of strands from disparate fields, and their different conceptual frameworks, that are brought together to inform my practice and this thesis. As a handicraft, plaiting does not produce a mechanically even surface: the visibly textured, uneven nature of plait is formed as some strands carry more weight than others, or greater tension is placed upon them. I propose that the plaits of this project are – like the 'pidgin' of verbal cultural

⁷ The independent development worker appears to be an increasing phenomenon, although little documented, for example Mzuri Beads.

⁸ Amartya Sen suggests that human dignity and the development of human capabilities are paramount over economic advancement, propounding 'the capability approach' (Oosterlaken 2009: 91).

interchange – a statement and a form of exchange: a language. They represent a dynamic communication of ideas, processes, values, hopes, cultural realities and myths.

If the research generated a question, it might be ‘What are the considerations facing the designer attempting to source new and sustainable materials for millinery through a development project in Africa?’ The answer comprises a range of journeys into bordering disciplines.

Methodology

Practice-led research in design has been developed in UK universities for over 20 years (AHRC 2007) and is now offered at doctoral level at some 70 Higher Education institutions. The methods deployed by this particular form of research vary greatly and the individual creative practice of each researcher is unique. The question of defining the originality and innovation claimed by these practice-led doctoral research projects is complex. Multi and interdisciplinary methods are common and the methodological studies accompanying the research investigate the difference between - and compatibilities of – different disciplines and their theoretical paradigms.

The methods I have used include the material culture studies of contemporary anthropology. These are based in the empirical methods of social science and ethnomethodology. However I also use aspects of development studies, which makes no claims to being a social science or a scientific discipline and is often multidisciplinary in approach. Post-colonial studies are central to my interrogation of the fantasy of ‘African’ aesthetics, and art history provided insights into the modernist fantasy of ‘primitivism’ as an integral element of the European avant-garde⁹. Craft culture facilitated my enquiry into the meaning of the ‘hand made’ and the aesthetics of irregularity, imperfection and texture. The culture of religion provided a framework for thinking about the structure of compassion, responsibility and the meaning of ‘goodness’. Feminism and gender studies developed thoughts on the character and consequences of patriarchy, paternalism, maternalism and the gender politics of income and work. The fact that feminism and religion are not sciences but practices makes them, in some ways, incompatible with social sciences as systematic and ‘objective’ practices. However, the research is carried out through a process of making, and craft makes this a generative rather than ‘objective’ research project. My methodology is, like the plait itself, a process which shows (through its uneven texture) the process of its making – its facture.

⁹ R. Goldwater's (1966 reprint) *Primitivism in Modern Art* was particularly informative.

The metaphor of weave abounds in the English language¹⁰, indicating the intimate relationship¹¹ between textiles and society and the importance of textiles in the making of a nation. The metaphor of plait and of braiding reveals to me a different history: of skilled artisans not dependent upon industrial machinery nor subject to being part of an urban proletariat for their income. Plaiting has historically contributed to an increase in the financial autonomy of rural women. The culture of plaiting that is indigenous to rural Africa offers resources for the development of a material that is both ecologically and socially sustainable. The plait may yet become a metaphor for another source of social strength and cultural creativity for the women of rural Uganda.

The innovation in research method, following from the process of plaiting as handicraft, is one of the aspects of the originality claimed for this research.

Outcomes

Through this research I identify some of the factors to be considered by the designer when sourcing new millinery materials through a small-scale development project in Uganda. I demonstrate the desirability of a multi-disciplinary approach to design and product creation when working with a new craft development group. As well as sample plaits, I have generated products from those plaits, film and photographic evidence, and a series of case studies. Supplementary documentation for this thesis includes appendices: market research into Ugandan tourist crafts, catalogues of Ugandan and European plait patterns, a report of outcomes from the Hat Designer of the Year 2009 competition, natural dye experiments and holistic approaches to craft development in Uganda. A separate, illustrated volume of field trip journals has also been included. These support my thesis that a development initiative can offer an ethical and sustainable way of sourcing materials for western couture millinery and provide a means of cross-cultural communication on multiple levels.

¹⁰ For example, "Such stuff as dreams are made on" (The Tempest 4:1), "the rich tapestry of life" (source unknown).

¹¹ The historical significance of textiles is discussed at http://egressfoundation.net/egress/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=68&Itemid=343

Thesis Structure

Chapter 1: Craft

The nature and functions of craft and the differences in contemporary craft practice in the UK and in Uganda. I argue the continued relevance of craft as an ethical, sustainable and inclusive method of production.

Chapter 2: Straw Plait for the Hat Industry

The development of straw plait for millinery in the UK as an important, historic, cottage industry, the benefits it brought to rural women and the factors that led to its demise. I discuss the distinctive aesthetic qualities of the plaits produced for millinery and argue for their revival.

Chapter 3: African Plait

The nature and significance of the plaiting techniques of Sub-Saharan Africa are explored with particular focus on Ugandan braids. Their aesthetic qualities, the methods of their production, their function and their meaning are described. My own hybrid or 'pidgin' plaits are presented, their aesthetic qualities, their development and their production described, which build upon the techniques of the UK and of Uganda.

Chapter 4: Aesthetics, Texture and Meaning

The aesthetics of traditional African craft are discussed, focusing on texture and surface irregularity and their function as a connector to the maker. I discuss authenticity and reflect upon the role of colonial propaganda in presenting a diminished image of 'African' aesthetics that continues to be propagated by Western popular culture, influencing the design of goods and market consumption.

Chapter 5: Change Agents in the Ugandan Crafts Sector: Their Impact on Design Development and Sustainability

The ethics of intervention are discussed and the need for change agents to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to make a positive contribution. I present a series of case studies that demonstrate factors that have helped and that have impeded selected craft development projects, highlighting the need for a multidisciplinary knowledge base and humility when working with new craft groups.

Chapter 6: Pidgin Plait Project

The project's background, initiation, location and participants are described, highlighting the regional, cultural factors that lead to the disadvantage of women. I discuss the development of the project and its impact on the participants, identifying some problematic issues that have yet to be resolved while documenting the benefits to date.

Chapter 7: Summary, Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

A summarisation of the key points of my thesis from each chapter before presenting my conclusion that 'Pidgin Plaits' communicate important ideas on multiple levels while offering a potential means of income generation for a group of marginalized women. I present an evaluation of the project, summarising the lessons learned through fieldwork. In the process I demonstrate an alternative, ethical and environmentally responsible approach to the creation and sourcing of goods for a niche industry.

CHAPTER ONE: CRAFT

In this chapter I describe the difference in meanings of craft practice within the UK and in Uganda and argue the continued relevance of craft as a means of production.

The Nature of Craft

1.1 Introduction

Handcrafted artefacts perform domestic, ritual, ceremonial and ornamental functions and are integral to the story of human cultural development. The broad term *craft* may encompass items of great diversity, but traditionally it signifies a skilful mediation between techniques and materials by hand. Craftsmanship may be fundamental to an object's construction, suggested by the materials in which it is made or by the treatment or decoration imposed upon it.

1.2 Contemporary craft practice in the UK and Uganda

Craft in the United Kingdom carries political connotations associated with the philosophies of Pugin, Morris and Ruskin, offering an alternative to industrialized processes. There are also moral and spiritual dimensions to craft practice (Shiner 2007:36-7). Therefore, with its traditional emphasis on the relationship between maker, materials, techniques, skill, environment and end user, craft promotes "lasting value" (Williams 2002:61) by speaking of history, tradition, and authenticity to a western culture seeking alternatives to "the homogenization of mass-produced products" (USAID 2006:9).

In developed, industrial and post-industrial cultures, such as the UK, craft is practised as a domestic hobby: by a diminishing number of traditional craft professionals, for example saddle-makers, wheelwrights and willow workers (Collins 2004); in couture fashion and its supporting industries, such as flower-making, embroidery, lace-making, millinery and bespoke tailoring; or by professional designer-makers producing articles of jewellery, accessories or home décor for a consumer elite, for example the items on display at Origin or 100% Design in London. Studio crafts inhabit an artistic domain of their own (Shiner 2007:35), often representing an overlap between art, craft and design, where their function is not always apparent or may have been lost to concept. Exhibitions in the UK, such as Art in Action or the Stroud

International Textile Festival, promote craft by enabling practitioners to sell their goods and simultaneously demonstrate techniques to craft enthusiasts.

UNESCO/ITC define handicrafts as items “produced by artisans, completely by hand or with the help of hand-held tools” and state that because of this, even when designs are repeated, no two items are exactly the same (USAID, 2006:2). Artisanal crafts - particularly in developing countries - frequently use locally occurring materials, thus continually connecting people and processes to environment¹² (Chouinard 2008:xiv, Rossbach 1973:54, Adams 1988:101).

Their special nature derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, and religiously and socially symbolic and significant. (ITC, no date)

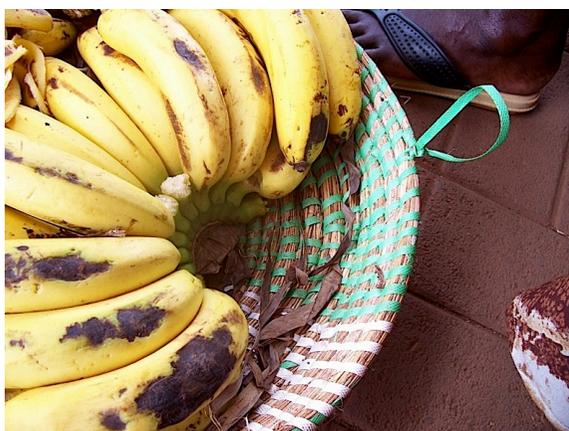


Figure 3: Coiled banana basket using packing tape



Figure 4: Coiled lidded bowl using recycled plastic

In pre-industrial, developing societies such as Uganda, craft is a means of production of everyday items such as baskets and mats, or items for trade, often employing historical technique, motif and form as a way of honouring the past, either for ceremonies, everyday functions, or

¹² Increased basketry production in the Okavango Delta, Botswana, to meet tourist demand led to the overharvesting and depletion of local resources (Mbaiwa 2004, Cunningham and Milton 1987).

for tourist consumption. Craft also evolves in response to new circumstances while acknowledging tradition. For example, objects such as coiled banana baskets and storage pots (Figures 3 and 4) demonstrate a simple, pragmatic craftsmanship, by incorporating found items such as packing tape (Figure 3) or plastic bags (Figure 4). Studio crafts are much less developed, although there is a growing appreciation for contemporary art-crafts amongst the Ugandan urban elite and ex-patriot community. Local interest in studio crafts, however, is often stronger in articles that retain functionality.

1.3 Craft as an antidote to consumerism

Cultural studies would propose that the meaning of life is measured by the objects we possess (Sklair 1998:297, Hetata 1998:275-80). Dissatisfaction with these objects, and a desire to keep purchasing, is essential in order to maintain the global, corporate status quo (Hetata1998:280, Jameson 1991), ensuring continued profits for multinational corporations. The interests of these companies lie in increasing global demand for their products, made in processing and manufacturing operations spread all over the world. A culture of consumerism, dominant in wealthier nations, has been propagated by the multinationals through 'consumerist elites', such as merchants and media. After watching television, shopping that is unrelated to basic need has become the most important pastime in the United States (Sklair 1998:304). This trend is spreading amongst wealthier nations throughout the world and seems unlikely to change quickly, although the ongoing economic depression may have some impact.

A logical implication of Greenhalgh's (2002:18) statement that "commodities of any kind, their production and consumption, shape the human universe" - in the context of the environmental damage created by excessive consumerism - is that we can change the shape of the human universe by making and buying fewer and better objects. Wherever possible, objects created must have longevity, in terms of the meaning and value placed upon them, as well as durability and ease in recycling. The places and ways in which objects are made may allow more of the marginalized of the developing world to benefit from the global economy, although to what extent they should be encouraged to do so is controversial.

Sustainability in its strongest sense, implies such a deep transformation of production and consumption activities that it implies a 'systematic discontinuity': a change so formidable that it cannot be imagined as the result of the incremental innovation of technologies in use or as a partial modification of the existing, non-sustainable way in which industrial societies consume. Therefore, achieving sustainability has to be considered a transition towards nothing less than a new economy and a new culture, in the way that it is most acceptable to a society: assuring both production continuity and social democracy." Ezio Manzini (1997:209)

The impact upon world economies of a wholesale change in the way goods are made and consumed would be enormous and possibly catastrophic, but questions must continue to be asked about alternative approaches to production and consumption if any progress towards safeguarding our planet and ending poverty can be made.

A disconnection between consumers and the people who produce the things they purchase may have contributed to western over-consumption. Jameson (1991:314-5) describes the “effacement” of objects that separates consumers from all trace of the producer, in a way that allows their guilt-free purchase and disposal. Greenhalgh (2002:9) speaks of how craft and design have historically “reveal[ed] themselves as the forces of anti-Mammon” in times of excessive consumption, describing craft as a “socially responsible art form”. Craft is also a socially responsible production form and can contribute to a process of change by reconnecting people to processes and environment, and to the re-humanization of objects.

1.4 Craft as a production method

Objects made by hand take longer to produce, and may not be made in sufficient quantities to meet consumer demand. Their lack of uniformity may be a selling point or a deterrent. Craft as a means of production is not feasible or desirable in all contexts: there is a continuing role for industrially manufactured goods, for example in technologies, transport and healthcare, where irregularity is inappropriate and potentially dangerous. Education of consumers may be required to enable their understanding of the higher prices charged for some craft items; the price may still be prohibitive to many. The relationship that many consumers have with the objects they buy would have to change in order to reposition craft within their lives, perhaps against resistance from stakeholders of the current status quo. I suggest that craft as a means of production is part of the answer, but not the whole answer; as such, craft processes should be re-examined to identify meaningful and useful applications. As a method of production, craft offers another choice to those who are able to choose.

Craft’s ability to connect people to processes and environment¹³ suggests potential applications for the ethical sourcing of a broad range of products – but particularly domestic and fashion items. By employing natural, relatively unmediated, locally occurring materials, the rural poor of the developing world can participate in craft production with minimum outlay and negative environmental impact. The close relationship between the handmade object and its maker - especially in the development context - may be used to promote understanding of other

¹³ Hethorn and Ulasewicz (2008) coined the phrase ‘people, processes and environment’ in reference to considerations in sustainable fashion.

cultures and circumstances, encouraging a re-evaluation of the objects we purchase and how that purchase impacts on others. If irregularity, as an aesthetic trait indicative of the hand made - of humanity - can be embraced, it may encourage consumers to turn away from the uniformity of industrial manufacture towards more ethically made, environmentally friendly alternatives¹⁴.

Ugandan Craft

1.5.1 Introduction to Ugandan craft research

In African societies, craft has been the means by which functional and ritual objects were made; it continues to be an important method of production. Although the function and meaning of handcrafted objects may have evolved in response to changing circumstances, lifestyle, tourism and competition from imported goods, craft activity remains 'central to the lives of many African people' (Guille 2006:59). In order to understand the historic and contemporary significance of craft and its processes within Uganda, I have researched traditional Ugandan crafts and recorded contemporary tourist and studio crafts observed during market research in Kampala, Jinja and Bulange.



Figure 5: Woven fish traps, Museum of Uganda



Figure 6: Drums with twisted vegetable fibre detail
Kasubi Tombs



Figure 7: Plaited palm mats, spears, wickerwork shields and barkcloth drapes, Kasubi Tombs

¹⁴ Surface irregularity, as an aesthetic trait in African craft indicative of the hand-made, is discussed in more depth in Chapter Four.

1.5.2 Traditional crafts

Woodwork has been less developed in Uganda than in some other parts of Africa. The instability of agricultural communities, waves of migration from Ethiopia, and lack of proximity to rainforests may have contributed to an emphasis on more portable crafts such as basketry and items of adornment in East Africa rather than wooden sculpture (Kennedy 1992, Prussin 1995). However, functional items such as wooden vessels, pots, ladles, spoons, stools, head rests, weaponry such as bows and spear, arrow or knife shafts (Figure 7), drums (Figure 6), and a few carved figures, have been produced by most groups across the region for centuries.

Historically, basketry has been particularly prolific in Uganda, each tribal group specialising in one or two techniques to produce artefacts of woven plant fibres. Hexagonal, check or twill weave, coiling, twining, plaiting, tied matting and threading techniques have been used to make a wide range of everyday objects such as baskets, lidded containers, fish traps, beer filters, mats¹⁵, rain covers, winnowing trays, head-mats and belts (Figure 4, FJ4 04/11/09, Trowell and Waschmann 1953:134-51, 226-34). Many tribal shields were formed from - or covered by – wickerwork (Figure 7). Netting techniques were commonly used to make bags as well as fishing nets (FJ4 04/11/09, Trowell and Waschmann 1953:163)¹⁶.

Suitable materials for basketry may be harvested from swamp, marsh, forest or savannah. The availability of plant matter dictates the methods of construction employed (Rossbach 1973:54) and the kinds of objects made. The fibres of various species of palm are commonly used, such as the wild date (*Phoenix reclinata*), raffia (*Raphia*), borassus (*Borassus aethiopum*) and doum (*Hyphaene thebaica*); other plants used include papyrus, sorghum, banana fibre, grasses, shrubs, reeds and vines.

The Kasubi tombs in Kampala show the versatility of plant fibres, especially for plaiting and coiling, in the creation of a magnificent resting place for the deceased kings of Buganda (FJ4 04/11/09, Figures 6-12). The vaulted, thatched construction of reeds, palm and various grasses, carpeted in plaited palm mats, adorned with drums (Figure 6), coiled pots, woven shields and curtains of barkcloth, demonstrates the importance of basketry techniques in historical Ugandan craft. The bound columns and concentric rings of reeds that support the

¹⁵ Chapter Three contains more detailed information on Ugandan mats.

¹⁶ The Museum of Uganda, Kampala, holds many examples of these traditional crafts.

structure resemble those of the reed mosques, formerly built by the Marsh Arabs of the Euphrates region, photographed by Thesiger (1967: fig.97) (Figure 13).



Figure 8: Kasubi Tombs, exterior of main building



Figure 9: Kasubi Tombs, interior of roof

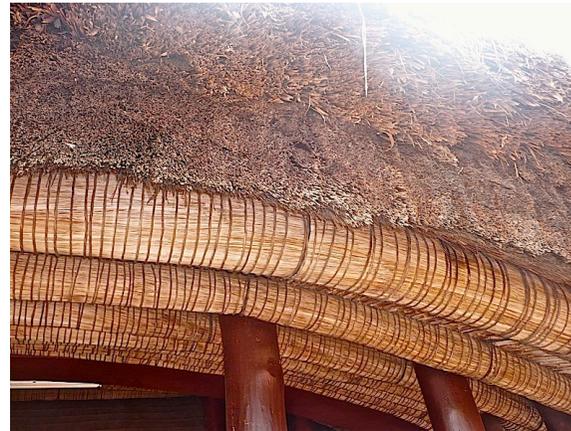


Figure 10: Kasubi Tombs, thatch and supports



Figure 11: Kasubi Tombs, mats and barkcloth



Figure 12: Kasubi Tombs- concentric rings of bound palm

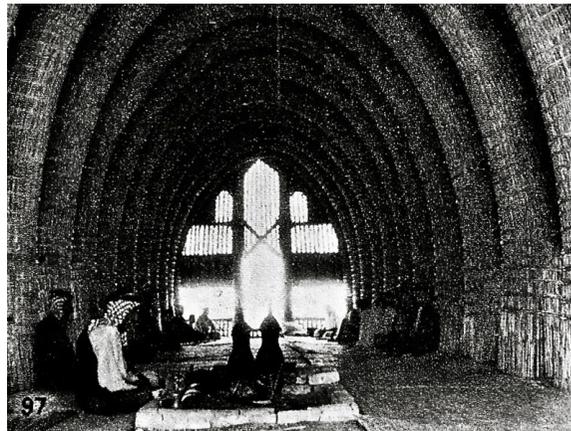


Figure 13: Thesiger's photo of interior of Marsh Arabs' mosque – construction similar to Kasubi.

The Museum of Uganda displays a wide range of traditional tribal artefacts which evidence the substantial heritage of craft practice within Uganda and demonstrate certain aesthetic qualities inherent in using natural materials in their natural colours: warm, earthy tones of

terracotta, gold, amber, rust, browns with touches of black or ivory. While all perfectly suit their functions, small variations and irregularities form reminders of their hand-made nature (FJ4 04/11/09).

1.5.3 The domestic market for craft in Uganda

'Handicraft production in Uganda is cultural, traditional and predominantly a cottage industry' (UEPB/ITC, 2005:7); makers sell to their communities, domestic craft traders or directly to tourists.

Basketry is still common, particularly in rural areas, where baskets, pots and other hand-woven containers are made for holding food and livestock, and where bags and sleeping mats are plaited. Baskets and plaited mats are often given as wedding presents; text may be incorporated in mats, with the names of those getting married or a prayer for their future happiness. Women weave baskets or plait sleeping mats in their homes, for their families, or to commission. Hand-made, plaited 'straw' hats are sometimes worn by those working outdoors.

Local markets sell basketry, clay pottery, wooden items such as stools, vessels, ladles and mallets, plaited sisal rope, netting, gourd vessels, barkcloth, and strung cowrie shells or black seed pods used for magico-religious rituals (FJ2 02/11/07, FJ5 07/10/10). Although strong plastic carrier bags are available, large bags made from plain, plaited, palm leaf braid are sold in many markets (FJ4 04/11/09). A range of hand-crafted musical instruments are still made for local consumption (Trowell and Waschmann 1953:408-415). Empty cans are recycled by conversion into colourful oil lamps and grain scoops. Sandals, made from old tyre treads, are created in styles from a simple strap to the more flamboyant, pointed and curly toed. Street vendors all over Kampala sell small, often crudely made, goatskin wallets lined with whatever material comes to hand (FJ5 27/09/10).

I can therefore state with confidence that craft is integral to the everyday life of large numbers of Ugandan people in both rural and urban areas. Handicraft is still an important method of manufacture in the production of functional objects of cultural meaning.

1.5.4 Tourist craft in Uganda¹⁷

The market for tourist crafts is growing, as more visitors are attracted to Uganda's wildlife, stunning scenery and opportunities for adventure or eco-holidays. The political stability of the last few decades has also helped to encourage tourism. Visitors want to take something home to remind them of their trip; many hotels have responded by opening their own, in-house craft shops.

Tourist crafts are often produced in anticipation of consumer demand (Jules-Rosette, 1984:180) and this results in a generic 'African' style that aims to embody visitors' ideas of African identity. These notions of 'Africa' may be pre-formed by others' interpretations, for example by film or television, where narrow and specific visual language has often been employed to codify the diverse cultures of a massive continent¹⁸. Other than the more kitsch items of African tourist craft (Guille 2006:59), tourists frequently identify 'natural' colours with authenticity, regardless of many African's preference for colour. For example, craft shops in Jinja report that tourists want to buy natural rather than brightly coloured items (FJ2 06/11/07). Whether this is because of a vogue for neutral colours in western home décor or because of a belief that natural is more authentically African requires further investigation.

Through my research into tourist crafts in the Buganda Road and the National Theatre craft markets and other enterprises in Kampala (FJ4 04+05/11/09, FJ5 27+28/09/10, Appendix I), and in the many craft shops on Main Street in Jinja, I identified a variety of homogenous 'African' crafts. Many crafts are imported: some of the wooden figures are Kenyan or South African; printed fabrics are labelled 'Zaire' or 'Tanzania'; apparently 'ancient' carved wooden figures, textiles, stools and masks are often from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Headdresses made from felted human hair and ostrich feathers (Figures 13 and 14) were claimed to be from the DRC, although similar headdresses may be seen in the Museum of Uganda as examples of local Karamojong tribal artefacts. My research suggests that the market for tourist craft is strong - where there is access to those tourists - and there is a growing demand for good quality, ethically produced items for which some tourists will pay a premium.

¹⁷ More details of tourist craft in Uganda are presented in Appendix I.

¹⁸ Western perceptions of African aesthetics are more thoroughly discussed in Chapter Four.

1.6 New markets for Ugandan crafts

Exports of Ugandan creative goods grew from \$1 million to \$11 million between 2003 and 2008 (UNCTAD 2010:302). World trade in creative goods and services continued to reflect an annual growth rate of 14% over that period (UNCTAD 2010:22, 25).

Table 1: Exports of creative goods in millions of \$

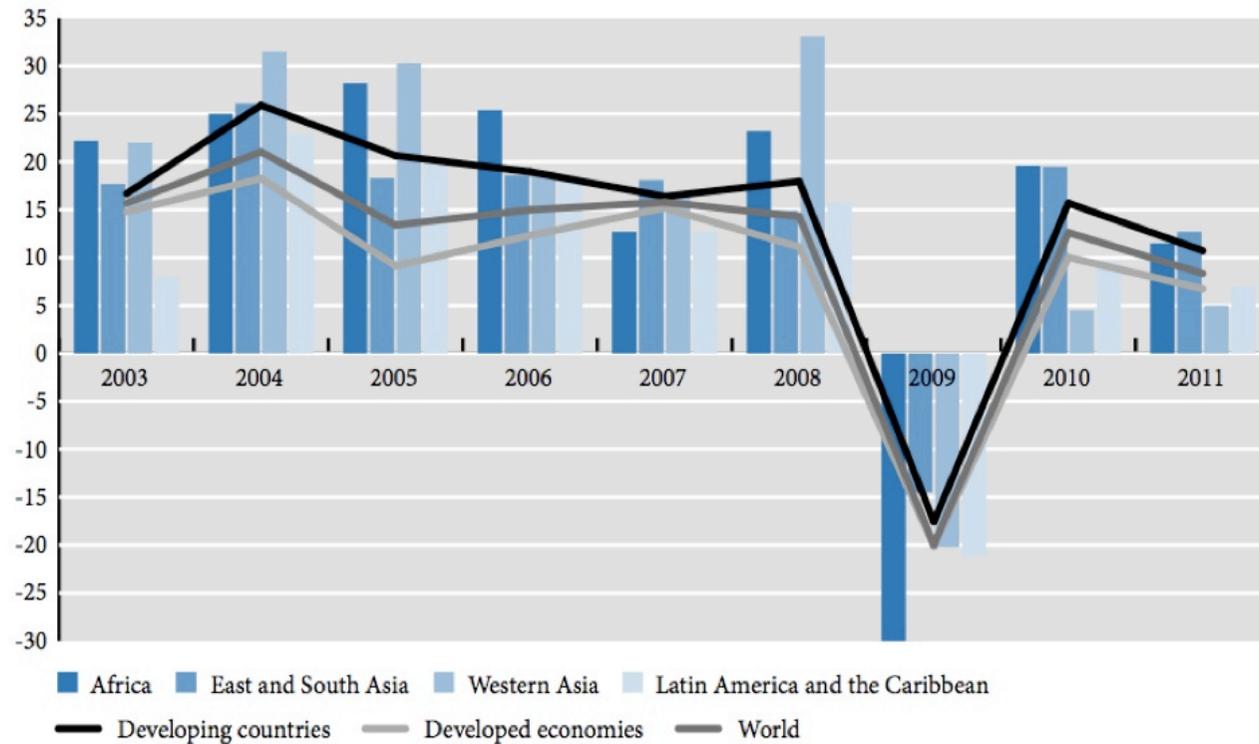
Economic group and country/territory	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Growth rate (1) 2003-2008
WORLD	204,948	233,400	269,331	296,549	324,407	370,298	406,992	11.53
Developed economies	127,903	140,884	158,144	171,023	185,895	211,515	227,103	10.02
Developing economies	75,835	91,124	109,267	125,321	136,100	156,043	176,211	13.55
Transition economies	1,210	1,392	1,920	2,206	2,413	2,741	3,678	18.76
DEVELOPING ECONOMIES: AFRICA	740	809	889	981	1,361	1,520	2,220	22.09
DEVELOPING ECONOMIES: EASTERN AFRICA	92	124	170	182	495	424	364	29.71
Burundi	-	-	-	-	1	1	0	-
Ethiopia	-	-	1	1	1	40	4	-
Kenya	11	18	20	26	37	45	58	28.40
Madagascar	18	24	29	30	33	42	50	14.74
Malawi	-	1	1	1	6	6	8	52.47
Mauritius	54	76	75	77	93	82	82	2.24
Mayotte	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	60.02
Mozambique	0	1	1	1	1	1	5	27.27
Rwanda	-	-	0	1	0	1	2	-
Seychelles	0	-	-	-	-	-	0	-
Uganda	0	1	1	1	1	8	11	90.89
United Republic of Tanzania	-	-	-	11	18	25	76	-
Zambia	8	3	2	9	1	4	2	-3.20
Zimbabwe	-	-	40	23	303	169	65	-

(Creative Economy Report 2010:302)

The current global economic downturn may have negatively impacted on these figures, but the overall trend is for growth in craft exports (Table 1). I have been unable to find specific data on handicraft exports in 2009-11¹⁹, but include the table below (Table 2) that indicates trends in global exports in this period. It seems likely that handicrafts export statistics would follow a similar pattern.

¹⁹ Much of Uganda's handicraft trade is informal, so figures are difficult to access.

Table 2. Annual average growth rates of exports by region (%)



(Economic Report on Africa 2011, <http://www.uneca.org/era2011/index.htm>)

In 2005, the Uganda Export Promotion Board (UEPB) formed a strategy for developing the export market for handicrafts, in collaboration with the International Trade Centre (ITC) and local stakeholders. This may have contributed to a sharp rise in Ugandan exports of creative goods in 2007 and 2008 (Table 1). Ugandan handicrafts – predominantly objects for the interior décor market - are exported to the USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK and Japan. However, increases in handicraft exports have been hampered by insufficient understanding of the international consumer, especially in terms of design, quality, consistency, supply capacity and access to markets (UEPB/ITC, 2005:20).

Artisanal craft practice is supported by many charities and NGOs, for example Oasis Uganda, Uganda Reflex and BeadforLife²⁰. The National Association of Women's Organisations of Uganda (NAWOU) works with small craft enterprises to enable groups to tap into export as well as local markets. NAWOU reports that baskets are their members' best selling items (Torkildsby 2008:12); much work has been done in product development for overseas markets.

Ten Thousand Villages²¹, based in the US, apply Fairtrade principles²² to purchase Ugandan crafts, for sale online and through their stores in the US. One Village, based in Woodstock, UK, have a similar if smaller ethical business, importing goods produced by artisans from many developing countries, including baskets from Uganda, and paying Fairtrade or more than Fairtrade prices (Appendix VI). These, and other similar organisations, reflect consumer interest in ethically sourced crafts in developed nations.

1.7 Developments in Ugandan crafts

Through craft the links between design, culture and health have been explored in partnerships between artisans, academic and/or medical institutions. For example, the 'Design, Health and Community Project' of 2007-2008 was a collaboration between the School of Design of Northumbria University, UK, the Department of Graphic Design of Durban University of Technology, South Africa and the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts of Makerere University, Uganda. The project explored the benefits of design in improving the wellbeing of craftswomen, in combination with capacity building and health education, based upon a previous craft and HIV/AIDS project called 'Siyazama' in South Africa. The Ugandan participants comprised groups of women from four areas of the country, who were encouraged to use the mediums of barkcloth and coiled basketry to communicate information and personal feelings about their lives and health concerns (FJ3 06/11/08). Through the integration of text or motifs, coiled basketry advocated HIV/AIDS education and prevention and the importance of a healthy diet for sufferers²³.

²⁰ More about these in Appendix VI.

²¹ Ten Thousand Villages is an Alternative Trade Organisation (ATO) founded by Mennonites, with 180 storefronts in North America and an online store.

²² For more information about Fairtrade standards, visit

http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/what_is_fairtrade/fairtrade_certification_and_the_fairtrade_mark/fairtrade_standards.aspx

²³ For example, symbolic or figurative appliques on barkcloth represented beneficial foods or medicinal plants, such as aloe vera; others commemorated family members that had been killed by the AIDS virus, or warned against promiscuity.

A Norsk Form team from 'Design Without Borders', in collaboration with NAWOU and Makerere University, worked with artisans to improve the quality and diversity of designs in the development of contemporary craft products for overseas markets (Torkildsby 2008:4). Building upon traditional techniques, items such as baskets, mats, jewellery, toys and bags were given the modern twist demanded by international consumers (Figures 14-16). The basketry by the Kalisizo Post Test Group was particularly successful, retaining a strong Ugandan identity while meeting the design requirements of the western market.



Figure 14: Coiled basketry developed with Norskform



Figure 15: Openwork basketry



Figure 16: Adaptations of mekeka



Figure 17: Ceramic dishes by Balaba Edward Magoba



Figure 18: plates by Bukenya Tony



Figure 19: The swim bottle, Mpindi Ronald Kibudde

Galleries in Kampala, such as Makerere University Gallery, Afriart and Nommo, promote contemporary Ugandan fine art and studio crafts (Figures 17-19). Art and craft practice can now be a viable profession for young Ugandans, although customers for paintings, prints, ceramics and sculpture are primarily from overseas or the ex-patriot community in Kampala²⁴.

1.8 Conclusion

Craft is a means of production that offers an antidote to industrialized process, reconnecting consumer to maker. Extensive and ongoing market research has confirmed that craft production is still widespread in Uganda, where there are highly developed plaiting and basketry skills and the need for new markets. Some initiatives within Uganda are enabling artisans to develop their skills in new, imaginative, but culturally relevant ways for home and overseas markets. Western consumers may be encouraged to make more ethical choices by being exposed to sustainably produced craft items that speak of the maker and their circumstances.

²⁴ I have been told that, in general, wealthy Ugandans prefer to invest in vehicles or land rather than the arts.

CHAPTER TWO: STRAW PLAIT FOR THE HAT INDUSTRY

2.1 Definitions of 'plait'

Plaiting is the combination of three or more weaker elements - laid over or under one another - to form a stronger whole. It provides a powerful metaphor for my project, where strands of knowledge - or separate activities - both support, overlap and blend throughout. In this research my focus is upon plaited braids²⁵, using straw-like plant materials.

The linear qualities of plant fibre adapt easily to plaited forms: leaves, stalks or vines may be split before reintegration as a braid. Rossbach (1973:55) suggests that “the constructions which exist in nature are retained, but reduced in size”. Plaiting is an obvious procedure to impose upon linear matter, and through the process a new linear material is created that is normally stronger and more complex. A relationship exists between the plaiting techniques used for the manipulation of hair and of plant fibres, other than mere process: a natural inclination to twist and fold lengths of matter to create sculptural forms of intricate texture²⁶. Plaiting techniques are used throughout the world to produce an enormous range of domestic, decorative or ritual articles.

2.2 Introduction

Straw plait dominated the European hat industry for about 600 years before its use dwindled to almost none in the second half of the 20th century²⁷. The plaiting of straw for hat-making travelled around Europe from country to country, with competing claims as to its origins and the hundreds of patterns produced (Appendix II). Some communities of makers added their own stamp to the plait by introducing new materials or different ways of working, in response to changing fashion and demand. In this chapter I describe the early origins of straw plaiting for millinery, its development and decline as an industry, in order to position Pidgin Plait in its historic context.

²⁵ 'Braid' refers to the relatively narrow fabrics produced by “interworking threads which run on a zigzag or helical course, being interlaced or twined with each other” (Collingwood 1987:160).

²⁶ See 3.1 for more on plaiting hair.

²⁷ 'Straw' is a broad term that covers a range of plant materials used in millinery, but most often it refers to the stalks of cereal crops such as wheat, barley and rye.

2.3. Early history

Traditionally worn by common people, straw hats are rarely referred to in ancient texts. However, painted and sculpted images from antiquity still exist that suggest straw-like materials have been used to make head wear for thousands of years (Inwards 1922:1-5, Dony 1942:15).

Straw hats were worn in ancient Thebes in the second millennium BC (Luton Museum 1933:7); images of hats and bonnets woven from vegetable fibres are found on murals in Pompeii (Freeman 1953); the Roman *petasus* and the Greek *kausia* were worn in the fourth and fifth centuries BC (Inwards 1922:2-3).

It would have been the oddest of oversights for a people skilled in weaving and plaiting from very early times to have neglected such an obvious production for which any field of grain would have furnished the material. (Luton Museum 1933:14)

These early hats appear to have been either coiled or woven in one piece rather than made from plaited braid (Freeman 1953). However, Inwards (1922:3) refers to an ancient statue in the Vatican of Mercury wearing a hat, the carving of which suggests finely plaited straw. Straw hats were worn in ancient Etruria, the area that later became the base for the Italian straw plaiting industry (Inwards 1922:4) and which has been accepted by many as the first European region to produce straw plait²⁸.

A 13th century English illumination shows harvest workers wearing straw hats, although the construction appears to be more that of twining than plaiting (MSS. 638. Folio 17 Pierpoint Morgan Library). Illustrations from the Maciejowski Bible of 1250 show farm workers wearing flat-crowned straw hats (www.larsdatter.com 2008). The altar frontal of a church in Ardal c.1300 shows a man wearing a hat of plaited straw (Plahter et al 2004). *The Virgin and Child with St George and St Anthony Abbot* c.1435²⁹, by Pisanello, shows Saint George wearing a plaited straw hat. And Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) refers to a nun living at La Columba at Cremona who "works good straw plait" (Da Vinci 1390: 46a). Therefore, strong evidence suggests that straw hats have been worn in Europe for a considerable time and that some of these were made of plaited straw braid.

²⁸ Some evidence suggests that plaiting may have started in Flanders and then travelled to Italy (Main 2007). Of course, it may have started concurrently, and quite independently, in different locations as a logical use for a lightweight, versatile medium.

²⁹ On display in the National Gallery, London.

The commercialization of the industry began in Florence where many people - of both sexes - were involved in the trade. By the 1500s the Italian straw plaiting industry was well established and a guild had been formed by 1575³⁰ (Inwards 1922:9-10, Dony 1942:16). The industry expanded in Tuscany from the early 18th century, when Domenico Michelacci experimented with methods of growing spring wheat to produce a fine, pale straw that was used to make the renowned Leghorn plait. This plait - named after Livorno from which it was exported - became immensely popular all over the world (Dony 1942:16, Freeman 1953, Daddi 2007).

The industry is a very favorite one, as it does not in any way impede chattering, the greatest of delights for the Italian peasant (Villari 1896:14).

Dony writes that straw plaiting in Saxony dates back to the 16th century, but cites the first written reference to straw plait as made in Dresden in 1709. He claims that plaiting probably originated as far back as the Middle Ages in Belgium³¹, while conceding that the first definite record from the region is from much later, from 1744. There is apparently no evidence of it being produced in France until the 19th century, although it was reputedly made in the Garonne Valley in 1792 (Dony 1942:17, Freeman 1953:7).

2.4.1 Beginnings in the UK

Straw plaiting was part of village life in rural England from at least the 12th century, when English harvesters wore twisted or plaited straw around their heads. Straw was traditionally used for thatching, basketry, and bee skips, as well as for hats. Plaiting specifically for hat making was originally the work of small, rural producers, making hats from plant materials that grew locally or that were otherwise easy to obtain (Davis 1981:3-4, Dony 1942:21-2, Inwards 1922:16).

There are competing theories as to the origins of straw plaiting for millinery in Britain and differences of opinion about the earliest record of straw hats here. Some evidence suggests that Flemish refugees introduced plaiting in the early 1500s³²; other theories credit Mary Queen of

³⁰ Novelist Cesar Canto (1807-95) claims that straw plaiting in Tuscany can be traced back to about 1341, using willow strips, although these could have come from Flanders. Wood chip plait was exported from Flanders to Italy and was a very expensive status symbol (Main 2007, Inwards 1922:9).

³¹ In the Geer Valley near Liège.

³² Letters of denization, dated 1530, to a Martin Johnson of Gueldres describing him as "a strawen hatmaker or splyter hatmaker". This pre-dates other references specifically to straw plaiting, by more than 30 years (Page, [no date] p136, cited by Dony, 1942:18 and Luton Museum, 1933:14).

Scots with bringing over plaiters from Lorraine³³. Inwards (1922:11) hypothesises that James I brought plaiters south with him from Scotland, when he came to take up the British throne in 1603, and settled them with the Napier family at Luton Hoo³⁴. The southern climate was certainly more conducive to growing straw and the time scale would fit in with reports that straw hat manufacture had "thriv'd" since the 1620s in the Hemel Hempstead and Dunstable areas (Oldmixon, 1735:755). Yet another theory is that straw plait was invented by Isobel Fenton of Beeston, Leeds in 1639 (Dony 1942:17). None of these theories have been proven.

The first clear written reference to the straw plait trade in Britain is from 1680, when Charles II gave a charter to Tring in Hertfordshire for a market where the sale of straw plait was to be restricted to mornings only, suggesting that the industry was already well established (<http://hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/occupations/straw-plait.htm>).

2.4.2 The straw plait industry in the UK

A trend for wearing straw hats arose in Queen Anne's court and continued into the early Georgian period, increasing their demand (Austin 1871:15, Luton Museum 1933:9). Primarily made by the rural poor, straw plait manufacture and trade formed an essential part of the rural economy in Britain. Dony says that "plaiting appears to have been a spare time industry in rural districts and engaged the whole household not required for farm work" (Dony 1942:48, Goose 2006:3).

Evidence in census reports indicates that the South Midlands was a major centre for the production of straw plait as early as the late 17th century. A petition was put before Parliament in 1689 by a 1000 families (representing 14,000 people involved in the straw industry) from many towns and villages in Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, and Bedfordshire, protesting against a bill brought forward by the Feltmaker's organisation that attempted to enforce the wearing of woollen hats. The bill failed to be passed. Two petitions were put forward in support of the straw plaiting industry, in 1719 and 1724 (Dony 1942:25).

Italian straws were difficult to obtain during the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815), so Britain began to produce its own straw plait in even greater quantity. (Davis 1981:6, Goose 2006:1-2) After the wars heavy import duty on straw hats and plait made their costs prohibitive and

³³ Mary may have brought plaiters to Scotland to teach her subjects there in around 1561, having witnessed the benefits of this employment in her homeland where some were involved in plaiting straw and others in sewing it up into hats.

³⁴ This theory was earlier put forward by Austin (1871), in his book *The Straw Plaiting and Straw Hat and Bonnet Trade*.

contributed to the growth of the local industry. A range of straw plaits were produced in Britain, often defined by regional variations in the type of plant fibre used and dictated by what grew locally. They were often named after their place of origin, material or method and sold in twenty-yard lengths.

In the Orkneys plaiting replaced linen production for a while (Dony 1942:33). Other straw plaiting centres were in Ripon, as well as parts of Essex and Suffolk, but the colour and quality of their products were inferior (Gomm 2007, Luton Museum 1933, Inwards 1922:15). Cornwall, Devon, Wiltshire, Dorset, Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Suffolk, Middlesex, Northamptonshire, Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland were also major producers at various times (Dony 1942:35, Davis 1981:3,7,8,21).

The chalky soil of Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire produced particularly good quality wheat straw for plait; it was in this region that the industry flourished the most. Originally only whole straws were used for plaiting in Britain. Plaiters who worked with the straw only seasonally favoured coarser braids. As it became a more regular occupation, dexterity and speed of making improved and finer plaits could be produced. In response to demand for finer straw plait, straw splitting devices were developed and quickly adopted by plaiters. These splitters had an enormous impact on the success of British plaiting, reducing the weight of the plait by enabling 'pipes' of straw to be split into narrower 'splints'. A range of designs was achieved by working whole or split straw, or by combining them to create a variety of patterns and textures.

Dunstable, strategically placed at the intersection of ancient roads leading to London, the North West and North Wales, became a major trading centre (Inwards 1922:16, Dony 1942:23). Here two fine splints of straw were used together, inside to inside, to create the 'Patent Dunstable' plait that had the appearance of a whole straw plait, but was much finer and lighter and could almost rival Leghorn.

Most towns in the South Midlands had markets for hats, but other items such as baskets and boxes incorporating straw marquetry were made as a source of extra income. In the 1780's, plait was used for almost every item of clothing, including shoes and waistcoats as well as dresses that were decorated with plait (Dony 1942:27).

A substantial cottage industry developed with both sexes from 4 to 80 years of age being engaged in the production of straw plait, although predominantly women and children, as indicated by Figure 20. The plaiting of straw was described as a "useful workhouse trade" (Dony 1942:21). The "old and infirm" or "young and helpless" were instructed in the art of plaiting and making straw hats as a means of earning a living (Dony 1942:21). "Wherever the industry thrived it made a significant contribution to family earnings" (Goose 2006:1).

The Society for Bettering the Conditions of the Poor produced a pamphlet in 1802 describing how plaiting was taught to the poor in Devizes and a small industry grew up there. It also helped plaiters in remote areas to find markets and fair prices (Report of the SBCP Vol IV:76, cited by Dony 1942:34).



Figure 20: Plaiters in St Albans, (The Illustrated London News 1853)

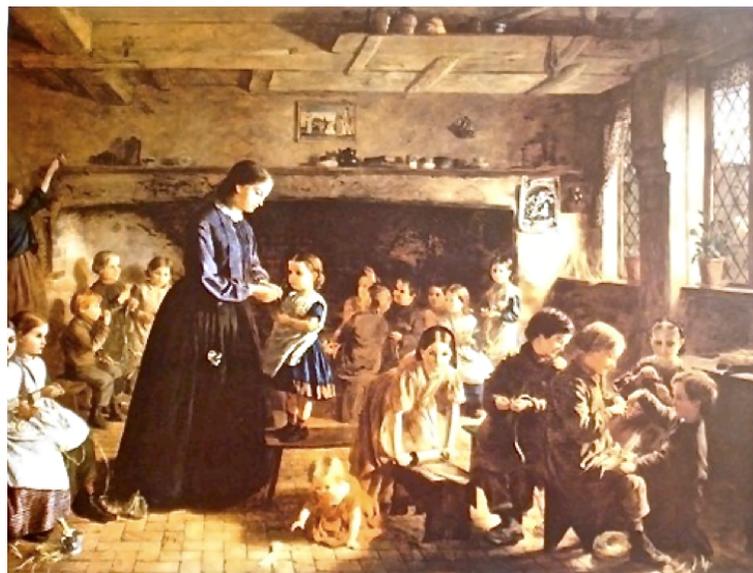


Figure 21: Painting of an Essex plait school by George W. Brownlow

2.4.3 Plaiting Schools

Plaiting schools were established in as early as 1801, with a large number running by 1819 (The Report of the Select Committee on Education, P.P. 1819: IX, cited by Dony 1942:73) (Figure 21). That they were so well established by then suggests that schools had been in operation for some years. The village of Wilstone in Hertfordshire alone had three plaiting schools. Known as "sore thumb schools", they

could teach children as young as two years old. These younger children were put to work trimming off ends from plait prepared by their elders with scissors that were tied to their bodies (Chiltern Open Air Museum 2007). Most villages had plaiting schools by 1860 (Austin 1871:17).

Learning to plait brought a fast return on investment: the initial fee of "a few coppers each week" for instruction in making plait might be repaid after six weeks, when a child could earn eight to fifteen shillings per week (www.brookmans.com 2008). The children's small fingers were able to produce a finer plait, and by starting to learn at such a young age they would become proficient in the craft and be able to earn an income from it throughout their lives (www.brookmans.com 2008). Pupils were of both sexes, the boys leaving when they were old enough to take up farm work (Dony 1942:73).

Conditions in the plait schools were often bad: cramped and with little light, leading to poor health and even deformity (www.brookmans.com 2008, Dony 1942:76). The repetitious pulling of the splints through mouths to moisten the straw caused cuts and sores to develop, and front teeth were affected by the sulphur used to treat the straw (Chiltern Open Air Museum 2008, Gordon 1981:10, www.bedfordshire.gov.uk 2008, www.wing-ops.org.uk/straw.html 2008). Reading and writing were supposed to be taught in these schools as well as plaiting, but many of the teachers were themselves illiterate (Gomm no date) reading might only consist of repetitions of a few Bible verses, already known by heart (Dony 1942:74).

Some of the schools were inspected, or "visited" (Austin, 1871:18), by the local minister or other local people, and the conditions in these were better than those that were not "visited". Various acts of Parliament came in to protect children: the Workshop Regulations Act of 1867 made it illegal to employ children under eight in the production of handicraft; the Workshops Regulation Act of 1867 and Education Acts of the 1870s required children between eight and thirteen to attend elementary school for at least ten hours per week (Davis 1981:28, Dony 1942:81). These had a detrimental affect upon the plaiting industry, where children were key members of the workforce.

2.4.4 Financial and social impacts on women

Women might earn five shillings per day from plaiting and it was an important source of supplementary income³⁵. Prices were subject to seasonal fluctuation though, with amounts paid for plait in the spring and summer at double those of the rest of the year. Women frequently earned more than their husbands at this time (Chiltern Open Air Museum, 2008, Goose 2006:4). The main plaiting season was from December to May, but some women did plan ahead and managed their time to plait for shorter daily hours over a longer period of time (Dony 1942:63). Although usually made indoors, straw plait was able to be produced almost anywhere, even when walking. The income generated by plaiting was such that the poor were reluctant to take up employment in domestic service or farm labour:

"The farmers complain of it as doing mischief, for it makes the poor saucy and no servants can be procured or any fieldwork done where this manufacture establishes itself." (Young 1804:222)

Women plaiters were also the target of criticism from local clergy and magistrates who complained of their moral shortcomings and accused them of neglecting their homes. It was also said that men were becoming dependent on their wives and "indifferent to regular work" (Davis 1981:22). It is clear that the extra money women earned as plaiters gave them more choices and more independence, which was perceived as a threat by male authority figures (Dony 1942:67, 71-2, Goose 2006:5).

The 1881 census for St Alban's Abbey lists clear divisions of labour within the trade, such as Bleacher of Straw Plait, Blocker, Bonnet Sewer, Brazilian Hat Manufacturer, Clerk in Straw factory, Commercial Traveller Straw Hats, Felt and Straw Hat Manufacturer, Hat and Bonnet Sewer, Hat Blocker, Hat Sewer, Hat Stiffener, Hat Trimmer, Plait Basket Maker, Plait Maker, Plait Miller, Straw Basket Maker, Straw Finisher, Straw Hat Blocker, Straw Hat Finisher, Straw Hat Machinist, Straw Hat Maker, Straw Hat Manufacturer, Straw Hat Packer, Straw Hat Sewer, Straw Hat Stiffener, Straw Hat Trimmer, Straw Plaiter, Straw Sewer, Straw Tailor. This demonstrates the enormous complexity of the industry by this time (<http://hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/topics/t012-strawhats.htm>).

³⁵ Agricultural labourers in 1850-60 earned approximately ten to eleven shillings per week (<http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~alan/family/N-Money.html>). In 1860, an income of five shillings was the equivalent of £163.00 in 2009 (<http://www.measuringworth.com>).

People living near Luton or Dunstable were more likely to be taught to sew - a sewer being of higher rank in the industry than a plaiter.

Table 3: Numbers of female straw plaiters 1841-1901

	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Beds	1607	10054	11476	20701	15058	10191	485
Bucks	1181	2922	2976	3412	1654	515	173
Essex	431	3058	2444	2839	922	37	0
Herts	4415	8753	8598	12089	7543	3133	681
<i>Totals</i>	<i>7634</i>	<i>24787</i>	<i>25494</i>	<i>39041</i>	<i>25177</i>	<i>13876</i>	<i>1339</i>

Source: <http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/occupations/straw-plait.htm>

2.4.5 The decline of the UK straw plait industry

The rapid decline of the plait industry between 1871 and 1901 can be attributed to a slowness to embrace new trends and an inability to compete with cheaper foreign imports. Changes in fashion in the mid-1850s and the development of new machinery, led to a demand for plaits that incorporated other materials such as horsehair and ribbon. Loom-plaiting, using horsehair, silk and cotton to produce a plait that was more like lace than straw plait, was produced in small workshops rather than in cottages (Dony 1942:59). Although some of this new plait was made in the St Albans area, this form of the industry flourished in France, Italy and Switzerland, where they quickly embraced the technology and soon led the way with fancy plaits in fine materials. Further damage was done to the British plait trade when the Italians produced their own version of the popular 'Dunstable Twist', called the 'Milan'.

In 1867, the first Chinese plaits were imported into Britain: originally copies of British plaits³⁶ (Figure 22), but in Chinese straw and at a much lower price. These plaits arrived at a time when the demand was for cheaper plait in quantity to supply the machine-sewn straw hat industry. The quality of the Chinese plaits was generally inferior to that produced in Europe, where wheat was grown specifically for plait rather than for food. In China the wheat was intended for both purposes; methods of growing and harvesting wheat for food produced poorer quality

³⁶ The Chinese took about 12 months to copy and perfect a plait design (Dony 1942:87).

stalks that were often damaged (Rankin Aitken 1922:9). However, Chinese plait was so much cheaper than European plait that buyers were prepared to compromise on quality. As expertise improved, Chinese plaits developed in their creativity and complexity, becoming extremely ornamental and influencing the design of European and American plaits (Figure 23, Appendix II).



Figure 22: 19th century British Plaits

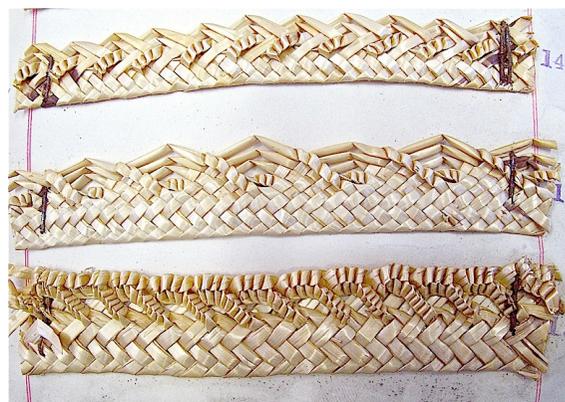


Figure 23 Late 19th century imported Chinese plaits



Figure 24: Late 19th century Imported Japanese plaits

In the late 1800s, plaits of the finest quality were introduced to the West from Japan - also cheaper than the local product. These pale, light barley-straw plaits soon dominated the market. The Japanese copied the Italian wood chip plait called 'Chip 3 ends'; this became extremely popular, undermining the Italian trade (Figure 24, Inwards 1922:20)³⁷.

British plaiters in the 19th century petitioned Parliament to ban the import of foreign straw plait, which was undermining the home trade and causing real hardship to rural communities. After many difficult years for the plaiters, legislation was passed to protect the industry, which was still largely based in the Luton area (Chiltern Open Air Museum 2008). However, by 1893 British plait cost twice as much as Italian and

³⁷ The New York Times (1896) reported on a strike in Tuscan villages, where plaiting was the sole employment of many thousands of people. (As late as 1922 90,000 people were employed in plaiting in Florence and the surrounding area - Rankin Aiken 1922:11). The strike was inspired by a growing resentment of the middlemen - plait dealers - in a diminishing market. With a reduced demand for the local product due to the cheap imports from China and Japan, wages fell to the point that women and children were on the brink of starvation. Troops were called in to protect the hat factories and factory owners, although some were disarmed by the women. Eventually an agreement was made to increase wages and orders for plait, but this could only be a temporary measure. It was suggested that the women be trained to keep up with new trends in fashion for plait or find another way of earning a living (Villari 1896).

six times as much as Chinese plait (Dony 1942:91): the trade continued to decline. The import of manufacturing materials such as hoods, capelines and plaits from the Far East was eventually accepted by the hat industry, which moved away from materials production and almost wholly into hat manufacture.

This trend continues today, with cheaper imports of finished hats and millinery materials from the Far East, most notably China, taking over the commercial millinery market in Britain and, indeed, world wide. Many hat factories have disappeared from the Luton area in the last twenty years, including major producers such as Kangol and Bermona, as British firms have either closed down or moved their production to factories in China. The future of British commercial millinery is in design, with agencies such as IndigoLime acting as mediators between Chinese factories and the UK High Street. The market for couture designer millinery, however, remains strong.

Today there are just a few small manufacturing bases for straw plait. Other than the trade in China, a reduced amount of straw plaiting is still done by hand in other far-eastern countries and in Eastern European countries such as Romania (Transylvania), Belarus and the Ukraine (Main 20/8/07). With the increasing industrialization of China, production of straw plait has significantly decreased there and is now a relatively small cottage industry. Emphasis in commercial millinery is placed upon materials that are assembled and blocked in great numbers and at speed; plaited braid is now predominantly made by machine, using paper. Straw plaiting - traditionally the seasonal occupation of peasant farming families - is unlikely to fit the industrial ambitions of twenty-first century China. Stockists in the UK are finding natural, hand-made plaits difficult to obtain.

2.5 Conclusion

At the peak of its popularity, in the 18th and 19th centuries, straw plaiting provided an invaluable income or supplementary income for the rural poor and offered an opportunity for financial independence to women. Although repetitive in nature, plaiting is a trade that allows women to work while watching their children or interacting with friends. If its use in accessories production is revived, plait might offer milliners and other product designers a more ethical medium with which to work as well as different aesthetic qualities from the materials most commonly in use today. The manufacturing of straw plait could also provide an income for the rural poor in Uganda (where plaiting techniques are culturally embedded), while adding to the body of sustainable and ethically produced materials available to designer-makers.

CHAPTER THREE: AFRICAN PLAIT

3.1 Introduction

Plaiting is integral to many Sub-Saharan African cultures. It is used to produce domestic, ceremonial and ritual items from locally available vegetable fibres. In its simplest form plaiting has been applied to the production of cords of various sorts: for example, basic, three-stranded, sisal ropes may still be found in many Ugandan markets and trading centres. Wider braids that employ anything from eight to as many as thirty-two strands are commonly produced then joined, to make household and ceremonial objects. There is evidence in museum collections of extremely fine, decorative braids of over fifty strands of palm, that were historically produced by Swahili peoples in Tanzania for mat-making (Figures 25-27, Förstle 2006: 16). The more elaborate forms of plaiting incorporate contrasting colours to create patterns down the length of the braid, or even text (Trowell 1996:25-6, Gerdes no date, Robinson 2008:8-9, Warner Dendell 1974:98-106), that have traditionally held meaning for the communities that produce them.

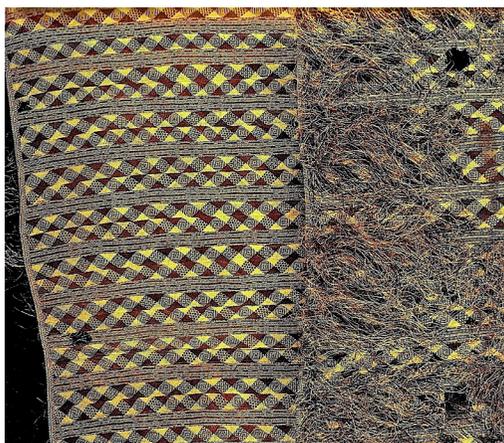


Figure 25: 16th century plaited mat from coastal East Africa (Förstle 2006: 29)



Figure 26: 19th century plaited mat, Lamu, Kenya (Förstle 2006: 24)



Figure 27: antique Swahili mat (photo by Rainer Vierkötter no date)
(<http://motozanzibar.wordpress.com/ukili-the-book/>)

Plaiting has been applied to hair in Africa for many centuries (Sieber and Herremon 2000:17-21, 119-122). Early western explorers marvelled at the extravagance of the hairstyles they observed and reported that other materials were frequently plaited into hair, such as gold thread,

straw, flax, hemp, grass, sinew or ancestor hair (Sieber and Herremon 2000:20-1, 60, Fisher 1996:16) to extend or decorate, or to pay tribute to the past. Hairstyles, as well as different patterns or motifs in textiles or carvings, reflected the work of particular makers or the identity of an ethnic group (Figures 28-31). Status was also expressed through complexity: royal women, chief's wives and wealthier women, who had more time on their hands, wore more elaborate styles. Although less specific to particular groups today than in the past, styles for both men and women may still communicate status, ritual, fertility and identity, as well as aesthetic values (Sieber and Herremon 2000:72) or the desire to attract a suitor. The process of plaiting hair – predominantly a female activity - involves closeness and conversation between the subject and the stylist. It is an “act of trust” that reinforces community bonds, structure and identity (Figures 28-31, Sieber and Herremon 2000:25).

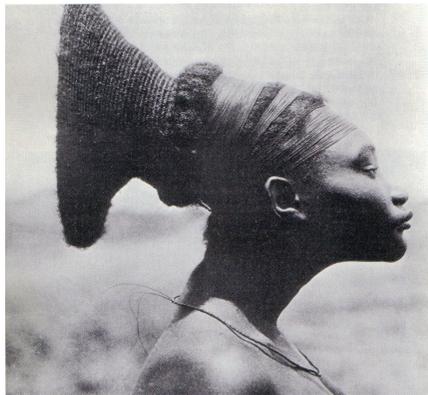


Figure 28: Mangbetu woman (1925) with ornate hair (Elisofon Archive, National Museum of African Art, US)

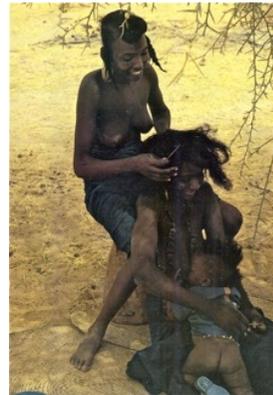


Figure 29: Wodaabe women plaiting on mat (Beckwith 1983: 56)



Figure 30: Wodaabe woman with intricate hair (Beckwith no date)



Figure 31: Mangbetu woman plaiting hair and mat (Sieber 1980:99)

African plaited braids tend to be flatter and wider than their European counterparts. This may be related to function: for example, African braids are commonly used to make mats, where a pronounced, raised texture would cause discomfort and be impractical. Too much surface texture would also impact on the ease with which mats and screens could be rolled up for transportation or storage. A wider, flatter plait is faster to sew up into larger items than a narrow one and may be easier to match up to become an apparently seamless whole - a feature of many Ugandan mats.

3.2 Historical African plait

The plaiting of braid to be sewn up into functional as well as decorative objects can be seen in many parts of Africa (Trowell 1966:25, Gerdes no date), as well as some other parts of the world, but notably in the production of sleeping mats in eastern African countries. These techniques appear to have been introduced by Arab traders from the east (Trowell 1966:25, Nakazibwe 2005:125, Roscoe 1911:413) or may have been part of a more ancient African craft tradition. Five thousand years ago the Sahara was green and well watered, not the arid physical barrier that it later became. There is evidence of similar processes being used in El Armana, Egypt, since at least 1580 -1350 BC (Crowfoot 1954:261, 422), when migration of peoples from Sub-Saharan Africa into the valley of the Nile had already taken place and informed much of Egyptian culture and technologies (Figure 32, Davidson 1984:22, 26, Willett 1997:99). Fragments of similar joined, palm braid have been found at Qumran with the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from approximately 100 BC to 100 AD (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/scrolls/art2.html>). Nakazibwe (2005:105) states that early Arab traders in Uganda originated from Yemen. Plaited braids are still produced in Yemen that are very like the Egyptian braid - for example, the striking 'witch hats' of Hadramaut (Figure 33, Clapp 1999:265) worn by female field workers. This implies that there may have been an exchange of techniques at some point in history.



Figure 32: Egyptian basket made with plaited braid, dated 305-30 BC (<http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/craft/basktech.html>)



Figure 33: 'Witch hats' of Hadramaut, Yemen (gazingthroughaglassdarkly.blogspot.com)



Figure 34: Transporting calabashes protected by plaited braid covers, Wodaabe. (Beckwith 1983:136)

Swahili peoples of the East African coastal region - Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania – have produced particularly fine, plaited braids for mat-making for many centuries. An intricately plaited mat from coastal northern Tanzania, dating back to the 16th century, is in the collection of the Art History Museum of Vienna (Figure 25, Förstle 2006:28-9); museums in Berlin and Zanzibar have mats that date from the 19th and 20th centuries (Figures 25-6, Förstle 2006:21, 24-5). These decorative mats were largely produced for domestic use, to beautify the home, as well as for a variety of ceremonial functions. Wealthy women in Swahili cultures would plait beautiful mats, in a parallel manner to their European counterparts' genteel embroideries, and were able to draw upon inspiration from their location in vibrant international trading centres (Förstle 2006:14-15). Sails on boats were made of plainer plaited braids (Förstle 2006:73).

3.3 Plaited braids in Africa today

Some North African groups, for example the Berbers, plait wide, brightly patterned bands of palm (Figure 37). Swahili people continue to plait palm braids for making rectangular, round or oval mats, and for bags, sacks and other forms of storage, particularly in rural areas. Striped mats are made from plaited braids of contrasting patterns and colours in Mozambique (Figure 38). Sudanese and Nubian women plait braid for mat-making, as well as using palm to make coiled food covers. Throughout Uganda palm leaves are plaited into braids for mat-making as well as bags and food containers. The Wodaabe of Niger produce screens and enormous oval mats made from wide palm braid, which perform myriad domestic functions (Figures 35-6). These are predominantly in the natural colour of the palm, but occasionally introduce a fine zigzag in a contrasting colour (Van Offelen and Beckwith 1984:33, 40). Warner Dendell (1974:106-7) describes a plaited braid produced in Nigeria, which is used to decorate the robes of chiefs. It is known as "Nigerian Chief's Robe Braid" and bears a similarity to Ugandan braids. Plaiting braid is also seen amongst the African diaspora, for example in the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago.

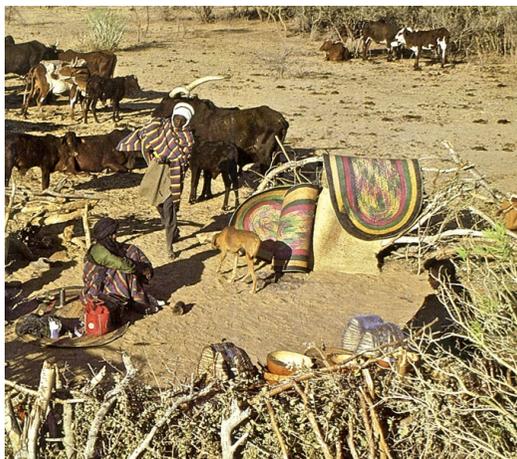


Figure 35: Wodaabe plaited braid mats (Beckwith 1983: 39)



Figure 36: Wodaabe plaited screens (Beckwith 1983:33)

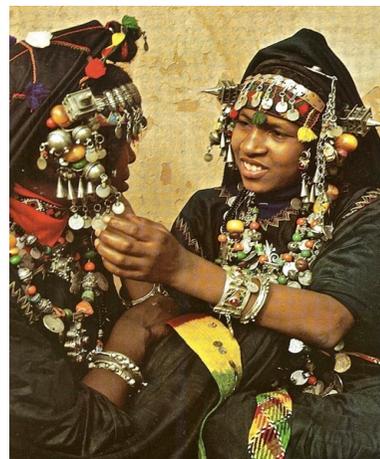


Figure 37: Berber plaited braid (Fisher 1996:253)



Figure 38: Mozambique mat of plaited braid (Gerdes 2008:168)

3.4 Braids in African hats and headdresses

Traditionally, many groups in Sub-Saharan Africa have worn plaited hats and headdresses. Amongst the Mangbetu people in north-eastern Congo (Fisher 1984:72-5), ceremonial hats appear to have been, at least in part, constructed from strips of plaited, patterned braid joined to form complex, crown-like forms (Figure 42). The Dogon people of Mali have traditionally used bands of plait in contrasting colours, joined to construct striped flaps at the back of the elaborate, ceremonial, buffalo masks (Figure 39, Beckwith and Fisher 1999b:284, 286, Chesi 1978:158-9). The Taneka people of northern Benin wear pointed straw hats with brims, made of relatively narrow plaited braid, that are used in a dance that mocks western visitors such as anthropologists and photographers (Beckwith and Fisher 1999a:72-3). They use a wider braid to make traditional bags and carrying pouches. The Wodaabe people of Niger produce plain plaited braids that are stitched to make hats with brims (Van Offelen and Beckwith 1984:45, 153, 161). Their finer braids very much resemble a cruder version of the Leghorn straw when sewn up. Wider braids are sometimes made and sewn over a gourd calabash 'block' to create the large domed crowns of brimmed, leather-trimmed hats that fit over turban-like, draped head-wraps; special baskets are made in the same way to protect gourd calabashes (Figures 40-41, Van Offelen and Beckwith 1984:20). Therefore historic and contemporary precedent exists for the use of plaited braid for hat-making in Sub-Saharan Africa.



Figure 39: Plaited flaps at back of Dogon masks (prismofthreads.blogspot.com)

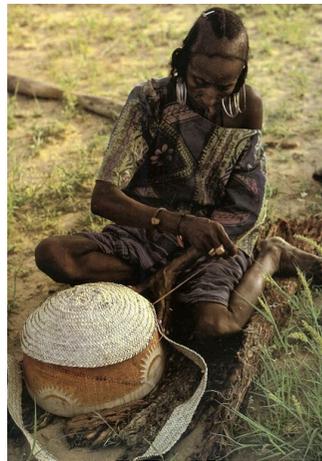


Figure 40: Wodaabe calabash cover/hat being made of plaited braid (Beckwith 1983:45)

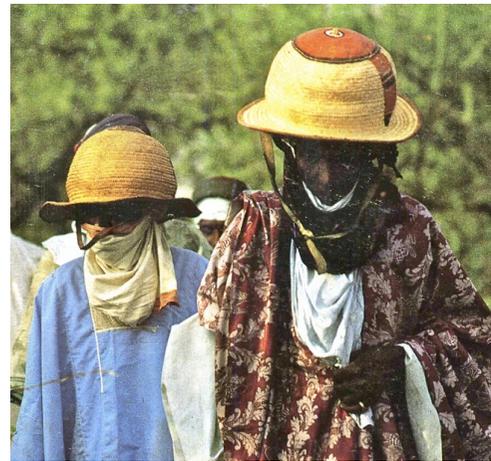


Figure 41: Wodaabe hats made of plaited braid (Beckwith 1983:161)

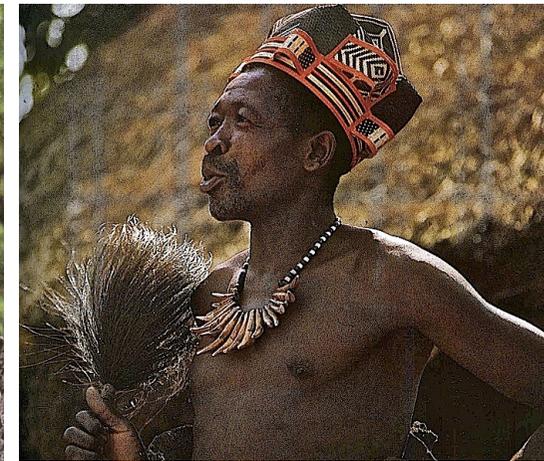


Figure 42: Mangbetu elder in plaited braid hat (Fisher 1996:75)

3.5.1 Ugandan 'Mekeka'³⁸

The plaiting of palm fibres to make mats has been part of Ugandan culture – particularly that of the Baganda people - for hundreds of years (Trowell 2003); many communities are still proficient in making these *mekeka* (Figure 43). A braid - normally between three and nine centimetres in width³⁹ - is plaited from numerous lengths of split palm leaf. This braid is then joined with raffia⁴⁰ and spiralled around to form an apparently seamless cylinder of approximately thirty to forty centimetres in diameter - depending on the desired mat size - before being cut down the length to form a somewhat asymmetric rectangle. This is then bound around the outside by another strip of folded braid to secure the edges and stop them from fraying (Figure 43). Repeat patterns are based upon mathematical formulae and careful counting, for example, over one, under one, over two, under three. These patterns are carefully matched on joining (FJ4 04 + 09 + 16/11/09, FJ5 01 + 04/10/10).

³⁸ *Mekeka* is the local name given to sleeping mats made from plaited bands of palm leaves in Uganda. They are similarly called *mkeka* in Swahili cultures.

³⁹ Plaits for *mekeka* vary in width, but are typically around seven centimetres wide. Their width is decided by the number of strands required to make a pattern and the width of those strands.

⁴⁰ There are several species of *Raffia* palm found in Sub-Saharan Africa. Leaves can grow up to 65 feet in length (<http://www.academicjournals.org/ajfs/PDF/Pdf2009/Dec%202/Obahiagbon.pdf>).



Figure 43: The lifecycle of plaited palm mats, showing the processes, some uses and the beginning of biodegradation.



Figure 44: Organising strips of plaits for joining into mat, Kalisizo 2011

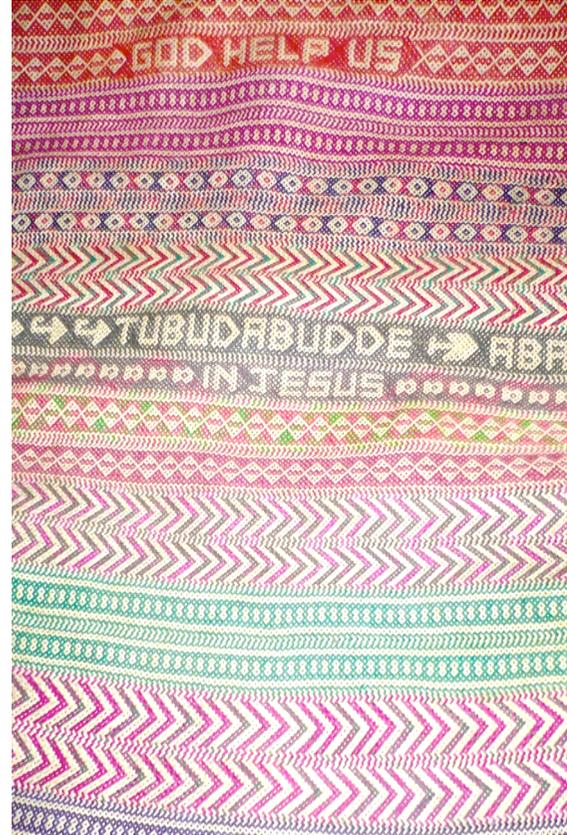


Figure 45: Mat with many different patterns and text Kalisizo 2011



Figure 46: Mat with text, Kalisizo 2011

Some mats produced in the west of Uganda near the Tanzanian border, as well as by women of Nubian descent, mix braids with different or alternating patterns and colours (Figures 45-6). When joined, these variations of pattern are the only evidence of the separate components. These complex mats are constructed differently from those described above: strips of plait are laid out in order and sewn together individually (Figure 44). The edges of the mat are then trimmed before binding with a folded strip of plait.

Across the African continent, patterns on statues, plaques, shields, wall paintings and textiles are frequently divided into bands, panels, triangles, circles or diamonds, often separated by stripes and each section filled with repetitions of a motif (Figure 47, Trowell 2003:29, Meyer 2001:187-8). These characteristics are evident in the patterns of plaited *mekeka* braids and their assembly into mats. Dr Catherine

Gombe⁴¹ of Kyambogo University, Kampala, suggests that many of the motifs used to form patterns in Ugandan *mekeka* pre-date contact with Arab traders and may be of Bantu or indigenous Ugandan origin. She believes that similar (if simpler) mat-making techniques to those of Swahili cultures have been practised in Uganda for hundreds of years.

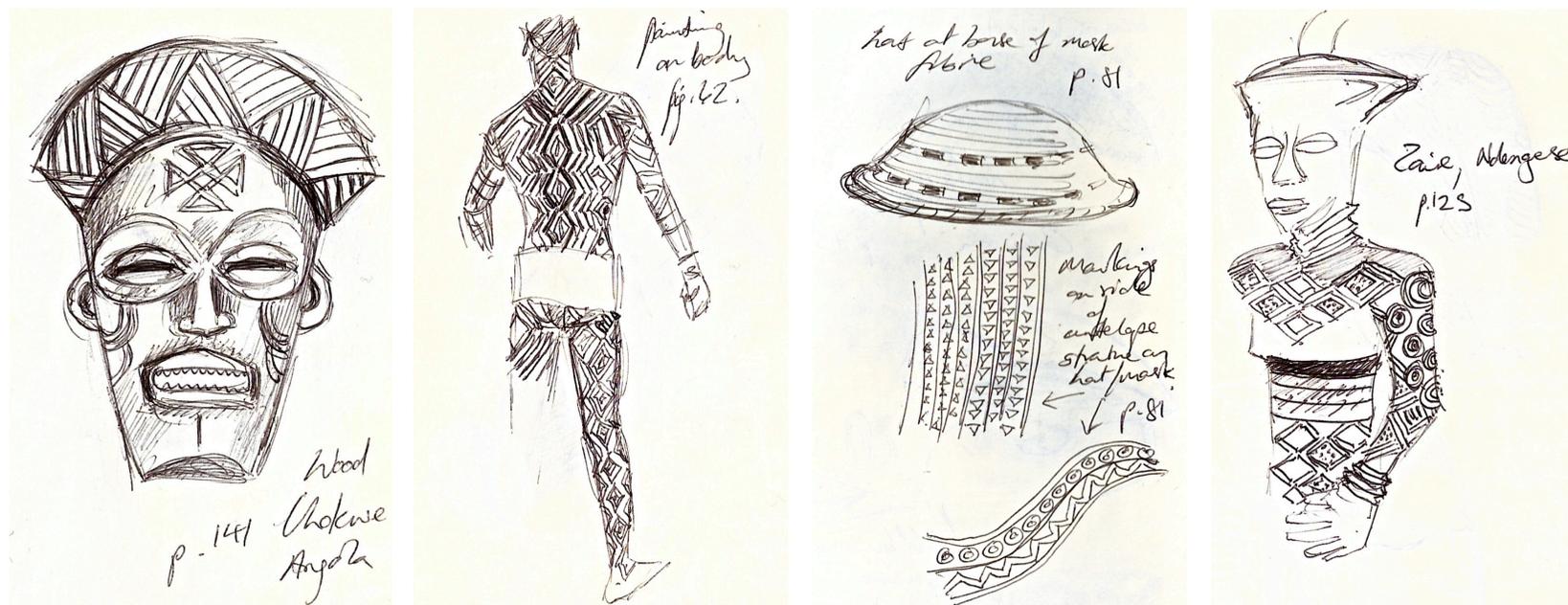


Figure 47: My sketches of surface texture and pattern in African art

The coloured patterns plaited into Ugandan mats have historically been indicators of different families or ethnicities, designs being passed down through generations, with names such as *Hearts*, *Cows in a Pen* and *Mama is Changing her Mind* (Trowell 2003:25, Warner Dendell 1974:100-103, Appendix III, Figure 48). The increase in tribal intermarriage and migration to the cities in Uganda has been such that this is no longer the case. Few can remember where the patterns came from, just that they have 'always been there'. Some more recent patterns reflect the colonial presence, such as *Railway Tracks*, *Missionaries' Tents* or *Kepe* (policeman's stripes). Most patterns and motifs had symbolic meaning to the groups that originally produced them and may have represented events, proverbs, allegories, myths or legends (Trowell 2003:66, Warner Dendell 1974:98). A relatively recent development within Ugandan *mekeka* has been the introduction of text and

⁴¹ Dr Gombe is currently researching the history of Ugandan mat making for publication.

motifs in the plait, emanating from the innovative Masaka region in the south-west. Although the incorporation of text in plaits has been part of Swahili mat-making for centuries, it is unclear when it first started in Uganda (Appendix III).



Figure 48: Some examples of Ugandan *mekeka* braids

Förstle documents over one hundred and fifty plait patterns still produced on the islands of Zanzibar and Mafia (Förstle 2006:43-49). While some patterns are very similar, and one or two identical, to those produced in Uganda - perhaps with other names - many are different and specific to their location. It is common to see more than two colours being used in Ugandan plaits (Appendix III), but less so in the Swahili plaits. Many Swahili patterns consist of zigzagging stripes, with patterns within the stripe, that create intricate checks when the braids are joined. Some Ugandan braids contain zigzagging stripes of less complexity of pattern but perhaps with more colours introduced. They are very firm, with each strand backed up by others as new splints of palm leaf are worked in before the previous ones end. They may sometimes be used on both sides thus offering a 'positive' and 'negative' version of the pattern in contrasting colours (Appendix III).

Robertson (2008) describes the perfect marriage of beauty and function in Ugandan *mekeka*, which are still owned by many households and perform multiple tasks. Mats are used as floor coverings, placed on the floor as a mark of respect when receiving visitors, for laying out dead bodies for burial, as a wedding gift, for sitting on when serving food or doing craft work (Robertson 2008:9). In the children's ward of Bugiri hospital in 2011 I observed many parents or carers of sick children sitting or sleeping on *mekeka* they had brought in, alongside their sick

children. Travelling through rural areas, it is common to see coffee beans or rice drying on older, plainer *mekeka*. Förstle (2006:52) describes the function of mats (in neighbouring Tanzania) as part of a bride's trousseau, as a place where traditional healers sit for treating their patients, where children are born and boys later circumcised, and where brides are prepared for their wedding.

Many of these functions were confirmed by a group of mat-makers I interviewed in Kalisizo in August 2011. They told me that traditionally girls *had* to learn to plait: after eating in the evening, women would sit and plait in their own homes as a solo activity, to prevent them from gossiping. This was encouraged and enforced by older women in the community who felt it to be "proper". Now women are able to plait individually or as a group, and mat making is often an economic activity rather than purely for the makers' homes. Mats are often commissioned for sale in craft shops and for the local community (FJ5 01/10/10, FJ5 04/10/10). A stall in Jinja market displays rolls of plait that are unavailable for purchase, as they have been made to order in specific colours.

3.5.2 Learning to plait in Uganda

Interviews with women in the villages of Kamuli, Kangulumira and Bulange in south-eastern Uganda (FJ5 01/10/10, FJ5 04/10/10) revealed that plaiting was learned from their grandmothers, mothers, friends, or from nuns in their schools. Plaiting was always in their community, so it was easy for them to learn to make *mekeka* as a leisure pursuit or for some income generation. However, in Kalisizo, Kyotera and Kasota in the south-west of Uganda, where AIDS has been particularly devastating, some of the older generation of mat makers - who would have passed this knowledge onto younger women - have died. Some craft groups there are now working to ensure that techniques are kept alive and still practised (taking over the former role of elders).

Women in the Bulange group estimate that it takes them approximately one hour to make one meter of *mekeka* plait, depending on the design, fineness and width; each mat is made up of anything from 18 to 30 metres of plait. As plaiting is built around necessary chores, such as collecting water and firewood, cooking, planting, weeding and harvesting crops, childcare and other domestic responsibilities, it can take up to a month to finish a mat. One old lady in Nkagwa - a village near Jinja - reported that it took her only a week and a half to finish a mat, as she was unable to work in the fields for health reasons and thus able to devote more time to plaiting. She said that older people tend to prefer to use wider strips⁴² of palm leaf to plait with (FJ5 01/10/10).

⁴² Strands of palm leaf used for plaiting tend to vary between 2 to 6 millimetres in width.

3.5.3 Materials used for plaiting

Mekeka are plaited from the leaves of doum or wild date palm (Figure 48) known as *esansa* in Luganda and *ensansa* in Lusoga languages. Leaves are carefully cut from the trees, to prevent damage to the plant, and laid out in the sun to dry and lighten in colour for several days (Figure 50). Younger leaves are paler, having had less time to form chlorophyll, and are used in their natural colour or dyed lighter shades (Förstle 2006:95). The leaflets, separated from the central stalk of the leaf, are split to the required width, topped and tailed, then gathered up into bundles, ready to use. Banana bark is occasionally plaited, but tends to become brittle when exposed to the sun, so is used less often for mats (FJ5 01/10/10).



Figure 49: Wild date palm growing in Uganda



Figure 50: A leaf of wild date palm



Figure 51: Dyed palm leaflets on sale in a Jinja market

Before using the prepared palm, some plaiters spread it out in the evening for an hour or two to moisten in the dew before wrapping it in a bag overnight (FJ5 01/10/10). In this way the palm is made supple and pliable, even if it has previously been stored for some time.

Other than being harvested by themselves, palm is available to plaiters throughout the year from markets and vendors (Figure 51). It is particularly abundant in September. However, in 2011 mat-makers in Kalisizo⁴³ reported that local government had recently banned the picking of leaflets off palm trees, as the palms were becoming scarce. The women were indignant as the shortage was caused by people who were cutting down palm trunks to sell as fencing posts, thus killing the palms and undermining Baganda culture and the income of the mat-makers. Local environmental activists⁴⁴ were exploring ways to plant and grow more palms to replenish stocks, although these will take a few years to mature.

3.5.4 Dyes

Women in Kangulumira informed me that *mekeka* plait was originally plain and natural in colour, or patterned with contrasting, plant-dyed palm. Missionaries introduced the chemical dyes that most groups now prefer because of their ease of use and vibrancy of colour. Palm leaves are quite resistant to most dyes, whether chemical or natural. Although some natural dyes, such as annatto and turmeric, work well on palm, more research is needed in this area (FJ5 01/10/10).

Chemical dyes are bought in small folded sachets of recycled paper from local markets. On the basis of my research, I believe them to be Basic or Azo dye⁴⁵. The palm leaves are immersed in boiling water, in a large pot, to which dye is then added, before simmering until they reach the required shade. Sometimes salt is added as a fixative; sometimes the palm leaves are soaked in water beforehand. The first batch of leaves dyed in the pot tends to be stronger in colour than subsequent batches. Some plaiters embrace these variations by dyeing enough leaves for a whole mat in each batch, so that later batches deliver paler shades to be used in other projects. Therefore very little dye is wasted. The old lady in Nkagwa sometimes dip-dyes the edges of finished lengths of braid. As a result, *mekeka* in these plaits have stripes of colour with blurred edges that run down their length (FJ5 01/10/10).

⁴³ Kalisizo is in Buddu county, south-western Uganda, close to the Tanzanian border.

⁴⁴ Artist Fred Mutebi is at the forefront of a drive to replant wild date palm in the Masaka area.

⁴⁵ Many of these dyes are banned in the EU because of their carcinogenic properties (<http://www.tfl.com/web/files/eubanazodyes.pdf>).

3.6 Pidgin Plait

I learned how to plait from *Swiss Strawcraft: Techniques of the Fashion Industry* (Main 2007), starting with a plain, six-strand plait in wheat straw (Figure 52). I later learned several other plaits from the book, finding many quite difficult, and produced small samples of each (Appendix IV, Figures 52-7). In 2009 I was given a plait manual by the National Association of Wheat Weavers of America, which provided further guidance. The techniques initially required concentration and counting to maintain the correct patterns, before I became more fluent. The Four Strand Rustic plait has a zigzag edge on both sides that gives an interesting texture when sewn up: reminiscent of roof tiles (Figures 54 and 59). While historically a very common plait, it was no longer available for millinery in the UK and was relatively easy to learn; I felt this would be a good plait to start with⁴⁶.



Figure 52: Plain six-end plait in wheat straw



Figure 53: Four-strand rustic in wheat straw



Figure 54: Four-strand rustic in palm

When a friend brought me some palm leaves from Uganda, I reproduced the different plaits in this material (Figures 54-7). The palm was thinner and easier to use than the wheat straw, with a relatively matt, finely ridged surface, reflecting its origin as a leaf rather than a stalk. Several lengths of split leaves were worked together to give sufficient body, replacements being introduced as each was approaching its end. Plaits for millinery need to be relatively narrow and flexible, so that they can achieve tight curves and be easily moulded, although they must also be firm enough to hold shapes.



Figure 55: Dunstable plait with single floater



Figure 56: Dunstable plait with four floaters



Figure 57: Paddock plait?

⁴⁶ On my first trip to Uganda in April 2007 I discovered that Four Strand Rustic plait was already being produced there, apparently taught originally by missionaries (FJ1).



Figure 58: Plait experiments



Figure 59: Strawcraft and plait experiments

I experimented with the palm leaves, trying to create more pronounced textural effects in the plait in response to my own aesthetic preferences and my research into African aesthetics which involved examining and sketching numerous African artefacts (Figures 57-8). However, the first plait I independently developed was directly inspired by the basketry of New Brunswick, Canada, from a different part of the world entirely. These baskets twisted fibres throughout the weave to give a spiky, hedgehog effect. My plait twisted a strand on one edge at regular intervals (Figure 60). This plait was particularly attractive when sewn up into various forms and very different from any other plait available today⁴⁷ (Figure 62). The plait was straightforward to make and flexible to work with; I felt it could be easily taught to others and would work well for millinery.

⁴⁷ However, I have since found evidence of a similar plait being made in wood chip in nineteenth century Nova Scotia (Gordon1981:65-7).



Figure 60: Plait no.2



Figure 61: Plait no.3



Figure 62: Plaits 2 and 3 sewn up

Later, I developed another plait with pronounced loops along one edge, giving a distinctive bubbly effect when sewn up (Figures 61-2). Because it was fairly quick and easy to make, I decided that it would be feasible to teach others. So far, my research has not uncovered any similar historic plait. Combining different plaits gives rich surface texture (Figure 62, right). The small discrepancies of fibre width, tension or spacing of braids add to the complexity of objects made by stitching up the plait. The haptic qualities of the plait are such that if I run my fingers over an object made in it, the irregular texture conveys the hand-made in an unmistakable way.

As I plait, my thoughts can drift. My body is released from self-consciousness and my mind from worry: I become lost in the repetitive process. Mentally, I can travel, dream, imagine, collect myself or switch off; breathing becomes deep and regular. I feel calmer and more content, until a point of fatigue is reached, sometimes after many hours. The designer and researcher Araujo (2010) makes an interesting

point about the ancient Greek association of the loom with order: she describes how the formation of pattern through the repetitive action of weaving was expressed by the word *kosmos*.

Kosmos related to pattern in its translation of a notion of order that was inseparable from the practice of craft (Araujo 2010: 83).

Through plaiting I gain a temporary sense of order: the predictability of outcomes within the parameters I allow. Embracing inconsistency in the plait, I can plait for as long as I want, break from and continue it when I am ready. It is relaxing.

Shapes for headwear in these plaits have been realised organically from rough design sketches inspired by historic African hairstyles found in photographs or depicted on artefacts (Figure 63-4, 79-80, Appendix IV). Forms are sometimes made first in card, to create sculptural guides, then the plait is positioned in a way that best seems to highlight its qualities and create the desired shape; it is stitched together, strip by strip (Figure 64).

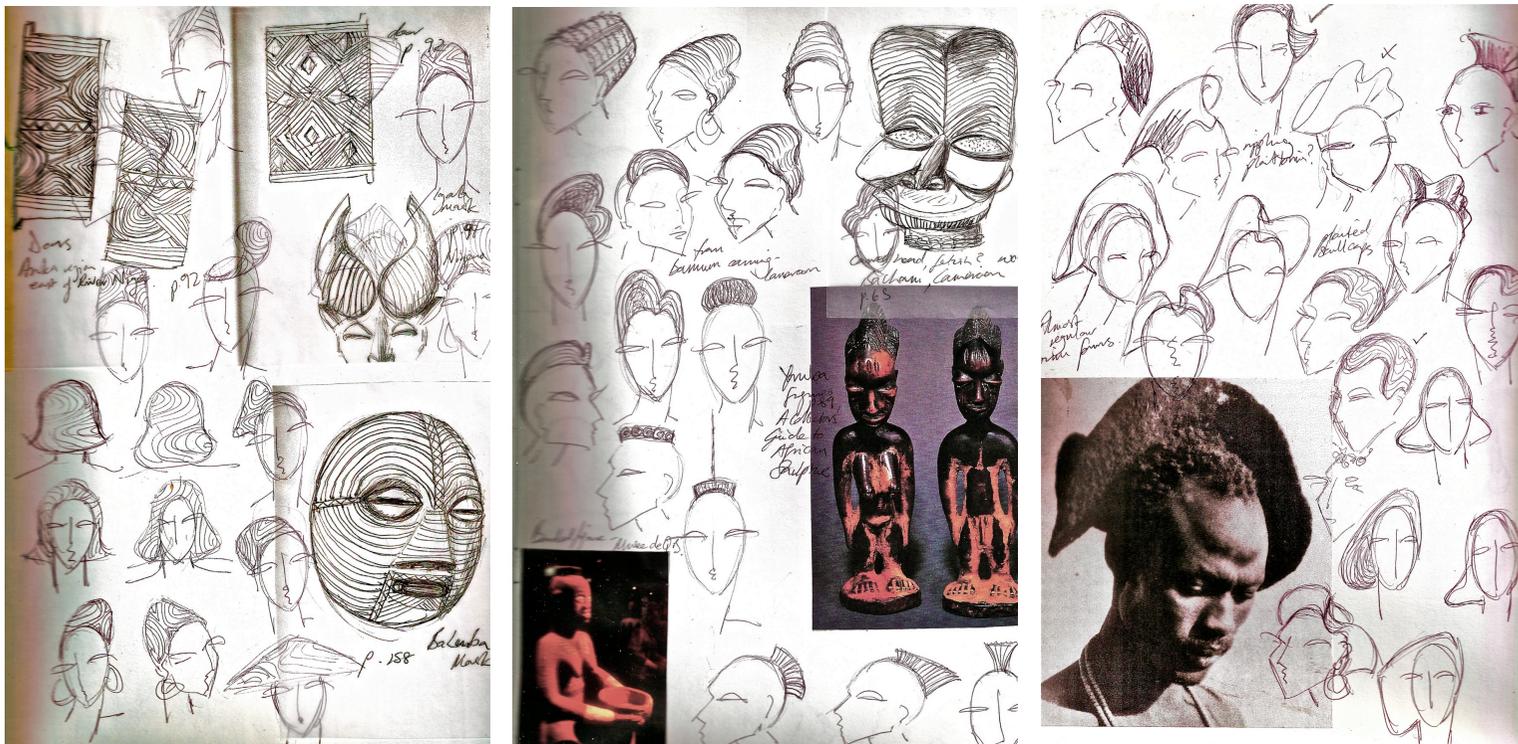


Figure 63: Design development for hats



Figure 64: My hats in the plaits

In the early stages of the project I was unaware that *mekeka* plaits existed, so I did not consciously experiment with those until 2009. Having watched the women in Uganda plait *mekeka*, and having read Trowell (1937) and Warner Dendell (1974), I experimented with creating narrower and more flexible versions of Ugandan plaits that could be used for hat making (Figure 65). With these plaits I developed some high fashion headwear directed towards the wealthy, urban market of Kampala: little bits of nonsense, to wear for weddings and The Goat Race⁴⁸ (Figure 65). I incorporated materials such as *kitenge* and raffia which I knew to be easily available in Uganda. I also substituted porcupine quills for the common UK hat punctuation: the feather quill. These have not proved easy to find in Uganda however - although porcupines apparently exist in some regions - and neither has the alternative of cane.

⁴⁸ The Royal Ascot Goat Race is a charitable, fund-raising event that takes place each year. Wealthy Ugandans and European ex-patriots that attend get very dressed up and often wear fancy hats.

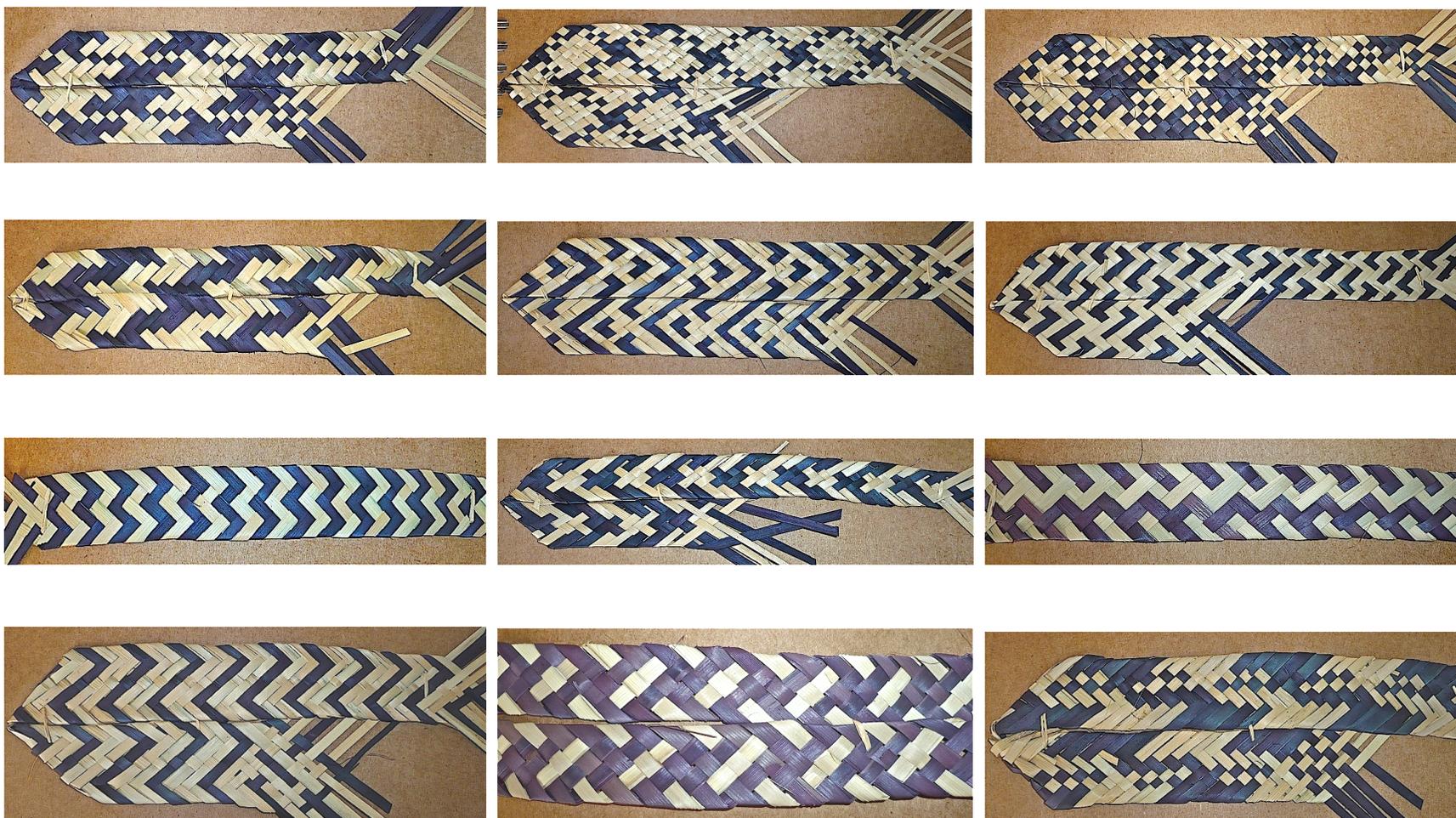


Figure 65: Experiments based on Ugandan plait

To summarise: for western markets, I have created textural, single-colour plaits and headpieces in sculptural forms - their designs abstracted and developed from African hairstyles (Figures 58-64, 79-80). These represent, to some extent, my own stereotypical (but, I hope, respectful) ideas of 'Africa'. I have also created flat, patterned plaits derived from *mekeka* patterns and hats of brightly contrasting colours in a more conventional western style but authentically Ugandan materials for the Kampala urban elite (Figures 65-6). These juxtapositions of aesthetic traits, textures, colours and techniques explore each culture's preconceptions of the other's aesthetic and desire for modernity/authenticity. Borrowing aesthetic vocabulary from the UK and Uganda, I have created pidgin plaits and hats.

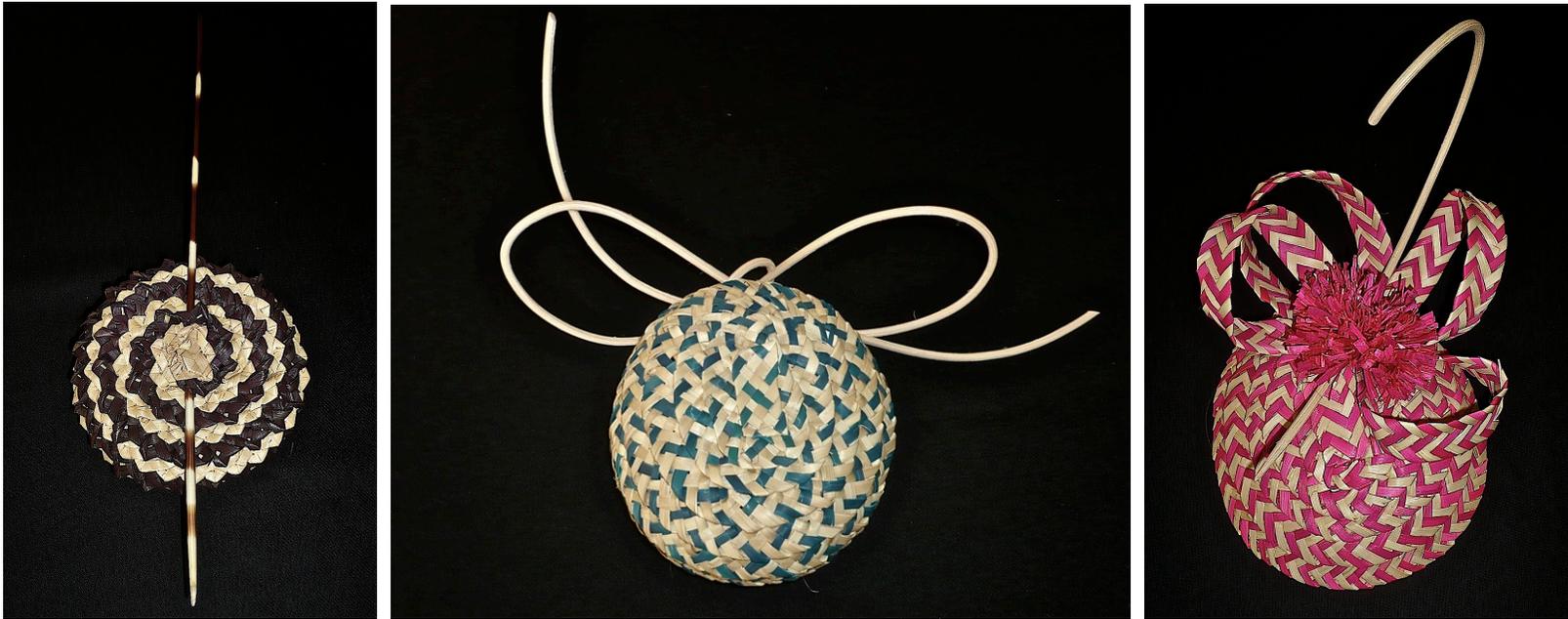


Figure 66: Hats in plaits based on Ugandan plait

3.7 Conclusion

Examination of plaits made for the western millinery industry and those produced in Uganda for use in mat-making suggested that there was potential for new plaits, based on the traditions of both cultures, to be developed for use by western accessory and product designers as well as in other markets. By studying how these plaits have been made - in what context as well as the techniques and materials of their production – a new direction for plaiting is envisaged that re-adopts pre-industrial processes to make a natural and sustainable medium for contemporary fashion. New plaits have been created that reference Ugandan and British plaiting traditions, expressing some aesthetic traits of both. The shared qualities of craftsmanship, community and environmental stewardship embodied in these diverse plaits points to an ethical and creative approach to materials production.

CHAPTER FOUR: AESTHETICS, TEXTURE AND MEANING

4.1 Introduction

Every object you looked at had the warm irregularity and beauty, the special quality, of things made by hand. In these beautiful open-air workshops women were in a leisurely way carrying on their occupations - cooking, pounding bark to make cloth, weaving baskets, painting patterns on each other's bodies with fine brushes dipped in black gardenia sap, or arranging each other's hair. (Flandrau, 1929:164)

As a designer, I have been heavily influenced in my work for this project by the aesthetics of both the real and the imagined Africa. In the process of developing the Pidgin Plaits, and some potential applications, I have felt it necessary to examine the nature of African aesthetics, with a focus on the phenomenon of texture created by irregular surface.

Surface pattern is integral to many traditional African artefacts. The significance of decorative patterns that appear to have no bearing upon function has been investigated by some researchers, for example Trowell, Fagg, Förstle, Orchardson-Mazrui, and is of ongoing interest. Trowell (2003:13) ascribes this impulse to decorate artefacts to '[man's] wish to link himself with the spiritual power or powers behind the visible world'. This suggests a dedication of these objects, and the craftsman's skill, to a higher power. Even if the 'impulse' to decorate oneself and one's belongings is derived from a mere biological imperative, rather than a cultural and social system, this points towards an instinctive appreciation of beauty that resides in humanity, however culturally variable and subjective it may be.

Less focus has been placed upon the role of irregularity as an important component of the African aesthetic atmosphere and its role in the formation of texture. The textural qualities caused by structural or surface irregularity, or variance in pattern uniformity, offer a rich source of inspiration for designers and – through their announcement of the handmade - may even prompt more ethical working practices by reconnecting consumers to makers.

4.2 Historical meanings of aesthetics

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa evidence of the compulsion to decorate is visible in the diversity of traditional artefacts and crafts which, while demonstrating communities' aesthetic sensibilities, also indicate their cultural and spiritual values. Ornamental detail and form applied

to or incorporated in artefacts may articulate power, status, ceremony, and ritual; it may be allegorical, or purely for artistic gratification (Orchardson-Mazrui 1998:86-88, Bocola 1995:12, 23, 28). Decorative objects confer prestige on their owners and have been used as currency, gifts or dowry payments in the cultures in which they were made (Bocola 1995:23). Designs may be specific to certain peoples and their understanding of 'beauty', or be associated with particular makers and passed down through generations (Jules-Rosette 1984:20), often reflecting a community's collective identity (Bocola 1995:12).

The decoration of an object may also imbue it with an essential 'goodness' as well as superficial beauty. In many African languages *beautiful* and *good* are denoted by the same word (Ray 1993). For example, in Lusoga, the language of the Ugandan Basoga people, *obúlúngi* means *beauty* and also *goodness* (Anon 2000). A similar association of meaning has existed in other cultures too: in ancient Greece both *virtue* and *good-looking* came from the same language root of *agathos* (Appiah 1985:18). Through their work African makers have attempted to communicate cosmological ideas and other values of a community; *goodness* - a quality that all cultures acknowledge - may be represented through technical accomplishment in craft and through ornamentation in all its forms (Appiah 1985:18-19). Making something well, therefore, to be both functionally and aesthetically pleasing, is making it the best it can be in every sense. Like bringing up a child to be healthy, able and to contribute to society, creating a beautiful, long-lasting, fit-for-purpose object enriches a community, may increase a sense of wellbeing, and adds to the sum of good.

The influence of religion upon African aesthetics has been fundamental: much of the art produced in Sub-Saharan Africa is formed for protection from or appeasement of spiritual forces (Bocola 1995:17) and is thus imbued with its own power. Wooden figures often perform religious functions, representing an ancestor, or a spirit. Often, these figures are symbolic of a person rather than accurately representational and are abstract in style. For superstitious reasons carvings in many groups may represent a human being, but they rarely portray an actual living person. This principle may also be applied to animals and spirits (Appiah 1984:17). Belief systems impact on aesthetics by placing value on different materials. For example, the Bambara and Dogon of West Africa believe that copper, with its ability to change colour to green or black, is the excrement of the Water Spirit and for this religious and aesthetic significance it has been more valued than gold in these cultures (Zahan 1984:23).

Orchardson-Mazrui (1998:87-8) identifies three categories of aesthetics in Mijikenda society in Kenya: the aesthetics of the 'beautiful' and the 'decorative' (which tend to be applied to all other categories); the aesthetics of ritual, status and political power; and the aesthetics of healing. The use of different materials or decorative details communicates the meaning of an object to the community in which it is made. Valued qualities such as youth, vigour, fertility and self-composure are reflected in the smooth, luminous surface of some wooden figures, often incorporating marks to represent decorative scarification (Ray 1993). Trowell (2003:14) compares the ancient kingdoms of West and Central Africa to those of Louis XIV and the court of Versailles, where items of the finest quality were commissioned for royal palaces and kings' wardrobes, clearly communicating the wealth and power of those kings.

Pattern and motif have communicated demarcation between strata of society. Traditionally for example, in Cameroon ordinary citizens could have pipes decorated with geometric patterns, but human representation could only be used on pipes for high officials or royalty (Meyer 2001:64). Embellishments have different associations. Some communicate power, such as horns, claws, skulls and hair, imbuing the object/owner with the essence of a given creature. Those used for display include beads, cowrie shells, fibres, and shiny or reflective surfaces.

Appiah (1984:16), however, warns of the danger of being so caught up in the meaning of an object that one fails to see the object itself and suggests that a balance between the aesthetic and the ethnographic is needed when viewing African artefacts. But perhaps part of their appeal is derived from a sense that their ornamentation has purpose (although that purpose may be undefined to the observer) and that their beauty is adherent to function (Guyer 2005:120-1).

4.3 Aesthetics and the environment

Artefacts are produced from local, organic materials,⁴⁹ reinforcing a group's connection with the forest or savannah in which they live. Ritual items made from local forest materials may symbolise the control of man over his surroundings - the subjugation of nature through "transformation achieved by human ingenuity" (Adams 1988:101). Schmalenbach (cited by Bocola 1995:17) talks about "the living power of the wood" perceived in African sculpture. This is also applicable to the plant fibres used in basketry and textiles, whose organic nature has a distinctive quality that speaks of the environment. Artisans work sympathetically with the natural beauty of natural materials (Dziedzic Wright

⁴⁹ Of course there are exceptions where imported or locally traded items, such as beads or cowrie shells, have been used in the creation of artefacts.

2008:335). Each piece of wood selected and each split leaf of palm are unique; ultimately no two items made from them, by hand, can be identical.

Pindell (1984:39) describes the contribution of raffia⁵⁰ to the African aesthetic:

Raffia, made from palm leaves, adds a further dimension through the versatility of its fibrous smoothness, which has a taut membrane quality. When it is wrapped, it creates a line with a meandering appearance because of the fluidity and flexibility of its width. Raffia can be twisted to form a fine, delicate fibrous thread that can be tightly woven; it can be cut to a short, velvety texture; or it can be flattened to create a smooth, yet undulating surface that clearly reveals the traces of irregularity in the underlying support.

Making has traditionally been an outdoor activity, usually in a shared compound. Connection to the surrounding environment is absolute, reinforced in every aspect of life. The relationship that different communities and makers of artefacts have with their environment - and their location - determines the type of items produced and the materials in which they are made (Prussin 1999).

Texture

4.4.1 Texture in African aesthetics

Surface interest in traditional African crafts - including pattern created by texture - may be formed by the introduction of different materials, fibres or techniques or may simply be inherent in the hand-made. The hand of the maker is a key ingredient of the African aesthetic: frequently indicated by a lack of uniformity, an irregularity of line, detail and contour. This enables light to react on different areas of an object in completely different ways, further enhancing the surface of many artefacts produced on the continent. Trowell (2003:40) refers to

...the African's great love of texture as apart from colour or form, which becomes obvious in the study of his⁵¹ craftsmanship in any material.

⁵⁰ Raffia is used in ceremonial and ritual dress, mats and basketry, as well as in the production of fine textiles.

⁵¹ The pronoun 'his' may be a reflection of prevailing sexism in Trowell's era, or may relate to certain crafts - such as woodcarving - being almost always performed by men.

Engraving pattern into wood, cross-hatching areas and making sinuous lines and concentric or interlacing shapes are approaches often seen in African statuary. This imposition of textural pattern on the surface interrupts the polished smoothness of the wood, as nature is both subjugated and celebrated by the maker.

In making a study of any collection of African work we cannot fail to be struck by the extraordinary richness of surface texture which is conveyed through the use of small patterns over large areas. (Trowell 2003:65)



Figure 67: Examples of surface texture on African artefacts

While the creation of surface texture often appears to be planned, it may also be improvisational or inconsequential. For example, in textiles inconsistent surface tension, irregular widths of fibre, stitch or non-uniform positioning cause beadwork, embroidery, geometric patterns or accumulated components to be disarranged to some degree (Pindell 1984:37-8). This phenomenon is particularly apparent in Kuba cloths, where cut-pile raffia forms somewhat erratic, raised, geometric patterns on a previously woven base. The skill of fabrication is beyond question, yet discrepancies remain (Figure 67).

Discussion about irregular surface texture with local experts on contemporary Ugandan fine art and studio crafts at Afriart Gallery suggested the role of artist error in the creation of irregular texture: occurring because the artists are only human. An artist may be distracted, or lose concentration, and the resulting errors and irregularities embraced as part of what makes something distinctive. However, while I feel it likely that error may be the cause of irregularities in some instances, I do not believe it to be the cause of all, and this topic would benefit from further research.

4.4.2 Texture in plait

The textural qualities of African plaited braids are generally limited to subtle undulations of fibre and inconsistencies in width, as opposed to other craft items where texture is often consciously incorporated. Faint ridges may be formed when two lengths of braid are joined. Contrasting colours are used to form bold, two-dimensional pattern in many East African plaits. However, some monochrome plaits traditionally produced in Zanzibar and Pemba consciously introduce texture through variations in weave (Förstle 2006:49), reminiscent of some traditional European plaits. In Ugandan plaiting textural interest is caused by inconsistency of fibre width and in the tension imposed upon that fibre: these variations enrich the surface of the plait beyond the ornamentation of the pattern itself.

4.4.3 Texture and authenticity

Whether they are intentional or not, small irregularities introduced to an artefact by the individual craftsman's hand, eye or impulse contribute enormously to the distinctive nature of objects, suggesting maker, material and process, and authenticity (Figure 67). Edmund de Waal (2002:186) identifies *authenticity* in the lack of self-awareness in the maker, in tradition, and in the production of an item in quantity for local consumption that protects it from 'transformation into a self-conscious art-object'. Other indicators of authenticity place emphasis upon

process rather than outcome, for example something being made or done ‘in the traditional or original way’ (Oxford English Dictionary), or in a way that ‘faithfully resembles an original’.

The manner in which goods are made may be authentic in terms of historical method, even if the items that are produced have evolved beyond their original form. For example, palm braid for hat making may be plaited outdoors by women in rural Uganda in much the same way as they have produced *mekaka* plait for centuries. The processes may be authentic, but adapted. Barkcloth Europe,⁵² for example, produces barkcloth by traditional, environmentally responsible methods; it is then treated in different ways that adapt the cloth to a wider range of applications. Each length varies slightly as each sheet of bark differs, even after it has been beaten and stretched by a skilled craftsman, so that even the most contemporary garments produced in this medium contain a unique echo of tree and hand.

Perceptions and misperceptions, truths and half-truths

4.5.1.1 ‘African’

Western attraction to the aesthetics of Sub-Saharan African craft began around the 15th century, when Portuguese explorers reached both the east coast of Africa to plunder and the west coast to trade. However, interest in African crafts gathered momentum through the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly between 1880 and 1920, when European appropriation of African artefacts peaked (Schildkrout and Keim 1998:21, 23-25, Davidson 1984:15-16, 64, 67, 127-136). Anthropologists catalogued the articles they collected and tried to establish their purpose and meaning. Different tribal groups were designated higher or lower status by explorers and anthropologists, in part due to the quality and quantity of the decorative artefacts that they produced. For example, Schweinfurth (1874) considered the Mangbetu of north-eastern Congo to be of ‘greater biological evolution’ because of the excellence of their crafts. The use of surface decoration on Kuba artefacts contributed to their similar elevation in western minds (Schildkrout and Keim 1998:21, 24, 70). A fetishization of the ‘primitive’ and ‘exotic’ developed, but the beauty of objects collected challenged colonial theories of race and of African cultural evolution (Schildkrout and Keim 1998:25).

⁵² For more information about Barkcloth Europe, based in Germany, visit <http://www.barkcloth.de/>.

However, long before Western explorers visited the continent, international and intercontinental trade routes had been well-established between Africa and China, India, Ceylon, Persia and the East Indies, influencing African aesthetics, technologies and cultures (Davidson 1984: 113, 120). Coastal areas have been particularly subject to a repeated process of exchange as multiple and diverse waves of external agents arrived at their shores. European trade with Africa began in the 13th century through North Africa and then directly with Sub-Saharan Africa from the 1430s (Davidson 1984: 114) and ambassadors from royal African courts travelled to Europe and Asia. The imprint of this contact with foreign agents has had long-lasting effects on traded goods such as beads and textiles: some items that seem to be authentically African may not in reality come from Africa at all. For example, the textiles market in West Africa has engaged in the trade of cloth from India, Europe and China for hundreds of years. The wax print textiles (that appear to be recognizably African) were originally devised by European merchants in the early 19th century who had studied and incorporated indigenous West African designs in their prints in order to compete with rivals. Today these wax print fabrics - ubiquitous throughout Sub-Saharan Africa - are just as likely to have been made in The Netherlands or China as in any African country. However, Sylvanus (2007) argues that it is not the place of production that makes the cloth 'African' but rather the way in which it is used and the meaning it holds to those who use it. A process of exchange between peoples has taken place globally for millennia as groups have travelled and interacted with one another.

It may become increasingly difficult to identify authenticity as the influence of tourism, immigration, globalization, television, film and the Internet reaches unprecedented levels. Western visitors to Uganda may have preconceived notions of 'Africa' shaped by vicarious (and sometimes misinformed) experiences of the continent: colonial and pre-colonial explorers and anthropologists recorded and presented information about the cultures of different tribal groups that live, or have lived, in traditional ways; contemporary media presents historical, as well as current, images of Africa that may have been created in the context of colonial or post-colonial ideologies, or as a homogeneous place of need.

4.5.1.2 Colonial propaganda and 'Africa' in contemporary, western popular culture

In the late 19th century language used in the popular British press to describe African peoples often amounted to imperialist propaganda, depicting Africans as "degenerate", "barbaric", "savage" and "uncivilized" (Coombes 1994:2, 17, 36) and with little material culture of value. It was in the interests of colonial powers to portray Africa as a continent that needed the civilizing help of colonization. Evidence of sophisticated African culture was dismissed as ancient rather than contemporary. Numerous exhibitions were staged in Britain in the late 19th

to early 20th century that constructed a politically expedient 'Africa' for the entertainment of the British public (Coombes 1994:63) - portrayed as authentic and objective representations. These caricatures diminished and confined the enormous variety of cultures that comprised Africa, and contributed to racial and cultural stereotyping. Images that appeared in the press often sensationally depicted African tribal chiefs surrounded by naked women, and tales of human sacrifice were presented out of cultural context (Coombes 1994:17). During this period a genre of literature emerged that reflected this 'Africa', such as Rider Haggard's 'King Solomon's Mines (1885), Buchan's 'Prester John' (1910) and Burroughs' 'Tarzan' series (from 1912)⁵³.

Twentieth-century, Anglo-American popular culture has presented a constructed African aesthetic through television programmes such as *Daktari* (1960s), or films such as the *Tarzan* series (1918 onwards), *King Solomon's Mines* (1937, 1950 [Figure 68], 1985), *Mogambo* (1953), *Hatari* (1962), *Out of Africa* (1985) and countless others. Some of these productions may not have been filmed in Africa at all, but demonstrate an amalgam of western ideas of 'Africa', regurgitating colonial representations from the earlier public exhibitions, described above⁵⁴. This restricted view of African aesthetics continues to shape expectations of 'authentic' craft products and has become part of the vernacular of design; I am aware that it has influenced my own visual preconceptions and preferences in African art and craft. Certain visual characteristics are emblematic of this 'Africa', such as natural colours and materials, khaki, animal skins, certain motifs (Figures 69-70); these are frequently appropriated by western fashion and interior designers, along with the use of bold African prints (as described above).

⁵³ The first *Tarzan* film was made in 1918, only six years after Burroughs' 'Tarzan of the Apes' was first published.

⁵⁴ Josephine Baker's performances in France demonstrated a similar 'exotic' aesthetic reflective of colonial and patriarchal assumptions of race and gender.



Figure 68: Movie poster from King Solomon's Mines (julienmorvan.blogspot.com)



Figure 69: Garments from St. Laurent's Bambara collection (toocutemagazine.com)



Figure 70: Michael Kors' Africa-inspired Spring Summer 2012 collection (hautefashionafrica.com)

Throughout the 20th century, and already in the 21st, fashion designers have found inspiration in African aesthetics and codified them for western audiences. For example, Yves Saint Laurent's celebrated 'African' collection of 1967 was inspired by the material culture of the Bambara people, primarily of Mali and Senegal (Figure 69). His use of raffia, flax, wooden beads and glass-beaded embroidery, and a rich palette of enhanced natural tones, communicated the exotic in a way that was described by *Harper's Bazaar* as "a fantasy of primitive genius" (McDowell 2000:337). He later developed the 'Saharienne' collection that contained an enormously influential version of the safari jacket (Loughran 2009:249) - a look that has been periodically recycled ever since.

The fashion magazines where these garments are presented "are not intended as ethnographies, and much of the information is erroneous...[intended] to titillate and sell a product" (Loughran 2009:252). However, this codified 'Africa' is firmly embedded in contemporary design culture. Language used to describe African-inspired fashion reinforces a sense of the 'exotic' and 'otherness', but also continues to echo the earlier colonial exhibitions. Some typical headings of articles about African-inspired fashion are:

'Dance to the beat of a tribal drum with modern, African-inspired pieces' (Vogue.co.uk June 2009)

'For spring, the message is loud and clear: *Hakuna matata*.' (<http://www.marieclaire.com/fashion/trends/articles/african-inspired-clothing> 2009)

'Fashion goes on safari as tribal prints rule in the urban jungle for summer...' (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1007761/Fashion-goes-safari-tribal-prints-rule-urban-jungle-summer.html>, 27/03/11)

Stereotypical preconceptions of 'Africa' are deeply embedded in western culture, even amongst those of the African diaspora. For example in African Fashion Week, New York, July 2011, Ugandan designer Gloria Wavamunno's⁵⁵ work was perceived as 'not being African enough'. In an event primarily organized by African-Americans – but who may never have visited Africa themselves - the collections that received the most press were those that represented a more clichéd view of African design.

4.5.1.3 Colour

As suggested previously, tourist demand for natural coloured crafts in Uganda may be shaped by a contemporary western fashion for neutral-coloured home interiors. Items in natural palm, raffia and banana fibre sit easily within a neutral-toned environment, as well as with stronger colours. The aesthetics of crafts sold as mementos of a visit to Uganda reflect both tourist assumptions about what is authentically African or Ugandan and what the maker produces in response to their own perception of tourist demand. For example, Faith Namaganda, a Jinja craft shop owner, described how tourists generally prefer natural colours. Most of her goods are stocked in natural shades and she pays makers more for natural coloured goods than for dyed ones.

Conversely, the craft groups I have visited or worked with in both south-eastern and south-western Uganda prefer colour (FJ2 07/11/07). This is demonstrated by their use of contrasting bright colours in making plaits of any sort - as well as for coiled basketry - for their own community (Appendix III). This suggests that if tourists wish to acquire an authentic Ugandan product, they should buy brightly coloured merchandise. However, as I claim above, overseas visitors' notions of 'Africa' may be shaped by journals, film, documentaries or museum archival artefacts relating to specific tribal groups – perhaps from another region or era - whose material culture did not involve the use of chemical dyes, although they have been imported into East Africa since at least the beginning of the 20th century (Förstle 2006:15, 100). Traditional, natural plant dyes are much more time-consuming to use than chemical dyes, and knowledge of how to harvest, prepare and use them is being lost. Dye experiments I conducted with local plant materials, with craft groups at Bushfire in 2008 and 2009 and Kamuli in

⁵⁵ Section 4.6.1 contains further information about Ugandan fashion designers, including Gloria Wavamunno.

2009, produced disappointing results, predominantly various shades of beige. Annatto provided the most definite colour- a bright orange, but the dyers tend to allow too little time for the dye to take, perhaps having become accustomed to using chemicals.

4.5.2 *The Hat Designer of the Year Competition 2009*⁵⁶

The Hat Magazine – a British trade magazine for the millinery industry and hat enthusiasts with an international circulation – selected the Pidgin Plait produced by the Bushfire group I worked with in Uganda as the compulsory component in entrants’ designs for the Hat Designer of the Year 2009 competition. This prestigious international competition has launched the careers of many successful young milliners, such as Justin Smith, Karen Henriksen, Sarah Cant, Yvonne Bussemaker and Yasmin Rizvi. The 2009 design brief was to reflect ‘the African spirit’ (Denford 2009) in two cut-and-sew hats, two experimental hats, and two couture hats. The short-listed entrants were to exhibit their finished hats at *Première Classe Paris*⁵⁷ in September 2009.

Over sixty entrants submitted hat designs that reflected their perceptions of “Africa”, ranging from those demonstrating a relatively subtle interpretation of African aesthetics, to the gimmicky and the blatantly racist. One entrant from Belgium submitted designs that included an enormous pair of lips on the head, annotated with “based on the African full lips”. This echo of the colonial era’s anthropometric attempts to categorize and denigrate races based upon physical features made me instinctively uncomfortable; such attitudes are rarely voiced in educated British society, where there is knowledge of and sensitivity to the past.

Many of the designs submitted represented the stereotypical visual language frequently used to denote “Africa”, including colour-graded plait sunsets over the Serengeti and a faux Masai head with beaded collars forming a brim (Appendix V). While some entries were very theatrical in nature, others showed a more sophisticated response to the brief, for example former competition winner Karen Henriksen’s creation of striking, contemporary headpieces using the natural plait in combination with other materials such as sculpted vegetan leather, reinventing the turban for the 21st century. Others used vibrant African fabrics or wood veneer. Winning designer Rachel Richardson managed to blend ingredients that were recognisably African - such as *kitenge* and strings of fine glass beads - in a fresh and directional

⁵⁶ Appendix V contains a more detailed account of the Hat Designer of the Year 2009.

⁵⁷ *Première Classe* is a vast fashion trade fair, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually.

way. However, very few entrants drew inspiration from the abundance of surface texture found in African artefacts, although the plait's textural qualities were drawn from this phenomenon.

'Modernity' in Ugandan fashion

4.6.1 Ugandan high fashion

Kampala is a large and diverse city, containing areas of extreme poverty as well as those of great privilege. Upmarket shopping centres, such as the Lugogo Mall, Nakumatt Oasis and Garden City in Kampala, testify to an affluent and sophisticated home market. African Fashion Week has shown work from two leading Ugandan fashion designers: Sylvia Owori and Gloria Wavamunno. A Ugandan Fashion Week is planned and there has already been a Swahili Fashion Week. Other Ugandan fashion labels include Arapapa and Bambi.

Wavamunno (FJ5 28/09/10) trained at the American Intercontinental University in London and later worked for Oswald Boateng. She grew up in an entrepreneurial family whose multiple business interests include tailoring (fashion) and interior design. Returning to Kampala, she found that she was part of a wave of young, hip Ugandans, who had been educated overseas, that wanted to revive and develop their creative culture in a contemporary way that was reflective of their heritage. Wavamunno works with African materials and her collections are made in Uganda. Chief Executive of Ugandan Fashion Week, she also showed her fashion collection at London Fashion Week in February 2011 and New York in August 2011⁵⁸. Selling to stores in the US, Wavamunno also has a growing clientele in Uganda who appreciate her modern, youthful and African aesthetic. Private viewings of her collections take place in clients' homes, often for groups of women who order bespoke pieces and pay a premium for individuality.

Owori is a well-established designer who has shown her fashion collections on catwalks all over Africa. She also owns a model agency and is editor-in-chief of African Woman. Magazines such as African Woman and Arise present images of desirable lifestyles: beautiful people in beautiful homes, wearing beautiful clothes, which are aspirational (and remote from the experience of most Ugandans). They are symptomatic of a strong and growing consumerism in African urban societies – and place an East African slant on the world of Vogue, Grazia and Cosmopolitan.

⁵⁸ See 4:5.1.3

4.6.2 *The second hand clothes market in Uganda*

In the markets of Kampala, Jinja and Iganga many stalls sell second hand clothes shipped from abroad. Thriving businesses are based on the belief that overseas goods are somehow better than those made in Uganda. One vendor from the massive Owino market in Kampala, cited in a BBC report (Garland 2009), said that imported clothes are popular because they are “good quality” and “not duplicated”, although ironically they may have been produced in many hundreds of thousands for High Street fashion outlets in the West. It is also possible to find vintage fashion items from the 1950s, 60s and 70s in markets (FJ4 10/11/09, FJ5 29/09/10). In Jinja market over 50 stalls sell simple garments - such as gathered skirts with elasticated waists - made from altered, imported, second-hand clothing (FJ5 29/09/10).

Second-hand clothing produced by global fast fashion outlets has increasingly found its way into African countries through charities and traders. In spite of its popularity, and the fact that much of the rural poor are dressed in rags, many second-hand garments from overseas still end up in landfill sites in Uganda. Man-made fibres, prevalent in imported clothing, are resistant to bio-degradation, contributing to environmental problems and the spread of disease by preventing water from penetrating the soil, creating run off and the stagnant pools that allow malaria to spread (Garland 2009). The increasing demand for fabrics such as (cotton) *kitenge* in Ugandan high fashion – promoted by Wavamunno, and in Owori’s *Uganda Organic* collection - could in time filter down and encourage the rejection of imported garments. The ecological, aesthetic and economic benefits of designing, making and buying locally are self-evident - at least to those able to make choices about the clothing they buy.

4.7 *Conclusion*

The traditional African love of surface texture, with its inherent irregularities, can stimulate new approaches to the design of materials and objects for western consumption. Inspiration for design may be drawn from the aesthetic of the African craftsman’s touch, where signifiers of the hand of the maker are fundamental and speak of authenticity to a developed world dominated by mass-production. The visual qualities of this touch - often textural - include what may or may not be an unselfconscious imperfection of line, pattern or form and suggest an intuitive rather than clinical approach to making. This comfort with non-uniformity could support the development of new ways of thinking for design. Self-conscious use of imperfection has, of course, been seen before and been used to give added value to products ranging from ceramics to textiles and even music, but a more improvisational, unconscious approach is indicated by the form and ornamentation of many African artefacts.

The surface designs of countless items for western consumption have been inspired by African form and pattern, including fine art, textile prints, knits, ceramics and jewellery. Less inspiration has been drawn from the textures – particularly that created by irregularity – found in African artefacts. Textural pattern in western craft - for example in historical straw plaits - appears to have been very much informed by European aesthetic traditions founded upon Hellenistic concepts about the beauty of perfection. Main's Swiss Strawcraft (2003) and the straw plait archive at Wardown Park Museum in Luton demonstrate the similarity of patterns and motifs in 19th century straw work to those found in lace-making, tapestry, decorative furniture and architecture, where there is a sense of the craftsman striving for a controlled, ornamental perfection, rather than working spontaneously with a material's natural qualities and embracing irregularity (Figure 71).



Figure 71: Examples of European decorative effects (left -curlytailanimals.wordpress.com, middle – author's own, right - hydroponiconline.com)

Working sympathetically with the materials to hand, coaxing them towards a pre-existing idea but being open to how their dynamic qualities might lead to unforeseen outcomes can bring life and character to otherwise inanimate objects. The “warm irregularity and beauty, the special quality of things made by hand” (Flandrau 1929) may be harnessed by designers and makers today - either superficially, by self-consciously introducing imperfection to line, pattern or form, or by choosing wholeheartedly to take the traditional African craftsman's approach.

CHAPTER FIVE: CHANGE AGENTS IN THE UGANDAN CRAFTS SECTOR: THE IMPACT ON DESIGN DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines some of the internal and external change agents operating in Ugandan craft development and their effectiveness as 'helpers'. In a new 'Scramble for Africa' different development actors – including missionaries, designers, academics and commercial bodies from overseas, as well as local operatives - are vying with one another to 'help'. In the process some are inadvertently undermining the sustainability of the projects they are trying to support. The professional experience brought by these agents to their interventions in grassroots craft development initiatives is reflected in how well the products find a market. My experiences with Bushfire crafts group and Mothers of Hope provide the examples I include of case studies of individual actors, their effect upon the artisans and the sustainability of the projects (FJ4, FJ5).

5.2 The ethics of intervention

Any attempt to intervene in the lives of others carries with it an enormous responsibility to ensure that their circumstances are not made worse through that intervention. The history of development initiatives by overseas operatives in Africa is famously problematic (Chambers 1983:4, Sachs 2000:13-6, Coombes 1994:111). From early attempts to 'help' by missionaries, colonialists, philanthropists, governments and agencies efforts have often failed to benefit their subjects materially, and in some instances have led to exploitation of natural resources, impoverishment of local culture, environmental degradation and conflict⁵⁹ (Gronemeyer 1992: 53-69, Sachs 2004:41-2, Manji and O'Coill 2002:569-70, 577-81, Bond 2007:2). As a result of this, some development theorists understandably attribute politics and greed to most motivation to help. However, I have met many individuals in the field whose selfless efforts to support others in small-scale development projects was motivated by their faith and their genuine desire to alleviate poverty and suffering.

⁵⁹ For example, during the British colonial regime (1888-1962), groups with less centralised systems of local governance, such as the Lango and Acholi peoples of the north, suffered at the hands of autocratic chiefs whose power – enhanced in British interests – was relatively unchecked (Gennailoi and Rainer 2006:11-12). The consequences continue to be felt.

The premise of 'development' has been that the living standards of the poor should be raised and thus their circumstances improved (Truman 1950, Sachs 2000:9). In his argument against development, Sachs suggests that a strain upon the earth's resources, brought about by raising the living standards of the developing world to those of the developed world, would be unsustainable. Instead, he proposes lowering the economic standards of the rich (Sachs 1997:8), a prospect that seems unlikely to be voluntarily adopted. Sachs (1985) argues that rather than becoming involved, or continuing to be involved, in national and international economies, communities should focus on local production and consumption as part of an eco-decentralist way forward (Sachs 1985:29). This ideal may be achievable in the long term, but is unlikely to be fully realised in the near future. In the meantime, sensitive development interventions that carefully consider people, processes, and environment, and have a clear market for the goods they produce, may bring relief from poverty and provide sustainable livelihoods for the rural poor. They may also help to build confidence and social cohesion amongst marginalized groups or individuals.

In the current global climate Chambers' (2005) vision of development as 'Good Change' is still attainable, easier to embrace, and involves less social upheaval: seeing what may be done to help, while ensuring that it will cause no harm. The many positive outcomes of small scale community development projects, such as increased household income, improved access to health care, safer working conditions, access to training, empowerment of women, and the building of social capital evidence the good that can be achieved (MacHenry 2000:31, 33-4, Munene et al 2005:90, 92, Appendix VI). Chambers states:

A decision not to act is itself an action. A person who withdraws or who abstains from intervening, is by that withdrawal or abstention still intervening by default. (1983:141)

The choices that formal and informal development workers make affect others. If they are to 'help' those in need effectively, this responsibility must be taken seriously. The potential for negative consequences to that 'help' should be weighed and eliminated, through planning, preparation, listening and learning.

5.3.1 Craft, design and development

Understanding how to innovate and develop goods that are on-trend for distant consumers, and suitable marketing strategies, is essential for artisans in developing countries who wish to participate in global trade. Therefore organisations or individuals that assist craft projects in

Uganda must understand both design innovation and market, if they are to aid the creation of sustainable livelihoods (Grobler 2005:15, 17-9, Jaitly 1989:172-4, Rosenbaum 2000:97-9).

Independent businesses in developing countries – if they are to achieve sustainable growth – have to pursue and create new markets, and the only way they can do this is through innovation. (ITC 2009:19)

However, design innovation may be a foreign concept to societies that have historically valued continuity, through the repetition of traditional forms and techniques⁶⁰. The problem of design innovation in Ugandan grassroots crafts is not insurmountable, as successful collaborations have demonstrated⁶¹, but duplication remains widespread.

The craft groups in Kangulumira, Kamuli, Jinja and Bushfire copy things that others are making, because they see them everywhere and assume that they sell. Some do sell well, but for new groups of makers attempting to break into the Ugandan tourist craft market it seems logical that they must either:

- make things better - unlikely as they have less experience
- make them cheaper - earning too little for their labour
- sell in a better location - prime locations have often been taken by established makers/craft retailers
- make different products from those of their competitors - more likely to lead to success, as long as those products are appropriate for their markets

The UEPB identifies the role of NGOs in the crafts sector as:

...support [of] handicraft development, creativity and innovation; identify[ing] talented craftsmen, and provid[ing] logistics and technical support to organized handicraft producer groups (UEPB-ITC 2005:39).

⁶⁰ Another hindrance to the development of design innovation may be the amount of daily chores that children perform, allowing them little time for artistic or creative exploration. As a child growing up in the UK, with a working father and housewife mother, I was encouraged to be creative from a young age and did relatively few domestic chores. Ugandan children, generally, have no such advantages. I believe that this topic warrants further research.

⁶¹ See 1.7 and Appendix VI.

Clearly, the need for more design innovation is recognized, as well as technical and business input, but the importance of design as a transferrable skill (Guille 2006:60) may not be fully comprehended by some organisations and individuals working with artisans in Uganda. These bodies should learn about - and to some extent incorporate – traditional techniques, motifs, materials and forms, and the meanings they hold, in order to speak the same visual and technical language. Developing products that build upon traditional techniques⁶² and aesthetics, but adapting them to new markets, should result in items that retain a sense of authenticity for consumers, and still hold meaning for those who make them. In practical terms, new techniques are also more likely to be assimilated if built upon traditional ones.

Western designers, working with groups of artisans in developing countries, can struggle with the ethics of how their input might shape crafts away from indigenous norms and their cultural relevance (MacHenry, 2000:40, Craft Revival Trust et al 2005:v, Guille 2006:60). However, having been brought to understand some of the challenges faced in their lives, I have had little compunction in introducing new plaiting techniques to the women I work with - whose priorities are dictated by need - although I have tried to embed (what I consider to be) an aspect of an authentic African aesthetic in the product.

Some development actors believe that intervention should only be made with local markets in mind, perceiving them as more stable than those overseas (Craft Revival Trust 2005:7, Sachs 1985:29). However, when artisans live in remote areas, local markets may be very limited, in terms of both potential customers and the prices that goods would reach. For this reason, I believe that it is most beneficial for the women I am working with to have as many customer options as possible: both local and distant. The makers' ability to comprehend overseas markets and quality requirements has been much more problematic in terms of the viability of the project. I will discuss with them the position those products inhabit in the cultures of end-users at a later stage⁶³.

Another difficult area has been the input of other informal change agents who have given damaging design and operational advice to artisans - albeit with good intentions. Some actors have assumed the role of designer, with insufficient understanding of market, design, or making process. As a result, artisans' valuable time has been wasted in producing objects that are difficult to sell. Inappropriate advice from

⁶² See 1.7 and Appendix VI.

⁶³ Guille (2006:60) points out that although practical skills training is given to artisans by some organisations, not enough focus is placed upon ensuring a positive local impact to their work, leading to the production of goods that are devoid of relevance in the contexts in which they are created.

well-meaning actors has also negatively affected pre-arranged orders for plait from paying customers (FJ5 04/10/10). Regardless of whether they have any underpinning training or knowledge, these actors have strong opinions about design and feel confident in sharing them with artisans, perhaps unaware of the consequences of their advice. The responsibility of 'helping' requires humility and critical self-reflection in outsiders trying to support artisans in craft development. A broad knowledge base is essential – either within individuals or amongst teams or organisations that wish to 'help' - if they are to 'first do no harm'⁶⁴.

5.3.2 *Assisting innovation*

In general, the groups in Jinja and Bulange have been extremely open to learning anything new that might generate income. However, most of the women are reluctant to innovate independently: perhaps having little self-confidence, or time to spend on risky ventures, or unable to waste materials on making products that may not sell.⁶⁵ While they may be open to new ideas given to them by outsiders, discussion with makers inviting their own potential innovation has been met with furrowed brows, unless samples are shown of possibilities. Some exceptions to this were coiled baskets incorporating bin liners or sweet wrappers, and some plait made at Bushfire that combined silver wrapping paper with palm, neither of which I had suggested to the makers.

In everyday life people make or adapt functional items in creative ways – for example Willy (FJ2 04/11/07) used a torn strip of fabric to make a fan-belt, converting an electric sewing machine to a treadle system; plastic packing tape incorporated in a coiled, palm banana basket; an empty plastic water bottle adapted as a filter for *magadi*⁶⁶ (FJ3 16/11/08). This resourceful, pragmatic approach to the materials at hand, driven by necessity, is common in Uganda; the challenge is to encourage new artisanal groups to adopt this in crafts production.

For those wishing to 'help' craft groups in product design a background as a designer-maker is essential. For example, I have found that new ideas are more easily adopted if demonstrated with samples and technical training. Teaching artisans how to innovate and learn new techniques contributes to the sustainability of craft initiatives after external partners have withdrawn (Rhodes 2009:74, 76, Bhatt 2007:5). However, the problem of up-to-date market awareness that can inform product development remains. Makers in remote regions may need

⁶⁴ Derived from the Hippocratic Oath.

⁶⁵ Jaitly (1989:171) identifies risk as a factor that inhibits design innovation by Indian artisans.

⁶⁶ *Magadi* is a liquid made when water is filtered through *matooke* ashes; used as a mordant, as well as to tenderise meat and vegetables.

ongoing support from people with design experience and market knowledge, in order for their products to enter and survive in the global marketplace. It would also be helpful for them to develop products with market longevity.

5.4.1 Individuals and groups 'helping' Bushfire and Mothers of Hope craft groups

Christian faith can be a powerful motivation to 'help' others: there is a biblical imperative to love your neighbour, to give to those in need and to help widows and orphans. Many of those attempting to 'help' in Uganda are motivated by faith. Their effectiveness in supporting craft projects requires additional qualities, however, as I will demonstrate.

My own intervention has been motivated by faith, in the belief that I should use whatever abilities I may have to benefit others. I am uncomfortably aware of its implicit paternalism and include myself amongst the ranks of those who come to Africa to 'do good' for better or for worse. During the years that I have been coming to Uganda I have met other *muzungus* who have felt called to come and 'help' in wide variety of ways. Through some case studies⁶⁷ I will demonstrate how the different priorities and skills-bases of individuals trying to 'help' some craft groups in south-eastern Uganda have affected those groups.

5.4.2 Case Study of O

Background:

O is a professional counsellor, from a church in Australia, who has visited Bushfire Children's Home annually since its foundation in 2005, as a Christian missionary, evangelist and counsellor. Her extensive mission experience includes family ministry, sex education, preaching against child abuse and addictions, supporting victims. She has undertaken missions to several other African countries, including the DRC and post-conflict Rwanda.

Activities:

O has been buying paper bead necklaces from the staff group at Bushfire for several years, at well above local market price. Wanting the makers to earn as much as possible from their work, she paid 10-15,000 UGX for necklaces that were only 4,000 elsewhere, including Fairtrade Uganda Crafts 2000. When she returned to Australia, she took a large quantity of paper bead jewellery with her. The necklaces were sold to individual contacts in her church and in other local churches. O asked people to donate the equivalent of about £6.50 (10 Australian dollars) to Bushfire and receive a free necklace.

⁶⁷ These case studies are drawn from observations and incidents predominantly taking place in Field Trips 4 and 5.

Benefits:

This strategy has been very successful for the last few years. Necklaces have also been taken on credit and the money sent back to Uganda. The makers have received a good return.

Issues:

Customers are now drying up: everyone O knew who had wanted a paper bead necklace has already got one. The makers were unable to innovate and O – who had no experience as a designer or maker - was unable to help develop new products.

O was very vocal in a meeting she attended between IndigoLime and Mothers of Hope (MOH) in October 2010: her suggestions for product design, development, organisation and pricing were inappropriate for the contexts in which IndigoLime work, having little bearing on contemporary UK fashion.

Her praise of work that was of unsuitable quality or design for UK commercial markets caused confusion when IndigoLime were attempting to clarify their requirements.

Evaluation:

Unless new markets emerge or new styles are developed, O's approach to 'helping' appears to be unsustainable. Because the makers have become used to receiving a premium for their work, their paper bead necklaces in MOH's craft shop are more expensive than those of their competitors, while offering nothing different, and on sale in a quieter location in Jinja. They have not been selling well. The pricing – and, I believe, the design - are unsustainable.

Some group members appear to listen to outsiders, regardless of their expertise or training in a specific area. I have yet to identify clearly the reasons for this. The mixed messages being sent by independent actors - especially those without design training or market knowledge - can undermine product development by creating confusion and may negatively affect the sustainability of craft development projects.

5.4.3 Case Study of B

Background:

B is the former buyer of a UK High Street fashion store, visiting Bushfire on three occasions as part of a mission group. She wanted to address her faith through her work and was interested in my plait project there.

Activities:

B had ideas for jewellery making at Bushfire, using beads from overseas -bought in Kampala. She took samples of necklaces from the UK to inspire the staff group at Bushfire and purchased beads in Kampala for them to use. B also encouraged the staff group in their paper bead making, suggesting the incorporation of small synthetic pearls.

B has also encouraged the plait group to copy plaited bags from samples she bought in Jinja.

Benefits:

The Bushfire plait group and the staff group have learned to make more items.

Issues:

The necklaces B promoted making were of the non-specific 'ethnic' style retailed on the UK High Street, cheaply produced in quantity in

China for some years: the UK market was flooded with them.

As they had nothing distinctively African about them, they seemed unlikely to find a market among tourists in Uganda; the introduction of imported components diluted their authenticity. However, *B* was determined for the staff group to make the jewellery, planning to find customers for them in the UK as well as in Jinja. No customers have been found so far, apart from a few visitors to Bushfire.

This intervention has set a precedent for visitors to get involved with jewellery making activities at Bushfire, regardless of their knowledge base. As a result, Ellie⁶⁸ and I have been pressurized to advise the staff group about jewellery making – something neither of us felt qualified or comfortable to do as we believed that the market was already saturated and that their beads were over-priced at 10-15,000 UGX. It has also led to some misunderstandings, as communications from different agents are sometimes confused.

B advised the plait group to make their braid thicker and wider than the narrower, more flexible millinery plait that I had taught them, so that it was more suitable for bag-making. As a result, many of the plait lengths for an order that I had placed were unsuitable.

I was informed by Bushfire staff that *B* had previously brought some of the group members to tears, when she told them that their plait was not well done and that it needed to be wider and firmer. Encouragement had to be given to rebuild the group's confidence in what they were doing.

So far the groups have received no money from *B* for the things she has asked them to make. The members' circumstances mean that they cannot afford to spend time making without financial return.

Evaluation:

One of the problems may be that, as neither designer nor maker, *B* recycles pre-existing designs (that have already saturated the market). She is unable to demonstrate to the groups what she wants, how to achieve it, and how to resolve technical problems. *B* may not understand how her actions impact upon others.

Mixed messages have confused the women about requirements for the plait, ultimately causing a loss of income when they were unable to fill my order. Their growing confidence in what they are able to produce was undermined and they were discouraged.

In order to avoid future confusion, I felt it necessary to emphasize to the plait group that *B* and I are not working together: when *B* asks them to make something in a certain way, it applies to what they make for her, not to the plait they do for me: my requirements were different from *B*'s.

5.4.4 Case Study of Mothers of Hope (with examples from the Kamuli and Kangulumira sub-groups and the bases in Jinja and Hope House)

Background:

Mothers of Hope (MOH) is an umbrella organisation for seven groups of disadvantaged women who produce crafts to generate income for their families. It includes the Bushfire groups (jointly). These groups live in villages within a two-hour radius of Jinja. Each group has a leader: most of whom are local, ex-Youth With A Mission (YWAM) women – committed Christians who feel called to work with people in need. Some of the group leaders have demanding jobs as well as other charitable work that they do, for example in healthcare, social work or fostering.

The Kamuli group, led by *L*, largely comprises women who have been abandoned by their husbands after they refused to have more children. Many already had at least five children and have been left unsupported. Some of the group are HIV positive, some are

⁶⁸ Eleanor Cain, an accessory designer, was employed at that time by IndigoLime (now head of men's accessory design at Top Man).

widows. *L* is a strong, warm personality who strictly oversees the women's work, making them unpick it as many times as she feels necessary until it looks right..

The Kangulumira group, led by *H*, has been meeting regularly for about two years. Most of the women are HIV positive; meeting together and being productive helps to keep up their morale as well as to generate some income.

Activities:

The women in Kamuli learn crafts in the hope of improving their incomes. They predominantly use palm and banana fibre to zigzag plait little bags, purses and mats to sell in MOH's shop.

The Kangulumira group are very industrious, producing good quality baskets, mats, bags, hats and other items in plaited or woven palm. Their chairperson organizes orders: she looks for customers and arranges sales. She also looks out for new ideas, which she shares and discusses with the rest of the women. They had recently developed a sectioned basket for carrying beer bottles, commissioned by a local banana beer brewery. They also made sleeping mats to order for individuals, as well as for MOH.

MOH opened a shop in 2009 in Iganga Road, Jinja, in a small arcade of craft shops. The location was away from the main craft shopping area and attracted very few customers. The group leaders contributed their own money to keep it afloat. Initially, a sales girl was employed. MOH paid her a daily wage, as well as travel and lunch costs, on top of their rent, rates, electricity and security charges. After 18 months MOH abandoned these premises and currently share space with a stationery shop, just off Main Street: a better location.

Benefits:

Groups of women managing difficult circumstances have been drawn together to gain new skills and encourage one another. Extra income has been generated for some groups.

Issues:

Little innovation of new items and sourcing new markets.

Few sales were made through the Iganga Road shop in Jinja. The location of the shop was in a new development, removed from the main tourist area, inadequately signposted or promoted. As MOH could not continue to afford to staff the shop, it was staffed by rota, but often closed. It operated at a loss, discouraging all concerned. By the time MOH moved to better premises in 2011, many group members and leaders had pulled out, leaving *L* to manage most tasks. However, the improved location is leading to more sales, so *L* is positive about the future.

Costing methods for goods on sale in MOH have been problematic resulting in pricing too high or too low. The price of some goods is out of pace (usually higher) with those of competing local businesses. Customers are told about the costs of production and fair wages paid to makers, to justify prices.

Makers in the craft groups are reluctant to wait for goods to sell before payment, although this is common practice in Jinja craft shops. MOH cannot afford to advance them money. This has resulted in low stock.

Evaluation:

The Kangulumira group seemed particularly well organized, skilled and motivated. They have established customers and look outward for ideas and contacts, so are not reliant upon sales through the MOH shop or input from *H*. Their dynamic chairperson was instrumental in bringing suggestions for new products based on what she had seen elsewhere and communicating these with the group.

They have diversified their produce. The group has some customers but needs more. If they were able to develop more original, but culturally relevant products - such as their beer basket - they might increase their customers.

The Kamuli group has made a good start but need to develop further their skills to compete successfully with other makers. Their reliance upon sales through the shop led to some discouragement and a falling away of group members.

As all the MOH group leaders are busy women, based in or near Jinja, and the artisans live quite a distance away, staffing the shop has been problematic. *L* and her niece are currently sharing this task. In August 2011, I left a small kitty of cash with them, in order to give makers partial advances on sales. It is hoped that this will enable them to increase their stock and generate more income.

5.4.5. Case Study of *L*

Background:

L's background in social work and her Christian faith have guided her work with the Kamuli group. Having travelled to Europe on several occasions, *L* has an understanding of European quality requirements and is quality controller for MOH. She is keen to try new ideas and has design ideas of her own. She was instrumental in the establishment of a small manufacturing base at Hope House, near Jinja, where bags and other items for IndigoLime were sampled and produced. *L* wants to be more involved in IndigoLime's design process.

Activities:

L implemented some of her ideas in adaptations of the *kitenge* and recycled sacking shoppers (that Ellie had designed) for the MOH shop, and hoped that IndigoLime would order some. *L*'s versions had large, floppy bows on them or diagonal bands of appliquéd *kitenge* that did not add value to the bags while adding to their production cost. The designs were too ornate for the UK High Street, but might find other customers if competitively priced. Ellie promised to send trend information that would help *L* to understand the UK market better, suggesting that *L* then put her own design slant on those trends.

Benefits:

L is able to develop design ideas in order to innovate new products. She designed a large patchwork bag that *O* liked and took back to Australia as a sample. Her enthusiasm has encouraged others involved in MOH, particularly at Hope House. Understanding of complex societal issues enables *L* to develop and organise ways of working that suit the needs of the makers. She sourced housing for the female workers at Hope House, who would otherwise have been destitute.

Issues:

Major issues here are an insufficient understanding of overseas fashion markets and the cost implications of the design choices she makes. Communication has also been problematic, regarding orders for IndigoLime, leading to incorrect items being produced.

Evaluation:

L is a good motivator and organiser. Her own design ideas may work for local markets and perhaps for those overseas if she is able to learn more about them. Market forces would determine their success. Training and sharing of market knowledge may be needed to help *L* in the role of designer.

5.4.6 Case study of Z's involvement with the Bushfire staff group

Background:

Z is a Ugandan woman who supports Bushfire through staff training, encouragement, preaching and counselling. She speaks at regional conferences on topics such as female empowerment and family welfare. She is also co-founder of an NGO whose mission is to equip families with skills they need and to support their futures, through counselling and training. Spiritual growth is considered key to this process.

Z represents the Bushfire sub-groups at MOH, although Rose (headmistress of Bushfire Primary School) is the more hands-on group leader. These groups are the most distant from Jinja and have less of an input into MOH, selling their crafts predominantly to visitors to Bushfire - including my plait orders - and to their local community. They comprise the plait group and the staff group.

Activities:

Z has encouraged the staff at Bushfire (whose salaries have been affected by a 60% reduction in overseas donations) to make paper bead jewellery, belts and small beaded purses, some of which they try to sell through MOH. Z gets visitors to Bushfire to advise the staff group on their jewellery. She has been extremely helpful in supporting the formation of the plait group.

Benefits:

The staff group have sold some of their jewellery to missionaries visiting Bushfire, who do not have time to visit craft shops and compare prices. In effect they have a captive but limited market.

Thanks to Z, the plait group is able to meet regularly at Bushfire; notices and orders are passed to them after Bible Study or Sunday Services.

Issues:

The jewellery is similar to that of their competitors', but more expensive due to their costing-in of varnish drying time. The necklaces, bags and belts are not always well made.

Communication can be problematic. For example, Z mistook a text from Ellie - enquiring how the jewellery was going - for a desire to order many necklaces. Praise of the work has been taken to mean an order has been placed. This has led to wasted time, disappointment and some bad feeling when a large quantity of necklaces had been prepared in anticipation of a non-existent order. Z had told the staff group to prepare as many necklaces as possible for this. Ellie was discouraged from saying she liked anything for fear it would be mistaken for an order. The English cultural norm of politely saying that one likes something (when one doesn't) had been dramatically misunderstood.

Evaluation: Z has worked to promote the making of paper beads amongst the Bushfire staff group without fully comprehending the implications of this. While O has taken necklaces to sell in Australia for some years, that market is approaching saturation. Unless more product development takes place, more competitive costing is devised, or new markets are found, it seems unlikely that paper bead-making is a viable means of income-generation.

Great care needs to be taken with both verbal and written communication in order to ensure that messages are accurately received. Ellie has stated that all her orders will be emailed to MOH on order forms.

5.4.7 Case Study of IndigoLime's involvement with Mothers of Hope

Background:

IndigoLime design accessories for UK High Street stores. Their design agency is in Hemel Hempstead, UK; factories in China do the majority of their production. Having heard about the plait project, Richard Randall (director and general manager) was prompted to develop a line of ethical products in Uganda. The growing market for ethical fashion in the UK provides an incentive for designers and manufacturers to develop ethical product lines.

Ellie (IndigoLime's lead designer at that time) had been personally committed to ethical fashion for some time and was knowledgeable about Fairtrade requirements. She has experience as a designer and maker of fashion accessories, working directly with stores to develop appropriate products for their customers; she also understands how to cost fairly and competitively. Richard has a background in accountancy and many years' experience collaborating with UK High Street stores to develop accessory lines for production overseas.

Activities:

In November 2009 Ellie accompanied me to Uganda, to investigate the potential for ethical product development. Richard joined us on a further trip in 2010. They worked with MOH to cost their craft products realistically, to ensure a profit. Ellie explained the conditions required to gain Fairtrade status and promised to work on that for them. Richard advised MOH representatives on more effective ways of operating. He suggested that they needed to organise publicity by collaborating with their neighbours to pressurise their landlord for promotion of the 'crafts village'. He argued that the rent was a big expense if there were no customers and questioned the value of the shop and its impact on morale. Richard discussed 'Mothers of Hope' as a brand: how their support of disadvantaged women could be promoted.

The importance of consistency and quality control for any items for IndigoLime was emphasised. Ellie had designed order forms to include very clear specifications. A budget was left to allow Internet access to ensure that future communication would be easier.

Orders received would then be printed off for reference.

A 'critical path' was negotiated with MOH. Various roles assigned and stages in production identified, mapped to dates (with time for potential problems built in), to ensure that orders would be met in a timely way.

Ellie showed how the design of some sample bags could be adapted to local materials and techniques, leaving the bags with the group as samples. She also bought a plaited palm leaf shopping bag in a Kampala market and showed the Bushfire plait group how to make a stronger, more decorative and refined version of it in *mekeka* plait. The outcome was successful and the sample purchased and taken back to the UK to show to buyers.

Ellie worked with the group at Hope House to make large shopper bags out of recycled sugar sacks from local markets, combined with *kitenge*, and later developed a small range in this style. The idea initially caused incredulity amongst MOH: the use of something that had been discarded to make a relatively expensive product was a new concept to the makers, who thought she was mad. Ellie made a rough sample for them to work from, then more finished samples were made and agreed. They were delighted. Ellie gave clear instructions to the team in the workroom. The sample machinist, *W*, quickly adapted a sample to the materials she had requested. Small details were discussed and finalized. Ellie made a sample key ring with paper beads to be attached to each bag as part of the MOH 'brand'. Other items in the range were a satchel, toilet bag and a small make-up bag.

Benefits:

Richard's business experience was immediately apparent: when purchasing materials for sampling, he automatically asked about

discounts for buying in quantity and how best to communicate with suppliers from the UK. He anticipated and tried to eliminate potential problems, for example by purchasing materials for MOH to use and having them delivered directly to them, thus saving the group travel expenses and ensuring that they use the right materials.

Ellie's shopper design has attracted interest from UK buyers, although they have yet to place an order. However, many individuals have purchased bags, with several orders of 150 or more for a contact in Australia. More still were ordered for North America – a US charity worker acting as agent. Having liked the padded purses that Ellie designed, an Australian customer has since commissioned larger versions as laptop cases.

Ellie also bought some re-modelled necklaces from the staff group at Bushfire to gauge interest in the UK. All groups were paid for the samples, so were happy - even if further orders did not materialize.

In July 2011 IndigoLime placed an order for 200 bags.

Issues:

MOH group leaders have many other commitments,⁶⁹ other than supporting the groups they work with: they have limited time to devote to sales and promotion.

The US charity worker drove the price of the bags down so far that MOH felt it not worth making them. Part of the problem was the costing of the bag: they added full travel costs for materials purchasing to each bag, rather than dividing the costs. Ellie was able to resolve this with the group, although the profit margin for the American order was still quite low.

In spite of a good prototype being left as a template, some subsequent bag samples have not been made in the same way. Alternative materials have been substituted and the length of the zipper opening reduced too much; leather was used as a lining instead of piping on a toilet bag. Last minute changes to design and quality have resulted in time, money and materials being wasted and potential sales lost.

Hope House is a crumbling property about 5 miles outside Jinja. As well as offices for Bushfire and for Uganda Family Resources Link, it serves as home for some families in need. In 2010 a room was turned into a basic workroom with five sewing machines. The four girls employed there by MOH lived upstairs in a single room. However, as money became tight and the best maker- *W*- left, MOH could no longer afford to keep on Hope House. By August 2011 the simpler bags were being produced by one remaining girl as outwork. As only *W* had been able to make the more intricate satchel, this could no longer be ordered.

When a MOH representative approached a Banana Boat craft shop in Kampala to stock the bags, they were told that the bags were unsuitable. However, when Ellie and I met the owner in October 2010, she spontaneously complimented the bags that we were using and expressed an interest in stocking them. An order was later placed directly with MOH. The dynamics of this are unclear: whether the Ugandan store manager found the use of old sugar sacks strange; whether Ellie and I had more credibility with the owner; or whether the owner - who was British and regularly visited the UK - was aware of the increasing vogue for recycled materials.

Evaluation:

Ellie's approach to working with Mothers of Hope, the Bushfire craft group and the Bushfire staff group was different from that of *O* and *B*: she was able to draw upon her market knowledge and experience as a designer to help the groups create commercially viable products for the tourist market in Uganda and for the UK accessories market. Her purposeful but flexible personality and sense of humour were useful commodities when things did not go to plan.

⁶⁹ For example, one of the leaders worked for YWAM and was also a foster carer for 27 orphans, some of whom were handicapped.

Richard's experience in business and manufacturing enabled him to identify some of the issues to be resolved in order for MOH to operate more effectively. Whether the group leaders fully understood, or would have the time to act upon, some of his suggestions, is unclear. Essential actions, such as the promotion of MOH shop, may be restricted by constraints upon the group leaders' time. MOH's input in decision making about how orders should be placed, quality systems and the timing of different stages in the manufacturing process suggest that they will have some ownership of this. However, it may be necessary to reinforce or revisit these decisions at a future date.

Ellie and Richard's experience of working with samplers in China had accustomed them to communicating clearly how articles could be improved as well as ideas for new products. However, they were accustomed to working with experienced manufacturers. Ongoing problems with communication coupled with the need for a precise product, on-trend for a given market and delivered on time, may mean that sourcing through MOH is not viable for IndigoLime at this point in time.

While the accommodation at Hope House may have appeared squalid to those used to more comfort, it offered mattresses, running water, electricity, toilets and solid walls: more than many of the poor of Uganda are able to enjoy. The health and safety standards of societies that are so remote from these conditions are inapplicable, although they should become objectives. There is an enormous difference between the raw beginnings of a social enterprise such as MOH's workroom - put together from a few donations and a lot of goodwill - and exploitation through sweatshop labour. However, images of Hope House could have been negatively portrayed overseas, damaging the reputation of those associated with them.

5.5 Conclusion

The examples given in this chapter show that however well motivated groups or individuals might be to 'help', effective support of artisans to develop and sell new products is problematic without market knowledge and without business, design and technical skills. Some local artisans may assume that outsiders know better than they do, which places responsibility upon outsiders to give them accurate information. Critical self-evaluation, therefore, is needed in outsiders seeking to help and an understanding of risk for the artisans. They need to understand the limitations of their knowledge and how this might affect others.

Other makers quickly copy successful craft products, with the result that ongoing product innovation is needed if artisans are to keep finding customers and new markets for their crafts. It is unrealistic to expect artisans working in rural areas of Uganda to have knowledge of markets in the developed world, or even in urban areas of Uganda. Without access to media, modern shops or affordable transport, access to this knowledge is unattainable without help from outsiders who understand those markets. If outsiders are to help artisans develop sustainable enterprises effectively, they must be able to share accurate information with those artisans and comprehend their own knowledge gaps.

A dialogue must take place that allows the strengths of all parties to come together. Artisans – especially new groups in rural areas - need help from outsiders in order to reach new markets, however paternalistic that may seem. They may need help in product design and development, technical training, costing, routes to market, marketing and shipping. Therefore, the more of these skills that outsiders bring to working with artisans, the better placed they are to 'help'. Outsiders in turn need to learn from the artisans about their circumstances, as well as their skills, traditions, favoured materials and motifs, if they are to help them to create viable products – both for the makers and the market - that ensure sustainable income. Ultimately, it is desirable for craft projects to become self-run, but support from outsiders may be needed until artisans are ready to take on all areas of responsibility⁷⁰.

⁷⁰ Bhatt (2007:5) warns of the ineffectiveness of short-term training of artisans by outsiders, suggesting that a more extended commitment is required.

CHAPTER SIX: PIDGIN PLAIT PROJECT

My agency: Pidgin Plait

6.1 Introduction

The mass-production and mass-consumption of throwaway garments in the fashion industry has led to the exploitation of people and natural resources. Low retail prices have often been achieved at the expense of maker and ethical process. The conditions in which cheap garments are produced and the unacceptably low wages paid to workers in the developing world - some of them children - have been well documented (Fletcher, 2008, Brand, 2008, Hethorn and Ulasewicz, 2008, Blood, Sweat and T-Shirts, 2008, BBC). Many fashion labels have emerged, for example Edun, Dosa and People Tree, which provide consumers with ethically and sustainably produced, wearable garments; High Street stores such as Marks and Spencer now offer organic and Fairtrade lines. The growing market for ethically produced goods provides an incentive for manufacturers and retailers, including designer-makers, to use ethically sourced materials.

In a market dominated by mass-produced goods, labour-intensive handcrafted materials have, to a large extent, been replaced or adapted. The range of millinery materials available today is much narrower than it was in the first half of the 20th century. Manufacturers of straw hat bodies produce relatively standardized materials in response to industry requirement for uniformity, but their range is limited. Western couture milliners can only compete with the low prices of hats produced in China through design innovation and craftsmanship. The availability of interesting materials is key to this. The summer millinery market has been saturated with sinamay for nearly 20 years⁷¹ and is ready for alternatives.

While there is a need for different millinery materials, creating them in an environmentally friendly way has become of paramount importance. Africa needs more export trade and the added value of 'process' (Commission for Africa 2005:93). By sourcing new millinery materials through a small-scale development project, milliners in the developed world have access to new, ethically produced materials with a distinctive aesthetic, while a group of women in south-eastern Uganda are able to increase their income by participating in global trade.

⁷¹ Philip Treacy's use of sinamay from the early 1990's has been very influential.

6.2 Background to the project

My initial impetus to set up a project in Uganda was influenced by my background as a milliner and fashion educator, my faith and my ethics: a desire to use my abilities (such as they are) to benefit others. In recognition of the damage that industrial manufacturing processes are causing the Earth's resources, I felt it important to use sustainable materials and processes wherever possible.

I had a long-standing attraction to a romantic idea of Africa: initially formed through reading Buchan, Durrell, Van der Post and Rider Haggard as a child, and reinforced by countless films and television programmes that were (allegedly) filmed in Africa. However unrealistic these impressions of Africa may be - some framed by discredited colonialist ideologies and stereotypes, as discussed in Chapter Four - they have nevertheless fed my interest in the continent. When an opportunity arose to visit Bushfire Children's Home in south-eastern Uganda in April 2007 with a team from my church, I leapt at it.

Alongside my creative practice, fieldwork has been the key driver of my research, although time with the makers in Uganda has been constrained by other commitments on both sides. I have conducted six field trips to Uganda over the last five years, each of approximately two weeks' duration. In the UK I learned to plait and researched African aesthetics, experimenting with palm leaves to create more textural plait. From research into hair in traditional African cultures I developed a series of headpiece designs, using an approach that I felt - to some extent - mirrored that of African craftsmen. I had a pre-devised plan, but worked towards it in a fluid way, embracing inconsistencies and irregularities as they arose and incorporating them in the outcomes.

I wanted to discover whether the production of new straw plaits for millinery, by women in rural south-eastern Uganda, would be possible, appropriate or even desirable to all the parties involved. I also wanted the project to be as beneficial as possible for the women makers in terms of improving their quality of life. The therapeutic benefits of craft activity are widely recognised, but it is also hoped that being able to earn will improve the self-esteem of the women and their status within the community and that gathering as a group will help to build social capital, despite the cultural norms described in this chapter.

Of course, my own judgements about what constitutes 'quality of life' may be flawed and culturally inappropriate and may echo paternalism. However, I would argue that I have approached the project from a feminist-maternalist standpoint in the belief that the women I am working

with are disadvantaged – not just by poverty, but by their subordination due to gender within a staunchly patriarchal society. While there are many different scholarly interpretations of maternalism, agreement exists that principles such as nurture and care, of women and children in particular, are characteristic⁷². These principles are also supported by my Christian faith, where there is an imperative to help widows, orphans and those in need⁷³.

In an attempt to overcome my ignorance and preconceptions as an outsider, I have tried to learn about local culture, languages, the lives of the participants, the skills the women already have, the challenges they face, their hopes and their values. In order to mitigate any potentially harmful outcomes to the project, I have tried to be sensitive to the women and their circumstances and to be guided by local actors, who I have consulted throughout its initiation, creation and development. As well as fieldwork, I have read some very formative texts, written by development theorists, practitioners and Ugandan academics, project reports and a light-hearted book about Ugandan social etiquette. I believe that outsiders⁷⁴ can be helpful in offering new strategies for artisanal groups to enter global markets that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. In the process of this research I have identified some of the considerations that a western millinery designer must take into account when attempting to source new materials through a development project in south-eastern Uganda.

6.3.1 Background information on Uganda

Uganda's population of approximately 33 million is the most youthful in the world; children under 15 constitute 50% of the population. It has the highest dependency ratio in the world⁷⁵; annual per capita income is only \$420; life expectancy is approximately 55 years. Although Uganda was listed as the sixth fastest growing economy in the world between 2005-2009 (Richardson 2011), poverty is still very severe in rural areas – especially in the north and east. A dramatic reduction in HIV and AIDS infection⁷⁶ through education and vigorous campaigning is on the rise again, resulting in many children having been orphaned by the disease (World Bank 2010, CIA 2010, BBC 2010).

⁷² Feminist Scholars Define Maternalism and Maternalist Policy <http://www.ub.uib.no/elpub/1996/h/506002/eirinn/eirinn-Feminist-2.html>.

⁷³ For example, Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 68:5; Psalm 146:9; Isaiah 1:17, Luke 21:2; Acts 6:1; 1 Corinthians 7:8; 1 Timothy 5:3; James 1:27.

⁷⁴ 'Outsider', in this instance, meaning anyone from outside the artisans' local community.

⁷⁵ The dependency ratio is calculated by the number young people (under 16) and older people (over 64) who depend upon people of working age (16-64) (Uganda Report 2008 available from www.oecd.org/dataoecd/13/3/40578334.pdf).

⁷⁶ In 1991 the HIV infection rate was approximately 15% amongst adults, but up to 30% in pregnant women in cities. This fell to around 5% by 2001, through campaigning and promotion of the ABC approach (Abstinence, Be Faithful, use Condoms) (<http://www.avert.org/aids-uganda.htm>).

Uganda comprises more than 40 different ethnic groups who predominantly describe themselves as Christian. Each group has its own language, but English is the official national language. Muslims make up about 12% of the population. President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986. It has been a period of relative peace in Uganda, apart from in the war in north of the country, where the Lord's Resistance Army caused devastation for over 20 years before being driven into the DRC and Sudan (World Bank 2010, CIA 2010, BBC 2010).

6.3.2 Namutumba district

The Namutumba area of Busoga is lush, green bush - relatively flat, with some marshland (Figure 72). Malaria is prevalent, jiggers are common, and there is extreme poverty in the villages⁷⁷. Local people are predominantly Basoga (singular *Musoga*), speaking *Lusoga*: a Bantu language related to *Luganda*. Some also speak Swahili reflecting the proximity of the Kenyan border. Tribal intermarriages, improved transport links and social mobility have resulted in some Bagisu and Baganda living in the community.



Figure 72: Bulange

⁷⁷ Some members of the community resent Bushfire, perhaps jealous of their relative material comfort, or because they do not condone witchcraft, or as Christians in a Muslim area⁷⁷. Local witchdoctors initially cast spells against Bushfire; some have now accepted them as a force for good in the community, although there are others that remain hostile.

Local housing predominantly consists of mud huts with thatched or corrugated iron roofs (Figure 72). Walls are made of woven branches plastered with mud or cow dung, or of baked mud bricks. Furniture may be a wooden chair or a coiled, papyrus stool. Mattresses are often on the floor or a wooden frame. Immediately outside the huts the earth is regularly swept and kept neat. Some of the huts are painted with patterns in black, white or dark orange; one local hut was painted with a replica of the Carlsberg lager logo. Most people have a 'garden' where they grow enough food to live on, and sell any excess. Many local people grow green bananas (*matooke*), as well as cassava, maize, greens, tomatoes, groundnuts (g-nuts), sweet and Irish potatoes and various fruits, and keep chickens and goats. Income-generating activities in the area include small-scale trade in coffee, maize, g-nuts, rice, chickens and goats (FJ5 08/10/10).

Local men wear western clothing, often in poor condition, or a smart shirt and trousers or the *kanzu*⁷⁸ for special occasions. Women wear the *gomesi* – a long garment of voluminous fabric hanging from a square-cut yoke, loosely caught above the hips by a wide sash. The high, sharply pointed shoulders of the elbow length sleeves are created by a series of tucks radiating from the centre of the sleeve head. Imported polyester fabrics appear to be worn in preference to cotton: perhaps as a trend, or because they are cheaper or easier to care for. A shawl is worn around the shoulders on cooler days. Young, unmarried women tend to wear western clothing, but modesty is important: skirts should be long and bodices must not reveal too much flesh. The majority of women cover their heads with headscarves. Everyone wears their best clothes for church.

In this largely Muslim region of Busoga there is a growing number of Christians, although many who profess to be Muslim or Christian still follow their traditional religion. Witchdoctors practise in most of the local villages; many local women bear a scar across their chests where they were branded as part of a dedication ceremony.

6.3.3.1 *Researching local culture*

In trying to understand the culture in which the project is situated, and how that may affect participants, two books have been particularly helpful: *Escaping Behavioural Poverty: The Role of Culture and Social Capital* (Munene, Schwartz and Kibanja 2005) and *Gender and*

⁷⁸ The *kanzu* is an ankle-length, shirt-like garment, originally introduced by Arab-Swahili traders in the mid-nineteenth century and later adopted by Baganda men (Nakazibwe 2005:125) and some other tribal groups, including the Basoga.

Development: The Role of Religion and Culture (Tuyizere⁷⁹ 2007). They have also supported many independent observations I have made and information given to me by local people. Interviews and conversations with participants, as well as with Professor John Munene at Makerere University (co-author of *Escaping Behavioural Poverty*) (FJ2 01/11/07) and with Sam Kitilya (founder of Bushfire, with previous experience of working on community projects in this area), have enabled me to learn more about the circumstances of local women and how their culture impacts their lives. This has allowed me to plan the project with a better understanding of its potential scope and constraints.

6.3.3.2 Patriarchy

Uganda is a patriarchal society where women - particularly in rural areas - are largely disempowered (Tuyizere 2007:32, Munene et al 2005:31-2). Polygamy is widespread in Busoga and women commonly give birth to eight or more children; therefore women have many dependents. Culture dictates that women are subordinate to men (Tuyizere 2007:49).

Women are seen as workers who were married so that they could labour in homes and in the fields, or as a necessary source of wealth, as they bring bride price on marriage, or they are perceived as mere reproduction agents. Traditionally, they are expected to fulfil the roles of mother, housewife, family worker and agricultural labourer (Tuyizere 2007:49).

That 80% of Uganda's agricultural labour is provided by the labour of unpaid women (Tuyizere 2007:49) is obvious to anyone travelling through rural areas. "The culturally based allocation of roles and activities overloads women ", more Ugandan women than men live below the poverty line (Munene et al 2005:28, 53).

Interviews with Sam Kitilya and other Bushfire staff members revealed that local women work hard, but men much less so: they are often to be seen sitting around in the shade (FJ3 06/11/08) and my own observations have verified this. Women (and children) perform multiple domestic tasks, as well as pursuing small income-generating activities such as selling coffee, rice or tomatoes. Ruth,⁸⁰ for example, on top of her normal activities, makes pancakes to sell at a local school (FJ2 12/11/07).

⁷⁹ Alice Tuyizere lectures in Religious Education Methods at Makerere University and is director of the Kisoro District Women Empowerment and Human Rights Organisation.

⁸⁰ Ruth Tugenya is the plait group leader.

Men are prioritised with food: fed first, getting the best or only pieces of meat, before children and finally women are able to eat. Wives may not refuse their husband's sexual advances (Munene et al 2005:38). Barren women are abandoned, or another wife is acquired to produce sons (Tuyizere 2007:54). In rural areas children as young as 12 may be mothers. Tuyizere describes Ugandan society as "rampant with HIV/AIDS, promiscuity, defilement, rape and other forms of sexual abuse" (Tuyizere 2007:52). These acts of violence, normally against women and girls, place shame upon the victims, rather than the perpetrators.

Domestic violence is culturally acceptable in most African societies (Commission for Africa 2005:33, 63) and considered a normal part of life. Marital rape is not recognised by law in Uganda (Tuyizere 2007:154,157); beating a wife is often seen as a "sign of love". Therefore, it seems reasonable to assert that many of the craft group members live in challenging and potentially dangerous domestic circumstances.

Busoga registered the highest GBV [gender based violence] prevalence of over 70%, according to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, 2006...The Survey also established that 60% of Ugandan women face sexual abuse. (New Vision: 22/10/10)

6.3.3.3 Women and income generation

Having multiple children ties women to the home, reducing their options for employment. Although motherhood confers status on women, especially giving birth to boys, evidence suggests that little value is placed upon them in rural Ugandan society for their personal qualities. As individuals, women's position in the local community is precarious: if they are unable or refuse to have more children - as did the women in the craft group at Kamuli⁸¹ - they may be abandoned by their husbands along with their dependents. Women who show signs of fatigue or ill health may be replaced by a younger wife (Tuyizere 2007:51). It is vital, therefore, for women to have the means to earn money in a way that will enable them to support their families and lessen their dependency. However, employment activities must be harmonious with the burden of their other commitments.

Munene told me that if a woman becomes more influential as a result of a development project, the men might want to get more involved. From his experience of studying the effect of culture on development projects, he claimed that married couples supporting each other do best, followed by single women or widows, and last of all fighting married couples (FJ2 01/11/07). This suggests that the Pidgin Plait project

⁸¹ See earlier case study of MOH 5.4.4.

has a reasonable chance of success, as the majority of the group were single or widows and the husbands of those who are married appeared to be supportive.

Interviews with Bushfire staff, the plait group and with Munene suggest that husbands would probably take most or all of the money that married women earn from the project. Munene felt that this would not be a disincentive though: women in rural Uganda believe that they endear themselves to their husbands by earning for them. He cited a Ugandan proverb: “An active woman makes a man come with shield to the table”, i.e. to fend off the profusion of food. Being seen to earn money raises the status of women in the eyes of their husbands: husbands are less likely to desert a woman who is earning. Therefore, when women earn, it can contribute to family stability. However, Munene warned me that if the money that a married woman had earned from the project was spent on another wife, her involvement in the project would probably be over (FJ2 01/11/07).

Most of the married women in the plait group said that they would ‘reach an agreement’ with their husbands about how the money would be spent. Some thought that they would be allowed to keep the money; others said they would tell their husbands what it was to be used for. Culturally, women are not encouraged to get together: gossip is frowned upon and men may feel threatened by this. The plait group provides them with an opportunity to meet legitimately. They said that showing the money to their husbands would prove that they are doing something worthwhile (FJ3 10/11/08).

However, as the greater proportion of group members comprises single parents or widows, they have more autonomy in how the money is spent. When asked in 2008, apart from two elderly group members all cited school fees as the main expense that income from the plait would help with. Some women wanted to invest the money in goats; another was hoping to buy a cow in the future; some bought a new *gomesi* (FJ3 10+13/11/08).

From what I have learned through interview, research, discussion with the group members and observation of local culture and how it affects women, I conclude that married women in this region of Uganda live in difficult conditions, balancing an overwhelming number of arduous duties with the need to be available and pleasing to their husbands. The lot of single women and widows is even harder: they carry the

responsibility of caring for multiple children or grandchildren by themselves; they may not have any land from which to generate more income; they struggle to pay school fees and cover everyday expenses.

The plait project

6.4.1.1 Introductions

I was initially presented to the Bulange community by pastors in Bushfire Church, who have been extremely supportive of the project⁸²; my son, then aged 15, accompanied me on the first field trip. I believe that these two factors contributed to establishing my credibility with the local women. As stated previously, mothers are - to some extent – revered (especially mothers of boys). Pastors and older people are highly respected; it is common practice for women and children to kneel at their feet when greeting them, as well at the feet of some *mzungus*. This has happened to me on several occasions over the years: an extremely uncomfortable experience. My embarrassment at being kneeled to perhaps reflected a discomfort with the colonial era, where whites assumed privilege in Africa. Respect is also given to teachers; the women refer to me as “our teacher”. Pragmatically, an assumption of my authority by local women may have been helpful in establishing the group. Although Munene suggested that it might be easier to work with an existing group (such as a burial group⁸³), Bushfire Community Church provided a good way of introducing the project to local women and the plait group formed as a result.

6.4.1.2 The plait group

The women live in nearby villages, mostly by subsistence farming or small trade activities, and have very little money. My proposal of teaching them how to make plaited braid was well received: over 30 women turned up for the first teaching session. Although curiosity may have been a factor in this, or the belief that I would be giving something away, the number of participants has stabilised at around 15. Bushfire provided lunch for the group during the first field trip, but as they already have over 100 children and staff to feed each day, they could not afford to continue. Some of the group members were unhappy when the lunch stopped; some left the group. They may (understandably) have been attending for a free lunch rather than to learn a new skill.

⁸² Recognizing the difficult circumstances in which many local people live, Bushfire staff believe that anything that local women can learn that might eventually bring them extra income is beneficial.

⁸³ Burial groups get together when a neighbour loses a loved one in order to pay expenses; they learn to work together and are trusted by their husbands.

Prior to visiting the area, I had not realized how isolated many of the women are in their daily lives, naively assuming that they would have close-knit social structures to support them. However, as previously stated, women in this region are not normally encouraged to get together or valued as individual personalities. I have therefore concluded that as a result of cultural attitudes local women are likely to lack self-confidence or a sense of their own worth and potential. Finding strength, solace and pleasure in the company of other female friends is something many women take for granted. I was keen that my project would help to build their confidence and skills as well as social capital. I was concerned, however, that any increase in the women's confidence or independence could result in increased domestic violence from men who may feel the traditional status quo to be under threat. So far, however, I have seen no evidence to support this and have been told that the project is having a beneficial effect upon the women: those who are married appear to be valued more by their husbands because they are able to contribute financially to the home (FJ3 17/11/08); the group as a whole are looking better cared for and happier (FJ5 06/10/10); some have been able to invest in goats and chickens; some are now making items in plait for the local community; school fees are being paid and necessities purchased (FJ5 04/10/10). By 2011, the group had collectively bought nine goats as breeding stock with proceeds from the plait. There is a lot of laughter when they meet together.

6.4.1.3 The group members

The group consists of women who live in villages local to Bushfire. They meet at Bushfire weekly to practise, to exchange tips, to improve their technique and to encourage one another (Figure 73). They come in the morning for the plait group, many staying on for Bible study in the afternoon.

Of the 18 present on 10/11/08, seven were married (either polygamously or as sole wives), six were widows and seven were single (some put their hands up twice, which suggests that two widows also described themselves as single). Each of the group has at least six children. Elderly members, such as Tolofisa, are reliant on family to support them; as Tolofisa's children, however, have grown up and moved away, she receives little support from them (FJ3 10/11/08).



Figure 73: The plait group

The most regular attendees are Ruth, Tolofisa, Lovinas, Tapenensi, Damali, Scovia Nakisita, Scovia Timugibwa, Scovia Ngudo, Nuru, Joyce, Edith, Apofya and Araisia. By 2008 they had independently organised a committee with Ruth as chairperson, Tolofisa as treasurer and Joyce as deputy-chairperson (Figure 73, centre). Robina was initially secretary, but later dropped out. From each sale a small sum is put in a kitty for expenses such as travelling to market to sell goods or buy materials⁸⁴. Most of the group also tithe to the church. At the start the women were concerned about the future of the project. They needed to know that there would be customers for the plait. I was able to purchase some items from them, including 20 metre bundles of plait to take back to the UK, to assess the market and promote the product.

6.4.1.4 Group members' previous plaiting experience

Many group members had some prior experience of plaiting *mekeka*, having been taught in school, by missionaries, or by their mothers or grandmothers (FJ5 01/10/10, 04/10/10). Some who had been taught 'crafts' such as plaiting or coiled basketry in the past said that they hadn't realised its usefulness to them at the time. Craft and sewing were perceived as something that their parents made them do if they wanted them to get into the workplace quickly, instead of continuing their education. Craft had thus become devalued. Some *mekeka* and basketry were being produced for local consumption prior to the project. The women's familiarity with indigenous plaiting may have helped their dexterity when learning new techniques.

⁸⁴ This produced enough capital to allow the group to buy nine goats in 2011.

6.4.1.5 Timekeeping

The group's timekeeping is challenging for those used to working in the UK, where punctuality is culturally important. When it rained in the night and the soil was soft, the opportunity to weed around crops or plant seeds had to be taken, so group members often arrived later on those mornings. Sickness can also be a factor in timekeeping and attendance. According to local sources, some of the group have serious health problems. Malaria is endemic, so group members regularly suffer from attacks.

6.4.1.6 Communication with the group

Some of the group members understand a little English and a few are able to speak it; most cannot. Ruth's daughter Edith is the most articulate English speaker, followed by her mother. English is taught in schools, but it may be that many of the group had not been able to attend school regularly or even at all, or had simply forgotten what they had learned. Conversations with the group have often been conducted through a Bushfire interpreter, who may - perhaps inadvertently - filter some of the information exchanged. It is unclear how much this has affected the project, or whether it has at all. If I had said anything that could worry or offend the group, then filtering or re-phrasing it would have been very beneficial. On the other hand, I may have missed some useful pieces of information. My attempts to speak Luganda and Lusoga have been met with pleasure and amusement; I have learned to greet⁸⁵, count, comment on the groups' work and thank them. One regret is that through my insufficient knowledge of Lusoga, I am unable to share in many of the jokes the women enjoy together (possibly some at my expense). A dry humour is evident, as exemplified by the greeting and response:

"Tusangaire" (We are happy [to see you])

"Tunabonna esangalo" (Let's see how happy/we shall see how happy you are)

I must have committed many breaches of Basoga social etiquette over the years, but the group has remained tolerant, good-natured and extremely polite.

⁸⁵ Basoga greetings are extensive by European standards, with long exchanges of reciprocal questions and responses about the wellbeing of each party and their family, punctuated by *"Mukama yebazibwe"* (praise God) and *"Amina"* (Amen). The women in the group complain that greetings are not as long as they used to be. As group members arrive to meetings at different times, plaiting is stopped periodically to greet newcomers.

6.4.1.7 Teaching processes

I have taught plaiting through careful, repeated instructions⁸⁶ and demonstrations: bringing samples, then performing a technique broken down into stages before starting the women off with their own samples (Figure 74). The more skilled group members (Ruth, Tolofisa, Apofya, Tapenansi and Edith) learned very quickly and then supported the others, although they said they had never performed the plait before. The women spontaneously trimmed and split the palm leaves, preparing small bundles of them for plaiting before starting, as they do for *mekeka* plaits; this is very efficient and I have since adopted this practice.



Figure 74: Plaiting at Bushfire

I give lots of encouragement, in Lusoga whenever possible. If anyone makes a mistake or does something badly, I try to correct it gently. Initially, one woman nearly gave up, finding the new plait too difficult; she persisted and has become competent. Whenever she finds something hard now, I remind her of how she believed that she couldn't do the first plait and how well she has perfected it (FJ1 Day 2).

⁸⁶ Usually interpreted by Sarah.



Figure 75: Plait group members wearing hats made in their plaits

I later showed them how to sew up braid into a simple, brimmed hat shape and then a cap - a process that most found more difficult (Figure 75, left). Some managed to sew the crown of a hat on my first visit though and a sample hat was left with them for reference. However, on the second trip I was told that some of the craft group had lost heart because they found sewing up the plait too hard, although others had been able to make and sell some hats locally. More instruction followed. By the fifth trip other group members were starting to feel more confident sewing up plait, but still needed more practice. During the sixth trip we focused on turning the plait into fancy little hats (learning how to place tension on the plait to create shapes). The group applied themselves well with excellent results (Figure 75, right). The finished hats, targeting Goat Race customers, went on sale at Gloria Wavamunno's shop in Kampala. I emphasised the need for neat, good quality work and how these designs must not be sold in local craft shops, as this would devalue them for wealthier clients.

The women have also learned from one another, as some group members have shared techniques they knew for making place-mats, banana fibre angels, small figures and coiled bowls.

Prior to the second field trip, drawing on my research on texture in historic African artefacts, I had developed Plait 2, which introduced a twist of the palm on one edge to form a conical point that created an unusual spiky texture when sewn up into a hat or other object. I taught this to the group, who took several teaching sessions to master it, although some learned more quickly. They felt it took longer to produce than Plait 1.

On the third field trip I taught the group Plait 3, which gave a frothy, very textural appearance when sewn up. Most attempted this; Ruth, Edith and Zeulens mastered it quickly.

6.4.1.8 Teaching the group about potential markets

As well as showing the group photos, diagrams and samples of European plaits, I also described potential overseas markets. I entertained them with photos of Royal Ascot headwear and entries for the Hat Designer of the Year 2009 competition. They liked the more conservative hats, which they said were “smart”.

Showing the women samples from Jinja and passing on details of how much would be paid by craft shops for each item, as well as its retail price, gave them some insight into the local tourist market. I shared retailer feedback that tourists prefer natural colours – to their surprise. On another occasion the committee accompanied me to Jinja for market research amongst the craft shops.

6.4.1.9 Product Development

Starting with a simple, flat-topped sun hat, I went on to teach the group how to make a small ‘African’ fascinator in the Plait 1, with a looped plait bow and raffia pompoms; they found it amusing, not really understanding its function in western fashion culture (FJ3 11/11/08).

By examining local pricing, I realised that caps represented better value for the makers than hats with brims, requiring less plait while reaching the same price (although 4,000 UGX still seemed a poor return for their labour). Plait 2 was used to make a cap prototype for the group, which they could copy and perhaps sell locally at a premium, as it was unlike other plaited articles found there (FJ2 11/11/07).

Because of its textural qualities and natural colour it somehow felt authentic.

In teaching sessions we developed some plaited bookmarks that could be sold to missionaries visiting Bushfire and may have a market in the UK through churches. I bought several off them at 2,000 UGX each, thinking they could be sold for £1 or £1.50 in church bookshops. I also considered approaching Waterstones booksellers (FJ4 13/11/09).

Finished items, such as hats, bags, perhaps crosses and angels, if they are sold in the West, will probably need to conform to western manufacturing standards to some extent, i.e. be of reasonably consistent quality and perhaps be ordered in specified colours. As mass production has accustomed consumers to uniformity in products, I was concerned that they might not tolerate too much variation. I resolved to find out how much variation could be accommodated, if it could even become a selling point and, if so, to what degree.

6.4.2 Local plant fibres

Some research has taken place into which locally occurring plant fibres, other than palm, might be used for plaiting. Elephant grass and sugar cane, as well as various grasses, grow nearby and some initial sampling was done. However, the women are adamant that these materials are too brittle and that palm is the best thing to use; my sampling has so far supported this. Time of harvesting may be an important factor in the suppleness of different plant materials. In general, the women's approach to any innovation is conservative, unless it is successfully demonstrated and proven to them.

Some plaiting was done with banana fibre, the pithy back scraped off beforehand. Banana fibre has a warm, natural, caramel colour with dark speckles that does not take dye well, so it is less versatile than palm. The banana wilt, that is threatening harvests in many parts of Africa, seems to affect the fibre from the trunk less than the fruit, so using it to plait might help those who have lost food crops. More research needs to be done in order to identify other suitable plant materials.

6.4.3 Natural dyes⁸⁷

Creating different colours of palm by using natural dye has been explored through lengthy, and often discouraging, experiments conducted at Kamuli and Bushfire. Many of the women claim to know someone who uses natural dyes, but no group member had the knowledge or seemed able to access it when needed. Experiments were performed with local plant materials, including sweet potato leaves, mango tree bark, ficus bark, yellow flowers called *kinenes*, *nswiga*, and others that no one knew the names of, with mixed results. Outcomes were predominantly various shades of warm beige, although tomato leaves and also annatto yielded more promising results. On the fifth field trip Damali produced some plait from palm that she had dyed with annatto giving a warm orange colour, and this has since been successfully made to order.

⁸⁷ See Field Journals 3, 4 and 5 for records of natural dye experiments.

All the groups I have visited or worked with have shown a marked preference for chemical dyes when dyeing palm leaves (FJ2 07/11/07, FJ3 17/11/08, FJ4 07/11/09, 13/11/09, FJ5 01/10/10). The effects from these chemicals were quickly obtained, strong and reasonably consistent. Pastel shades were less favoured, although some makers dye different batches of palm in the dye bath until the colour is too pale and the chemicals are nearly exhausted (FJ5 01/10/10). Wastewater is tipped out on a patch of grass (FJ3 14/11/08). I have concluded from this that environmental damage from dyeing palm leaves on this scale is negligible. As the chemical dyes work quickly, their use requires less water and fuel. However, health concerns remain a serious issue with the same pots used for dyeing that are also used for cooking; the powder form of the dyes is easily inhaled; and gloves and nose-masks are never worn when using them.

6.4.4.1 Quality

Natural-coloured plaits are reliably consistent in colour, but further work needs to be done on dyeing to order to ensure that customers get exactly what they ask for (Figure 76). For example, an order for specific colours in specific plaits was placed by email for collection on the fourth field trip in November 2009; it was not adequately fulfilled, highlighting the need for more training on matching dyes to the colour chart provided. A black shade was very different from the intended outcome, but very beautiful in its irregularity and iridescence: it would be marketable if consistently reproduced (Figure 76, centre). The women told me that black was the hardest colour to achieve and was made by mixing lots of other colours together. As some other groups – such as the groups Norskform have worked with – achieve a perfect black in palm, I know that it is possible and my own experiments have supported this.



Figure 76: Bundles of plait

The importance of accurately meeting orders to ensure the sustainability of the project was discussed with the group, as well as reasons why the order had not been met. The unpredictability of dyes bought in the local markets was identified as a factor (FJ4 13/11/09), and sampling processes were therefore reviewed. I have found it better to dye the palm leaves before plaiting, as dyeing afterwards can lead to shrinkage, revealing paler areas the dye hasn't reached. I partially resolved this by soaking the plait in a solution of glycerine and water, which plumped it and made it supple and slightly glossy.

Some women have felt that they can offer me poorly made plait or plait in the wrong colour, perhaps due to their need or insufficient understanding of quality requirements, or perhaps because their other commitments prevent them from being able to practise enough. How much of this is due to lack of skill, desperation or opportunism is difficult to determine (FJ3 11/11/08). Poverty has affected the plait the women make in various ways. They can only afford to buy small amounts of dye at a time, so are unable to check colours properly by sampling. I have explained that this is counter-productive: they end up wasting much more than the cost of the dye and ultimately lose sales. I am not convinced, however, that this is the whole story and need to do further research. In addition, the living conditions of group members can result in the bundles of plait containing or being slightly nibbled by cockroaches. All bundles are now treated with Doom before being brought back to the UK, and in August 2011 I left them money for the purchase of a metal chest to store plaits and hats. The women have no electricity in their homes, so plaiting after dark is unfeasible and the time they are able to spend on making is consequently limited.

6.4.4.2 Length/quantity

After some market research among milliners in the UK⁸⁸ it was decided that the plait should be made in 20 metre lengths. Historically European plaits have been sold in 20 yard lengths. Tape measures were issued to group members, although some preferred to use a one-metre length of string as a guide. After checking the length of bundles that I bought on the fourth trip in 2009 I found some inconsistencies, but by 2010 all but one of the bundles I checked were 20 meters or more in length (Figure 76).

⁸⁸ Interviews took place with Stephen Jones, Siggie, Noel Stewart and Jane Smith in 2007, who agreed that 20m was a useful length, being enough to make a hat with a small brim. A questionnaire that included this question was issued to finalists of the Hat Designer of the Year Competition in 2009, most of whom concurred.

6.4.4.3 Costing

Deciding on price has been difficult: a provisional price has been arrived at after research among UK milliners into how much they already paid for plait from the Far East and then allowing a small cushion for when transportation costs would need to be added, based on a calculation made after a visit to a shipping agent in Kampala (FJ3 05/11/08). As it was a non-profit making venture, I wanted to pay the women as much as possible for the plait, but not to out-price the market. Whether this is sustainable long term is unknown: the current price of 30,000 UGX per 20m bundle may be too high to maintain if exchange rates fluctuate too much or shipping costs rise. The western market may pay a premium for an ethically produced plait, but of course it must suit that market practically and aesthetically. I was concerned about future bad feeling if I needed to reduce the price to the group, so felt it important to be very clear from the start that this was a possibility. I explained through an interpreter that:

- at the moment there are no additional costs, such as transportation, incurred by the plait: what I pay the group is what I sell the plait for;
- I am not looking to make a profit, but cannot afford to make a loss - it must be a cost-neutral venture for me;
- until shipping costs and other expenses need to be applied, I would pay the women 30,000 UGX per bundle;
- I may be able to maintain paying that amount even after costs are applied, if the UK/US/European market allows me to add those costs onto the retail price.

Bushfire staff members have told me that the amount I pay for each bundle of plait is huge by local standards and even reduced by half would still be generous (FJ3 08/11/08). The women have said that they understand this: they are very happy with the price at the moment but realise that it may come down – maybe even to 10,000 UGX in the future. They appear to trust me, but it is difficult to tell.

6.5 Communicating orders for plait

More thought needs to be given to the format of orders. I have thought my orders to be very clear, laid out by type of plait (numbered) with quantity in each colour mapped to the shade card. In spite of this, several orders have not been accurately fulfilled – particularly when colours have been requested. I must review how I specify requirements: perhaps block capitals are needed and large font for figures, as well as photos or swatches. I tried to explain that if I order a certain colour, it must be that colour: if I took an order from someone who needed a

particular shade, he/she wouldn't buy it if it were another colour. Because of this, I have decided that it is too early to take orders for the group from UK milliners in specific colours, other than natural.

On one visit in 2008 the group had been told I would buy "many" bundles rather than the 20 that I had ordered, with the result that they produced much more than I could afford or carry (FJ3 10/11/08). This was very disappointing for the women and mortifying for me. I was reluctant to ask who had passed the order on to them, as this felt accusatory. Sarah, and others I spoke to later, realised that there had been a mix-up about the quantity of plait, so I hoped that orders in the future would be passed on more accurately. There has been an improvement, but colour is still problematic.

In a meeting with the Bushfire staff team three women were proposed to take responsibility for issuing orders to the group and collecting them to send, as well as monitoring quality (FJ4 11/11/09). I was concerned that having so many responsible for this might cause confusion. Moreover, as one was pregnant, she had more pressing things to consider. Headmistress Rose later took on a more active managerial role. Orders placed in 2011 were accurately fulfilled.

6.6.1 The Market

One of the questions to be answered is how the plait might sit within the Ugandan marketplace. Research was undertaken in Jinja and Kampala to discover any potential local or home market for products developed from the plait, as well as any competition. Prices for plaited or woven craft objects were extremely low, and it was difficult to see how the women could earn enough to make production worthwhile, although any income at all would be welcome. Although the group were able to make bags, baskets, and sun hats in the plait, they would need to improve the quality and offer different designs from those already on the market. After further research and deliberation, I felt that production for the West would bring the women a much higher income than production for the tourist market. Although better than nothing, their profit margin would be small if they sold locally, and the market was very competitive (FJ2 06/11/07, FJ3 13/11/08). If the women sold directly to tourists they would do better than if they sold through a craft shop, but their access to tourists/visitors is limited. It might help if Bushfire set up a small craft shop for visitors, although their stream of overseas visitors is not constant. I decided that setting up a website for direct sales would be the best way forward. As a result of this, efforts were renewed to develop plaits for the millinery trade of the developed world.

Between field trips two and three I interviewed several UK milliners about the plait samples. Feedback suggested that a plain colour palette needed to be established, that 20m lengths were best, that £10 per bundle was a fair price and that the ethical nature of the product was attractive. Some felt that pastel shades would be useful as well as brights. Only one milliner interviewed would use the mixed colour plait.

6.6.2 Kampala

Networking has been helpful in exploring new markets for the plait. As a designer-maker from London with experience of working with international fashion designers, I have been able to get access to some key contacts. Whether this would have been as easy for a local person in Uganda is unclear, but I suspect not. Having learned about the growing group of urban, middle-class, fashion-conscious Ugandans, I made contact with Gloria Wavamunno in 2010 to enquire about the local market for occasion hats - much like those worn for dressy occasions in the UK (FJ5 28/09/10). I took a collection of samples to a meeting with her in Kampala and planned to teach the plait group how to make them. Mindful of the Ugandan love of colour, I had created some narrower versions of the *mekeka* plait for some of the hats, in combinations of natural palm and bright colours. I used the plait to form various small to medium-sized hats - some trimmed with *kitenge*, raffia pompoms, or porcupine quills (Figure 77). Gloria loved them and convinced me that there would be a good market for them in Uganda as long as each one was slightly different, her argument being that wealthy women want to wear exclusive items and will pay a premium for this. She explained how she sold her fashion collection through gatherings in private homes where orders were taken, and she recommended this approach.

I had not previously known that there was a market for couture millinery in Uganda, but this appears to be another area that needs to be explored. Wavamunno informed me that hats designed by a western designer but made by a craft group in Uganda would have extra value. In August 2011 eight couture hats were delivered to her store on a sale or return basis (Figure 77). An order was also taken, and delivered, for a cap and mini-beret for a private customer in Kampala with contacts in the fashion press, but I need to spend more time in Kampala to build on this.



Figure 77: Group members in couture millinery

In 2010 the owner of the Banana Boat craft shops expressed an interest in stocking the hats in her stores, although she felt the prices were too high and that it would be better to reduce them in order to sell more. As my philosophy was that the group should earn as much as possible for their work – and that it would be better for them to make one hat at 30,000 UGX than three at 10,000 – I was less happy with this proposal. It may be worthwhile for a diffusion line though (FJ5 10/11/10).

6.6.3 Jinja

The craft group joined 'Mothers of Hope' who opened a shop to sell crafts to tourists. As described in Chapter Five, Mothers of Hope initially made very few sales through their shop due to their pricing, the lack of diversity in their wares and their location in a quiet street in Jinja away from the other craft shops. With their move to better premises in 2011, the position is slowly improving. If some advice about promotion given by Richard Randall in 2010 is followed and they acquire more stock, they may do better still (FJ5 30/09/10).

6.6.4 Ethical production for the UK

IndigoLime is currently keen to establish and market a range of ethical products, to be produced in Uganda. In 2009 their former designer (Eleanor Cain) identified a range of thirteen products, including traditional handicrafts as well as hats, baskets, and bags made in the Pidgin Plait that she felt would find a market in the UK (FJ4 14/11/09).

6.6.5 The millinery market

The outcomes of the Hat Designer of the Year competition in 2009 demonstrated the versatility of the Pidgin Plait and attracted a lot of interest from milliners and millinery materials suppliers, who were drawn to its ethical nature as well as its aesthetic merits. One of the finalists, the working milliner Karen Henriksen, continued to use the plait after the competition for her collection and has since taken orders on those hats. Another successful young milliner - Justin Smith - used the plait for a striking hat/breastpiece for his Autumn 2010 collection. Other milliners have asked for samples and want to use the plait when shipping systems are in place. Many bundles have been sold to individual designer-makers. In 2012, when I expect to have more free time, I plan to set up a website to promote and retail the plait as a non-profit-making venture on behalf of the plait group.

6.6.6 My practice



Figure 78. Exhibition of my practice-led PhD work Pidgin Plait, RCA April 2012

Throughout the my research and product development process I have experimented with the Pidgin Plaits to sample and produce hats and headpieces that explored my ideas about the African aesthetic of surface texture, the beauty and significance of hair in African cultures and the notion of hybrid aesthetics (Chapter 3.6, Figures 62-3, 65, 77, 78, 79-81). These pieces were exhibited in April 2012 as the practice supported by this dissertation. They represent an assimilation of knowledge that I have gained through the research and making process, and physical evidence of some of the concepts that I propose - working on various levels as items of craft, of communication, of interpretation and of negotiation.



Figure 79. A series of hats I made as part of my research practice, designs developed from African hair, using Pidgin Plaits and strawcraft techniques.



Figure 80. A series of hats I made as part of my research practice, designs developed from African hair, using Pidgin Plaits and strawcraft techniques.



Figure 81. Exhibition of my practice-led PhD work Pidgin Plait, RCA April 2012

6.7 Case study of group member

In order to illustrate some of the benefits of the project to group members so far, I have included a case study of X.

Background:

X has been a member of the plait group from its start in April 2007. She is in her 50s, widowed since 2000 and responsible for eight children ranging from 14 to early-30s in age. Her financial commitments include school fees and medical bills as well as supporting herself and her younger children. She keeps some of the crops she grows in her garden and sells the rest. She is HIV positive and not always able to access medication for this. She sometimes cooks things to sell for extra income. X is the most able member of the group and a prolific plaiter. She had previously plaited *mekeka* and had learned to make place-mats from woven palm leaves in school. She understands and speaks some English, learned at school.

Activities:

After she has worked in her garden during the day X plaits after an early supper until it gets too dark. She sells hats made from her plait to neighbours, friends and other villagers. She has sold me many bundles of plait since the project started, usually of a very good quality (in fact, I have sometimes had to buy inferior plait from others, in order to be inclusive, in spite of X having extra to sell). Her skills have developed quickly and she has been open to trying new things, such as making bags and hats.

Benefits:

X has been able to purchase cement and bricks to complete the building she lives in, which had apparently been unfinished for many years, with income from her plaiting. She has saved some of the money for this. She had not previously wanted to embark on HIV medication as she couldn't reliably access it, but now she would be able to. She has noticeably grown in self-confidence since she joined the group. A relative told me that neighbours used to laugh at them sitting plaiting - telling them they were being lazy - but now can see how it has benefitted them.

Issues:

X has no electricity and has limited time to plait in daylight. However, she plaits quickly and systematically, producing more than most of the other group members. She is sometimes unwell, which can also affect the time she has to work. While her plaiting is very accomplished, she needs to take more care with sewing it up; however, she is improving all the time.

Evaluation:

X is the most able and entrepreneurial group member; she has taken full advantage of everything the project has taught her. She works very hard and produces more plait than any of the other women. She has already benefitted materially and socially from the project: she seems happier, more confident and her local status has risen. Neighbours who teased her are now respectful of what she does.

6.8 Conclusion

One of the problematic issues within the project is the role of the western designer/maker who understands the market in the developed world and the imposition of a western aesthetic on a group of non-western makers. However, I felt quite strongly that there was a need for more texture in plait (for the market in which I work) rather than patterned plait that while more authentically Ugandan might restrict how items made of it could be worn. Through my research into African crafts and African aesthetics I became convinced that texture within the plait would on some level be compatible with local tastes and speak to their craft heritage.

While the imposition of designs upon a community of makers for a market they cannot comprehend may appear arrogant, I have found that the women are eager to learn anything that might provide them with some form of income. Their understanding of the end use of the product or input in its design - insisted upon by many working in or theorising about development (Murray no date: 6-8, 10-11, Eversole 2005b:356) - has not been an issue so far⁸⁹. Insistence on the makers' understanding of context for the end product is a concept that may be argued in the relative luxury of the developed world, and indeed will become more appropriate later on, but the most important issue for the makers I am working with is to feed their children and be able to send them to school. My aim has been not to disempower the women, but to build their skills and confidence gradually to a point where they are able to initiate new ideas that are market appropriate. However, it may be that this point is never reached⁹⁰. In navigating an ethical way forward, I have attempted to strike a balance between adapting and integrating European and Ugandan plaiting techniques and local materials for new markets and the practical and social needs of the makers.

Referring to barkcloth for the tourist market, Nakazibwe (2005: 320) highlights the 'demeaning tendencies' that are apparent when a cultural craft is commodified. Historic meanings may be lost, but on the other hand souvenir-making may also help to reconstruct and popularise a material or technique that had been falling into disuse: a conundrum. While the same argument would apply to traditional items being commodified for the fashion industry, I feel that the plait that has been produced with the craft group at Bushfire represents a hybrid or pidgin product that simultaneously carries affiliation to both cultures and may be understood by all.

⁸⁹ As the plait is designed to be adaptable to new trends by craftspeople working within Western markets, as well as perhaps for local Ugandan markets, even this may not be an issue.

⁹⁰ Bhatt (2007: 5) warns of the ineffectiveness of short-term training of artisans by outsiders, suggesting that a more extended commitment is required.

Ensuring the sustainability of the project in terms of providing an income for the women over the long term is another goal. It may be more beneficial to the women at this stage that income from plait has been sporadic rather than regular. The fact that orders are placed only about twice per year has prevented them from becoming reliant upon income from the project. Normal activities continue in between, although they still meet, and in 2011, for example, they told me that I mustn't worry about them relying on me alone because they were investing money from the plait in other enterprises, such as goat breeding.

There are all sorts of questions about what the short and long term impact of this intervention might be. How will women having more money affect power structures within the community? What will happen to their status? Will men feel threatened and could the consequences of this be detrimental to the women? Will the married women be allowed to keep the money they earn? Might it go to another wife? How is extra money spent? Is that any of my business? What has been built has been built slowly, at a realistic pace, in recognition of its local context. Western approaches to production with a uniform product, firm lead times and small margins cannot be part of this project at this point in time; it is debatable whether they ever should be.

Making materials and products that are adaptable to the ever-changing trends of western fashion may be a more realistic way forward for artisans in the developing world than making finished goods, particularly when they are unable to access regularly information about those trends. If what they make can find a customer within local markets too, so much the better. Because it is such an adaptable medium there is a future for the ancient craft of straw plaiting. If milliners and other product designers can be persuaded that the time it takes to sew up plait to their designs is more than repaid in the special qualities of the finished product, more of them will want to use it. If, on top of these qualities, the plait is ethically made - generating a fair income for a community in the developing world and made from natural and sustainable materials - consumers may be persuaded to pay a premium for a product that is hand crafted in every respect. This will not be enough to 'shape the human universe' (Greenhalgh, 2002:18) but may add to a continuing debate about the ethical sourcing of materials and products for fashion, and how craft may sit within this.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

7.1 Introduction

Throughout the research process and within this thesis separate strands of theory and practice have been interwoven in a manner that has made the most sense to me. I found it necessary to investigate each area in some depth, although not always exhaustively, in order to inform the choices I made at every stage of the project. As I am a craft practitioner, the weight of my research has instinctively fallen upon artefact, design and process, but I also found it necessary to explore some theories around development, alternative economics and aspects of sociology, psychology, sustainability and history in order to contextualise my project and position it within historic and current debates.

To a great extent I have had to react flexibly to challenges and opportunities as they arose, embracing what happened in the field – particularly with product development. My background as a practitioner and teacher has been invaluable in this. I propose that multiple factors must be considered in order to ensure the success of such an intervention and believe that the development of a hybrid or pidgin product that carries meaning to both local and overseas markets has been important. The evidence I have gathered supports the desirability of a multi-disciplinary knowledge base to underpin the planning and implementation of a small-scale development project in a Ugandan village as a means of sourcing new materials for the couture millinery industry. Through attempting to understand some of the complexities inherent in working with a group of women whose culture and circumstances are so different from my own, I have found a common language through craft: maker to maker, combining and adapting the techniques and aesthetics of both parties.

7.2 Key lessons learned through field research

Through the series of field trips I learned an enormous amount about the considerations to be taken into account by a western designer working at the grassroots level in Uganda. Numerous issues arose that were unforeseen and my plans had to be adjusted as a result - adapted to circumstances which were beyond my control. With hindsight, there are some things that I would have done differently in order to promote a more fully collaborative project and there are many things that are yet to be done to ensure its longer-term sustainability. Below I summarise the key issues identified.

- *Communication*

Communication with people from another culture can be problematic. Verbal communication with other actors cannot be too clear and understanding should not be taken for granted by any party. Vital information may be lost through insufficient or incomplete interpretation. There is also room for misinterpretation between Luganda and Lusoga speakers.

Cultural differences in the way preferences and opinions are expressed or are heard may impact on communication, even when dealing with those who are fluent in English. For example, faintly praising work out of politeness – which may not be good enough or to one’s taste – may be interpreted as an interest in buying it or encouragement to make more of the same; people may say what they think one wants to hear: and names given for certain plants and objects could vary from person to person. Therefore miscommunication can be cultural, linguistic or related to an individual’s mode of understanding or expression. Expectations should be discussed as carefully as possible to prevent frustration and disappointment.

Written orders may not always be received, as access to the Internet cannot be relied upon in remote regions. Even when an order has been promptly received, one simply cannot take it for granted that it has been properly understood or, indeed, accurately communicated to others. Texting orders may be more effective if there is a reliable contact with a phone.

- *Cultural differences in approach to innovation*

The culture of rural, south-eastern Uganda is conservative - valuing the repetition of traditional techniques and patterns. Local people may lack the knowledge to independently innovate. As others copy successful craft items quickly in the Ugandan Crafts sector, the need to be able to continually innovate is important. The effects upon women of living in a rigidly patriarchal society - such as that of Busoga - may include a lack of self-confidence. Sometimes it is necessary to demonstrate what is possible in making – to prove it – in order to convince project participants. Encouraging a “let’s just see what happens if we do this” approach is useful.

- *Local knowledge*

Women in rural Busoga may know more than they think they do. When starting a project with a new group it would be helpful to ask group members what ‘crafts’ they have made previously - asking them to show examples. Beginning by giving each of the group

some palm - or another easily available material - then asking them to make something with it, could draw out information about any prior making experience. Helping the women to comprehend their existing craft knowledge might enable them to feel more confident in their ability to innovate.

Telling group members about the qualities that are necessary in a product to be developed, then asking them to see what they could come up in response to this, may be another way of discovering what they know and may enable them to take ownership of the product. Asking group members for their own ideas for products for their local market might encourage them to develop more self-reliance. However, innovation for distant markets is likely to be problematic without outsider support.

- *Time planning*

The women have many other commitments in their lives that conflict with their participation in the craft group. The priorities of an outsider (seeking to help) are not necessarily theirs'. Time planned for training and product development with a group may be reduced considerably as unforeseen events unfold. For example, local custom requires strict participation in funerals from the whole community and other duties in support of the bereaved are expected from neighbours or those with blood connection to the deceased. Time may be lost as a result. The fact that the women have many responsibilities to shoulder must be accepted and respected, and the best use made of the time when they are available. If possible longer visits from an outside trainer might be more helpful than those of just a fortnight, in order to develop skills and products more effectively.

Time should be planned to develop effective networks in Uganda to support a project locally. These networks may include private and commercial customers, suppliers and press. Time is needed to organise photo-shoots and editorial.

- *Quality*

Ensuring a good quality product may be a significant challenge. Reasons for this can range from insufficient practice of techniques, unfamiliarity with the demands of the market, miscommunication and misdirection by other outsiders and poverty. Craft products may be affected by poverty in several ways: the women's inability to sample properly to check the consistency of dye colours purchased and to develop expertise in dyeing; access to reliable dye sources; and pest infestation that can lead to the goods being nibbled.

Purchasing dyes in more bulk, then sampling to check them should enable orders for coloured products to be more accurately fulfilled. The purchase of metal trunks – inexpensive and easily available locally – for storage would prevent damage to craft goods by rodents and perhaps by cockroaches.

- *Illness*

The impact of poverty on the group members includes poor health and inadequate medical treatment. Frequent pregnancies and childbirths, regular attacks of malaria and other serious health conditions such as HIV and AIDs effect the time they have to make craft items and the energy levels they can bring to that. The illness of other family members has also had an impact on their ability to attend meetings regularly and complete orders for plait.

- *Motivation*

While curiosity may initially be a huge draw to participation in a craft development project - and perhaps the hope of being given something - the women need the incentive of an income to sustain their membership. They cannot afford to make crafts as a hobby, however pleasurable that may be. They need to know that there will be a market for what they are making.

Large orders will be discussed in the community and may result in women whom are not regular group members attempting to contribute to an order. Regular members are likely to resent this. In order to ensure the goodwill of faithful group members, their continued involvement in a group and a better quality product it is best to only allow the regulars to contribute to orders.

- *Travel disruption*

The inaccessibility of some remote craft groups in Uganda may be further increased during heavy rains, when roads can become impassable. The potential effects of political unrest on the project could include roadblocks that might hinder transportation. Election and immediate post-election periods may be particularly fraught, deterring travel to major centres on days when - for example - Walk to Works⁹¹ are staged. Therefore tight deadlines for any orders are problematic.

⁹¹ The Walk to Work movement is led by Ugandan opposition leader Kizza Besigye, in protest over high fuel and food prices.

- *Depletion of natural resources*

The ongoing surrender of rural bush to agricultural activities such as rice-growing has led to the uprooting of some palm trees that are local to the project in Namutumba. This is a matter of grave concern. Strategies are needed for the conservation of wild date palm before it is irrevocably depleted in this region and it becomes difficult to source palm leaves for plaiting. Perhaps education, discussion with local chiefs, the creation of a small reserve, or some sort of incentive scheme for growing and protecting the trees are needed. The important Ugandan cultural tradition of plaiting *mekeka* could be under threat if the trees continue to be cut down, and it would negatively impact this plait project.

- *The interference of other outsiders*

Visitors to a craft project from developed countries (or from more developed regions of Uganda) may feel that they have sufficient knowledge of product and market to share with groups in an authoritative manner. Outsiders are listened to respectfully and their advice is - to a great extent – followed. Whatever the reasons for this, outsiders trying to work with rural grassroots groups must understand the responsibility this assumed authority carries: that time and income could be lost by those who can afford it the least. When working with a craft group, it is important to be very clear about what is required in terms of product design and quality for orders, so that advice from other outsiders cannot contradict agreed requirements.

- *Relationship*

The formation of a good relationship with the group members – founded upon honesty, fairness and, perhaps, a shared faith - is key. Careful explanation of why certain choices have been made or why they may have to change - particularly around the sensitive subjects of pricing and product development - is important. The support of respected, trusted, local people is important in establishing a new group. Learning enough of the local language to greet, ask after family members and to praise good work is helpful in encouraging the acceptance of an outsider by group members and demonstrates respect for the group. Learning about local culture is important to an understanding of the lives of the women and the inherent constraints upon their time, but also about them as individuals. Of course, relationship is a dynamic force that can impact choice and there can exist a tension between relationship and business. A business model that is caring and supportive of group members, accommodates their circumstances and the difficulties they face, the impact of these on products and deadlines for orders - is unusual and may be difficult to maintain.

7.3 Recommendations

It is hoped that this research will be of use to designers who wish to work with groups in developing countries to source new materials for the fashion industry or interior décor market and that it will help them to appreciate the need to equip themselves with knowledge of the participants' circumstances, traditions, aesthetics and culture as well as the market. While I have documented a range of Ugandan *mekeka* plaits, there is more work to be done in recording and cataloguing their different patterns. Trowell, Warner Dendell, Gombe and Robertson have previously researched these plaits, but there has been no exhaustive research to date.⁹² There is a need to gather samples and photographic evidence before some patterns die out. This knowledge can help to initiate alternative dialogues for development and new approaches to product design. For example, the formation of hybrid aesthetics to create a medium that speaks to both makers and overseas markets has been adopted in this project; this could be explored in further research. The usefulness of prior teaching experience, as well as craft practice, is an area that could be the subject of some quantitative research. Impediment to design innovation in Ugandan craft is a complex subject that requires urgent research. The informal, independent development worker appears to be an increasing phenomenon and should also be the subject of further research.

7.4 Summary of thesis

The consistent thread running through this thesis is the craft of plaiting. Other elements have been introduced in relation to the Pidgin Plait project.

In Chapter One I noted that craft has historically provided a means of making that respects people, processes and environment and continues to offer an alternative to industrialized processes. Revisiting and recycling traditional craft techniques needs urgent exploration, in order to find more ethical and sustainable methods of production. I described craft's ability to reconnect consumers to makers through signifiers of the handmade, which are integral to many craft products, such as lack of uniformity and the use of unmediated materials. I suggested that through that reconnection consumers might be prompted to make more ethical choices.

I examined the historic, contemporary, home and tourist markets for craft in Uganda, establishing that craft has been and continues to be an essential activity for large numbers of people living in rural areas. This is in contrast to craft practice in the UK, where craft is more likely to

⁹² As stated previously, Dr Catherine Gombe is currently researching the history of Ugandan *mekeka*.

fall in the domain of hobbyists or designer-makers. I highlighted the conformity of many tourist crafts that appear to codify 'Africa' as well as the competitive nature of that market. I described some initiatives, such as collaborations with academic institutions, which draw upon traditional craft techniques to express modern concerns such as HIV/AIDS. I described Uganda's historic and current basketry and plaiting traditions, which are now finding new markets overseas. I suggested that Uganda's heritage of craft practice, particularly in basketry techniques (including plaiting), position it well for the development of new craft products.

In Chapter Two I presented the history of straw plaiting for millinery, in order to demonstrate its significance as a cottage industry that brought socio-economic benefits to the rural poor. The fact that plaiting could be performed flexibly, around other commitments, as a group or solo activity, suggests its viability as a means of income generation for women in comparable rural contexts. Its reliance on locally available, unmediated, biodegradable plant materials is in keeping with sustainable manufacturing ideology.

In Chapter Three research into historic plaiting of braids in Africa identified processes and aesthetic traits that might be considered in product development, such as pattern with contrasting colour. I described the history, processes and meaning surrounding the making of *mekeka*, showing that the plaiting of braids has been embedded in Ugandan culture for many years.

The use of plaited braids by other peoples in Africa to make a wide range of items was described with particular focus on their use for headwear. I suggest, therefore, that the plaiting of braids for headwear has been part of African culture for centuries. My project builds on existing plaiting traditions, albeit in new ways.

I described my development of Pidgin Plait by recycling and adapting the plaiting traditions of Europe for a rural Ugandan context and produced thereby a new material for millinery in the UK and possibly Uganda. Two collections of hats were developed that separately addressed the aesthetic requirements of both cultures through the lens of my own impressions and preferences. The therapeutic benefits of performing a craft activity like plaiting were acknowledged and my own responses to the process recorded.

In Chapter Four I discussed some aspects of African aesthetics, with particular focus on texture. The significance and meaning of decoration and texture in African artefacts was explored, for example as a means of communicating status, ritual or power. The equation of "beauty" and "goodness" in many African cultures suggested that decoration imbues an object with goodness.

Irregularity was identified as a key ingredient of African aesthetics, which often appears to be incidental rather than pre-determined. The power of this irregularity is that it speaks clearly of the maker's hand: of how and where an item is made.

The aesthetics of tourist crafts were discussed: I suggested that the designs of many tourist crafts are based on a cycle of perceptions and misperceptions between tourist, artisans and craft retailers that are founded upon the fantasies of 'Africa' propounded during the colonial and post-colonial eras. I identified some signifiers of "Africa" and the tourist preference for natural materials and shades. Some entries in the Hat Designer of the Year competition supported this hypothesis, as well as feedback from craft stallholders in Uganda. I described some Ugandans' preference for bright colours and the impact that chemical dyes have had on local aesthetics.

In order to demonstrate a potential position for hats in Pidgin Plait in the home culture, as part of an emerging market, the Ugandan high fashion scene was described. This demonstrated - at the time of writing - a renewed appreciation for Ugandan and pan-African aesthetic traditions through printed and locally sourced fabrics and bold use of colour. Ugandan fashion also showed a more general desire for the 'modernity' perceived in western goods.

I highlighted the purposeful, yet flexible approach taken by African craftspeople as a method that leads to the creation of beautiful, non-uniform, handmade objects. I suggested that this approach should be adopted as a means of reconnecting consumer to maker in some areas of production, although consideration must be given to how this is presented to a market accustomed to uniformity.

In Chapter Five I examined some of the change agents in Uganda that have impacted upon craft development. From my experience in the field (admittedly limited) I am forced to conclude that - however well meaning amateur craft interventionists may be - experience as a designer-maker, with market knowledge, was more likely to produce successful results for the artisans. I also propose that artisans in rural Uganda need support from experienced designer-makers with market knowledge if they are to supply an overseas market that is otherwise incomprehensible to them. They must also be able to innovate in order to compete locally rather than copy existing forms. This is particularly important for new groups trying to enter the crafts sector. I suggest that imposing western commercial practice in sourcing goods is unfeasible when working with artisans in areas where communication, transport and obtaining materials may be unreliable. A flexible approach to ordering and delivery, and indeed the specifications of the goods themselves, may be required until craft groups are more

established. This supports my hypothesis that Pidgin Plait offers a versatile medium that accommodates a certain amount of inconsistency. The fact that it may be sewn up overseas into shapes to suit ever-changing markets eliminates some of the challenges in sourcing finished goods from new rural artisans.

In Chapter Six I presented my project: Pidgin Plait. I described the initiation of the project in response to market need, and how it has developed over the years in response to circumstances, relationships, challenges and compromises. I gave background information on the region where the project is situated and described the impact of culture upon the participants and other groups in the area. I highlighted some of the issues that affect the makers and the choices made as a result, such as only taking orders in un-dyed palm until such a time as we can guarantee fairly reliable colours; predominantly ordering bundles of plait rather than finished items until the group have mastered neatly stitching the palm to reasonably consistent shapes; and my pricing policy.

I have established an interest in Pidgin Plait among milliners in the UK, Europe and the US who have been keen to find an ethically produced product with different aesthetic qualities. Markets in Uganda were described. Apart from product inconsistency, which to some extent is accommodated by the plait, I identified communication as one of the biggest challenges when working with groups of artisans in rural Uganda: the accurate relaying of information and orders is an ongoing challenge, but one that will eventually be overcome.

While I have attempted to include the key issues arising from field trips, it was impossible to condense field trip journals sufficiently to enable them to be included in this thesis; it seemed best to bind them in a separate, illustrated volume, which may be referenced for fuller details of what happened in Uganda.

7.5 Concluding remarks

Through this project a series of Pidgin Plaits have been created that form a means of communication between the women makers in rural south-eastern Uganda and the western couture fashion world. In the process of bringing together some historic craft traditions of both cultures I have worked both independently and collaboratively in the development of a product that represents an aesthetic, technical and cultural amalgam. I have chosen – and often been forced – to act spontaneously, embracing serendipity, responding to events in Uganda,

and rejoicing as group members have produced work that had not been anticipated but has had great merit of its own. This is one of the joys of collaboration: an exchange of the unknown and the unforeseen. If I went into this project with pre-determined aims (to develop new, ethically produced millinery materials through a development project in Uganda), I have discovered and learned more than I could ever have imagined, and the outcomes reflect this.

For the foreseeable future my involvement with the group is essential to enable them to sell their plait overseas. The women have no way of comprehending the couture millinery market without external support. I understand that this is a controversial stance amongst some development theorists: it is difficult to empower people fully when control of their operations is to some extent withheld. The establishment of home markets that they can independently create for, and the means to access these, must become a priority. Although there may be interest in hats in the Pidgin Plait amongst the urban elite of Kampala, even this market is incomprehensible to the group at present. Design development and market training are needed to enable the group members to innovate independently and successfully.

However, so far the plait project has been extremely successful on a number of levels. Through this project the women makers have developed more confidence and security. Meeting regularly as a group to plait has enabled them to support one another emotionally in the difficulties they face. Realising that they are able makers has built self-esteem and encouraged them to make more. The creation of a local craft culture offers opportunities for ongoing income-generating activities. In forming a committee, saving money from plaiting, and making collective decisions for their organisation and investment the women have taken active agency in transforming their lives. The effects of this may have a long-term impact on the choices women and girls are able to make and on their status within this community.

There are several issues that must be addressed to ensure the sustainability of this project: setting up a reliable means of communication with the makers from the UK; establishing a formal transportation system for plait orders; ensuring that the production of coloured plaits is consistent with that ordered and customer expectations; monitoring of the local palm trees to ensure that key materials are not depleted; further advertising and promotion of Pidgin Plaits, initially by means of a website and a Facebook page. However, none of these concerns are insurmountable and there is every reason to believe that this project can continue and grow. Sourcing goods and materials from overseas is a normal practice of globalization. My intervention takes this in an alternative direction by independently going to Uganda to work with marginalized women in a rural community in order to establish an ethical production system for plaited braids. Sourcing goods in this

way enables the rural poor to participate in the global economy in a manner that is sustainable in pre-industrial conditions. In the process, I have imported to Bulange a means by which the women may meet as a group and build support structures in a culturally acceptable way – something these women had not been able to do prior to the project.

The aesthetic qualities of Pidgin Plaits, such as irregularity, rich surface texture, the unpredictability of the natural and handmade product, eloquently convey the makers. As both a statement and a form of exchange, the Pidgin Plaits offer a visual communication of important social, cultural, aesthetic, political, economic and ethical considerations, therefore offering a means to reconnect consumers to makers.

Appendix I: Tourist Craft in Uganda: A Market Report

Through my research into tourist crafts in Kampala, Entebbe and Jinja I identified a variety of homogenized 'African' craft products, many of which were imported from neighbouring countries or South Africa. In this appendix I describe and catalogue some of the multiple products on display that support conclusions I have drawn about the aesthetic qualities of contemporary 'Ugandan' tourist crafts. The evidence also supports my assertion that craft production is integral to the lives of many Ugandans.

Buganda Road Craft Village, Kampala

The Buganda Road craft market in Kampala consists of around 50 small stalls selling a variety of homogenous 'African' crafts, including 'ebony' wood carvings of animals and people, masks, large papier mache giraffes and zebra heads, leather sandals, figures and forms of glass-beaded wire, soft toys in padded *kitenge*⁹³, fabrics, and coiled raffia jewellery. It is difficult to ascertain which pieces are made locally and which have been imported but paper bead jewellery, baskets, plaited bags and mats, barkcloth products, banana fibre mobiles and nativity scenes, and patchwork goat-skin rugs are all made in Uganda. Stallholders admit that some of the wooden figures come from Kenya and South Africa; many of the printed fabrics are labelled 'Zaire'. Some stalls in the market sell carved wooden figures, stools and masks from the Democratic Republic of Congo that appear to be quite old, although figures may sometimes be 'aged' in various ways⁹⁴; some also stock Kuba cloth - both cut-pile and appliqué. Inside one shop were some headdresses made from felted human hair adorned with ostrich feathers. It was claimed that these were from the Congo too, although similar headdresses are on display in the Museum of Uganda as examples of local tribal artefacts.

⁹³ *Kitenge* is a printed, identifiably African fabric, although some is produced in Holland and China. Tanzania, Uganda and 'Zaire' are important suppliers.

⁹⁴ At least as early as 1905 accounts suggest that 'traditional' African artefacts for western consumption were produced in a way that would meet western notions of authenticity (Schildkrout and Keim, 1998: 27, 182, 188)



Stall in Buganda Road: masks, jewellery, paper beads, bags
(Beads Ugandan, others' origins unknown)



Buganda Road: gourds, drums, pots, spoons, bags, sandals
(Drums and sandals Ugandan, others' origins unknown)



Buganda Road: Masks (DRC?), walking sticks, stuffed *kitenge* animals, drums, mobiles, jewellery, artwork, bags, carved wooden figures, placemats, paper bead necklaces. (Drums, paper beads and placemats Ugandan, others' origins unknown).



Paper bead necklaces, other jewellery, wooden walking sticks and spoons, bags, goat-skin rugs, cards, dresses, drums, hats. (Paper beads, bags and goat skin rugs Ugandan, others' origins unknown).

National Theatre Craft Market, Kampala

The National Theatre craft market is well known and is laid out in a considered way with an open central area and shade trees. Stalls around this space sell a range of handicrafts, many of which may be found elsewhere, as well as some contemporary Ugandan ceramics and traditional Karamojong jewellery. It has fewer stalls than the Buganda Road craft market, but appears to be busier.



National Theatre: Raffia skirts (for dancing), cards, paper bead necklaces, woven sisal bags, *kitenge* bags, African-style shirts, lengths of *kitenge*. (Raffia skirts, paper beads Ugandan, others' origins unknown).



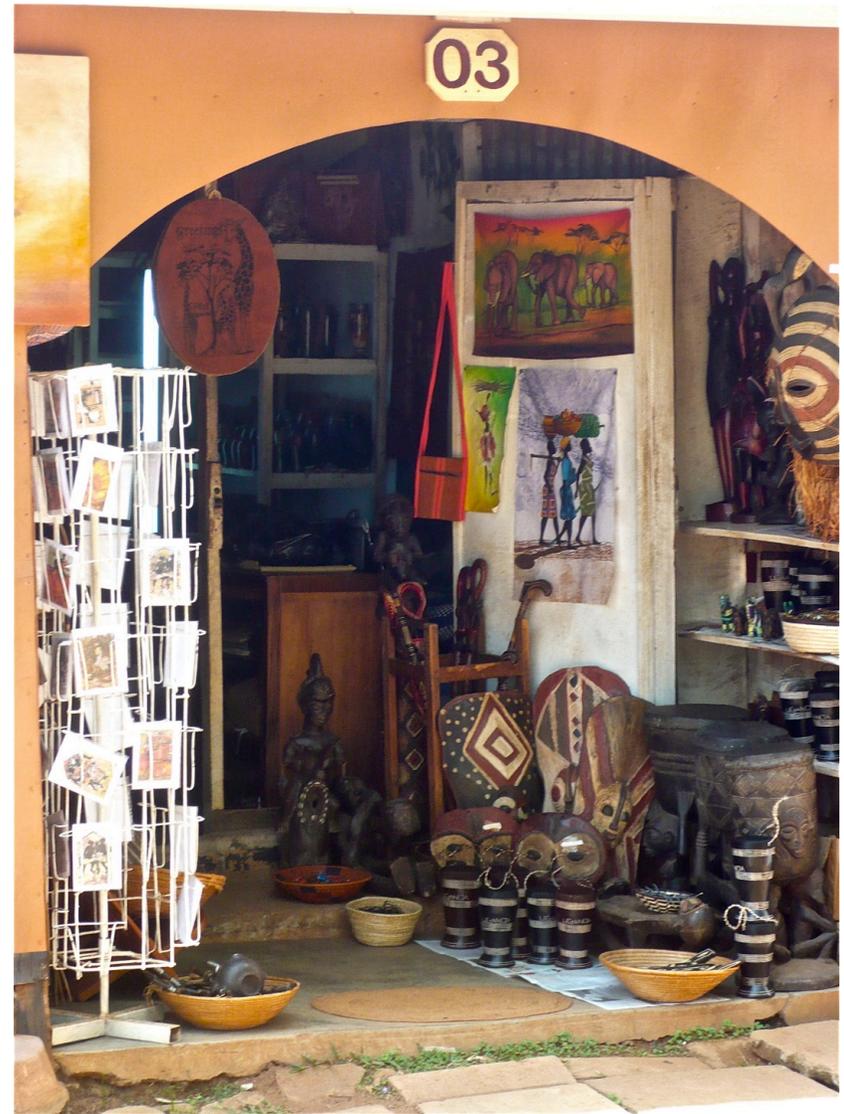
National Theatre: busy open area, with school visit taking place



National Theatre: patchwork *kitenge* bags, drums, raffia skirts, plaited hats, barkcloth hats, paper bead necklaces, dresses, wraps, sisal bags (Ugandan).



Paper bead necklaces, horns, African shirts
(Paper beads and horns Ugandan, shirts' origin unknown).



Masks, paintings, wooden figures and vessels, barkcloth products
(Barkcloth products Ugandan, others' origin unknown).



Paintings in National Theatre craft market, 2011, (origins unknown).



Ubiquitous wooden figures, with paintings as backdrop (These imported figures are on sale everywhere).



Paper bead necklaces, beaded bangles, horns, drums, banana fibre balls, flutes, earrings and other jewellery, baskets, elephant hair bracelets. (Paper bead jewellery, Horns, drums, banana fibre balls and baskets Ugandan, others' origins unknown).

Uganda Crafts 2000, Kampala

Uganda Crafts 2000 in Kampala is a Fairtrade craft shop stocking items of noticeably superior quality from Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya and the DRC. Baskets are finely coiled, in striking colour combinations and in a wide range of sizes. Some innovative motifs and patterns are developed, for example a commissioned basket for MTN. Mats are finely plaited in both simple and complex patterns. They also stock Nubian coiled food containers with wide, conical lids. Prices are higher than in many other outlets, but items on sale are labelled to identify the maker and their circumstances, e.g. “Joyce, single mother, HIV positive”, which may discourage haggling.



Assorted Ugandan palm and raffia baskets from Uganda Crafts 2000 (www.ugandacrafts2000ltd.org/ 2011)



Wooden figures, barkcloth hats, coiled baskets, wooden spears, carved stools and masks, gourds, ladles (www.ugandacrafts2000ltd.org/) (Barkcloth hats, coiled baskets Ugandan, others' origins unknown).

Also on sale are paper bead jewellery, barkcloth, raffia, palm or banana fibre place mats and drinks mats, *mekeka*, coiled pots, purses, wallets, sandals, bags, stuffed *kitenge* animal and dolls, mobiles and banana fibre or beaded wire figures. Much of the stock at Uganda Crafts 2000 is similar to that of other craft shops or stalls, but their basketry in particular is more diverse and better crafted.

Banana Boat, Kampala

Banana Boat is a small chain of three up-market craft shops owned by European ex-patriots, selling to tourists and wealthy Ugandans. The shops carry a selective range of quality craft goods from Uganda and other African countries. The goods are carefully displayed in their branches at the fashionable Garden City Mall, Lugogo Mall and the Kisementi area of Kampala, and prices are high – as must be the overheads for their locations. The shopping experience at Banana Boat is calmer, cleaner and more fragrant – due to the scented candles and soaps on sale - than in the hustle of the craft markets. Natural tones and natural materials prevail amongst the stock, creating a sort of ‘safari’ ambience.



Wooden candlesticks, stools, leather and canvas bags (origins unknown)



Coiled baskets, paper bead necklaces, sisal bags, carved figures (necklaces Ugandan)



Kuba and Kente cloths hanging on walls, mobiles, baskets (baskets Ugandan)

Sylvia Owori, Kampala

The Ugandan fashion designer, and editor of African Woman magazine, Sylvia Owori has her own somewhat expensive craft shop, adjoining her boutique in the Garden City Mall. It stocks a limited range of local craft items such as paper bead necklaces and other jewellery, baskets and woven wraps.

Papercraft 2000, Entebbe/Kampala

Papercraft 2000 is a small organisation making paper goods from banana fibre, pineapple fibre and recycled paper. It supplies Banana Boat with diaries, cards, address books, calendars and notebooks, and safari lodges with specially commissioned visitor's books, information packs and other paperwork. Greetings cards in the paper sometimes incorporate *kitenge*. Papercraft 2000 also produces jewellery made from its own recycled glass beads and gift packs of well-presented, hand-made soaps.

1000 Cups of Coffee

This popular coffee shop on the Buganda Road, opposite the crafts market, stocks a range of crafts and garments in African fabrics. Another small craft shop shares the premises, with the usual carved figures, masks, paper beads, bags, bangles etc.



1000 Cups of Coffee

Main Street, Jinja

Main Street in Jinja is lined with craft shops towards its eastern end. Many of these shops carry similar products to those in Kampala, although Karamojong crafts are particularly well represented here, such as necklaces, neck-rests, stools, milk containers, finger knives, and carrying pouches which reflects the relative proximity of that region. Items from Kenya, such as wooden figures and 'Maasai' chequered red/black wraps, are also common. Some craft shops have workshops at the back, where paintings are produced or necklaces strung.



Some of the many craft shops on Main Street, Jinja



Paper bead necklaces and bags incorporating African fabrics

Local tourist crafts in Jinja include a variety of basketry and plaited palm mats, place mats, palm/banana fibre plaited braid purses and bags, Christmas ornaments in banana fibre, coiled pots of raffia, palm or recycled plastics, paper bead jewellery, glass bead jewellery, barkcloth items such as pencil cases, hats, mats and wall-hangings, all sorts of bags in woven palm, raffia, wool yarns, leather or *kitenge* (or any combination of these), jewellery and ornaments made from cow horn, patchwork goat skin rugs, leather or goat skin sandals and knotted sisal plant holders. Wooden figures were found in almost all the craft shops I have visited in Uganda. They are generally produced in South Africa, along with beaded wire figures and bowls. These figures are emblematic of the homogenization of African tourist crafts, which play to tourist preconceptions.

Appendix II: Historic Plaits for the European Millinery Industry

Code words	Art. Nos.	QUALITIES	Width, in/in	yards.
E101			7/3	60Y
E102			8/9	"
E103			9/10	"
E104			10/13	"
E105			13/15	"
E106			16/18	"
E107			19/22	"
E108			9/10	"

Four-Strand Rustic plaits in various widths

E116		11/13	60Y
E117		13/15	"
E118		16/18	"
E119		19/22	"
E122		13/15	"
E123		16/18	"
E124		18/20	"

Flatfoot Four-Strand Rustic Plait

This appendix records historic plaits used by the UK millinery industry during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The examples shown demonstrate the textural nature and levels of intricacy of these plaits; all are from an archive of over 2,500 patterns belonging to Wardown Park Museum, Luton. The names of patterns and/or details from manufacturers' or importers' sample cards (in italics) have been included where known, but much of this information has been lost, along with the knowledge of their production.



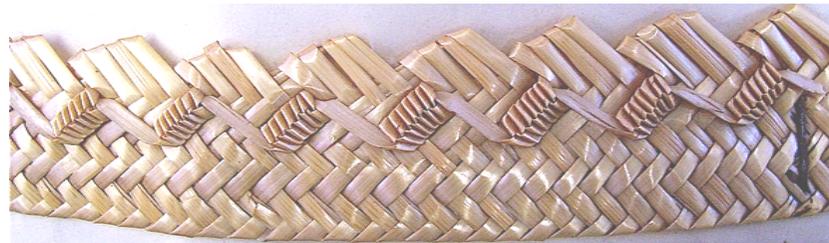
Four-Strand Flatfoot Rustic, using three strands in tandem
21 Wholestraw Mottled



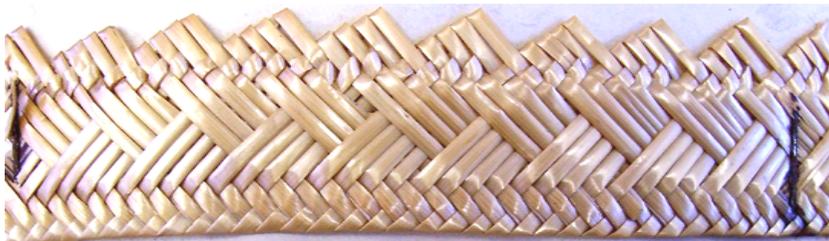
Single Batwing



Diamonds and Purls/ Three Waves plait ?



Diamonds and Purls -23 Wholestraw Mottled



Two Purl - 7 Wholestraw Fancy (Mottled) Qual "Choice"



14 Wholestraw Mottled



Two purl Tuscan plait



Two purl - 15 Wholestraw Mottled



11 Wholestraw Tuscan



19 Wholestraw Mottled



12 Wholestraw Wite



14 Split White



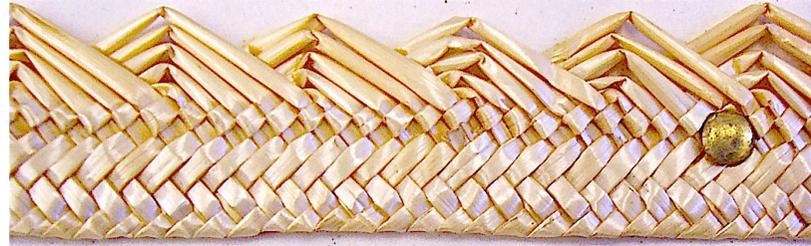
16 Wholestraw, mottled



14 Wholestraw, Fancy (mottled) Qual "Choice"



Expanded Hair Plait



Dunstable with Four floaters on one side
14 Wholestraw Fancy (White) Qual "Choice"



Feather Edge -13 Splitstraw Fancy (White) Qual "Choice"



17 Wholestraw Mottled



Dunstable with three floaters on one side
11 Wholestraw, Fancy (White) Qual "Choice"



Double Bedwin Plait - 11 Double Split White



Dunstable with Two floaters on one side



11 Wholestraw Fancy (White)



Long Paddock Plait







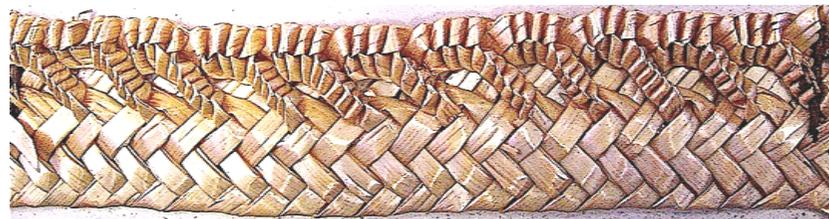
14 Wholestraw (White)



14 Wholestraw (White)



13 Splitstraw Fancy (White) Qual "Choice"

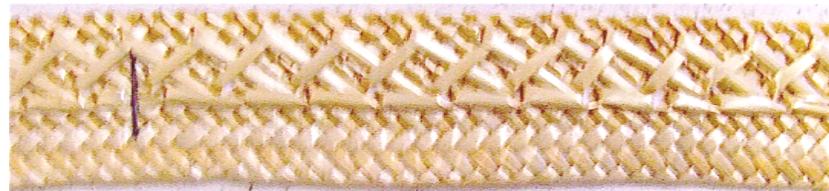




10 Wholestraw White



12 Wholestraw White



19 Split White



13 Wholestraw White



19 Split White



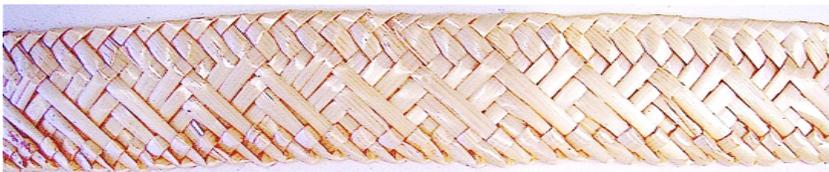
8 Splitstraw Fancy (White) Qual "Choice"

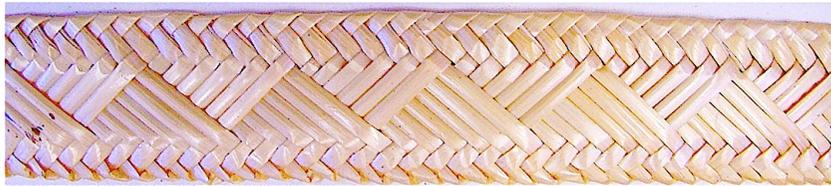


15 Wholestraw Tuscan



8 Splitstraw Fancy (White) Qual "Choice"





Thirteen straw waves



Ten or twelve-straw diamond plait



23 *Wholestraw Mottled*



19 *Wholestraw Mottled*



Twenty-straw diamond plait – 22 *Wholestraw Mottled*



15 *Wholestraw Mottled*



14 *Wholestraw, Fancy (Tuscan), Qual "Choice"*



19 *Wholestraw Mottled*



9 Split White



10 Wholestraw Fancy (White) Qual "Choice"



12 Splitstraw Fancy (White) Qual. "Choice"



13 Splitstraw Fancy (White) Qual. "Choice"

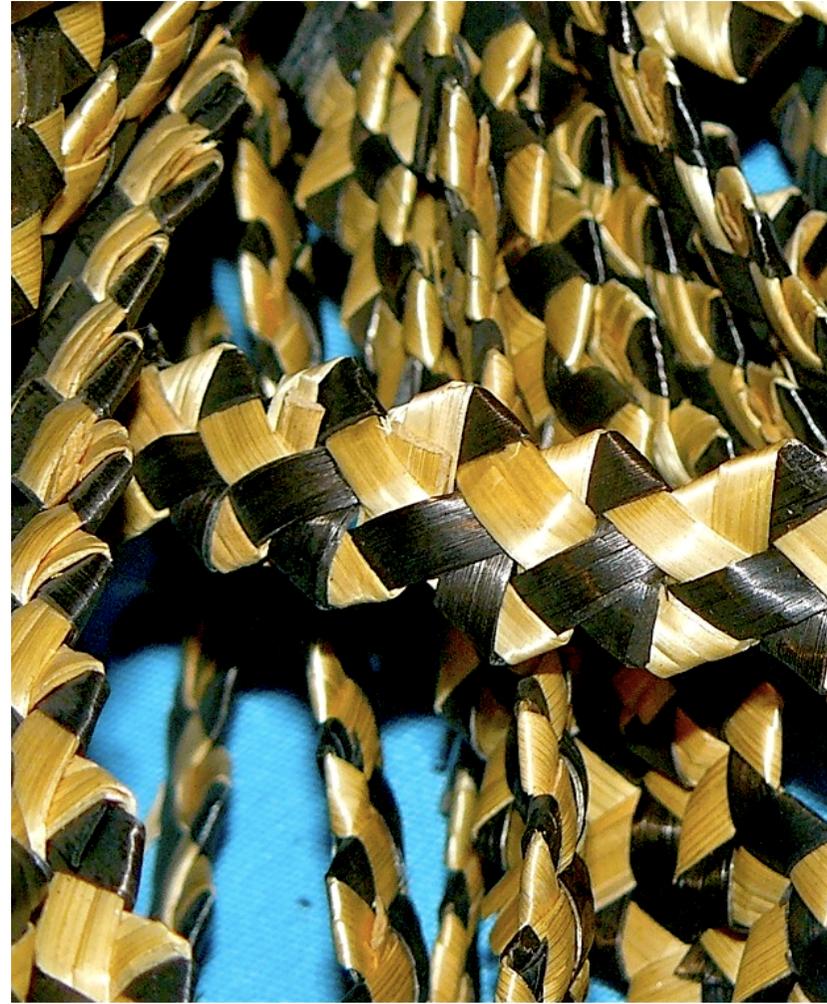


The plaits in this appendix were predominantly produced in China, and shipped from Tientsin, at a time when imported Chinese plaits dominated the British market. Chinese plaits grew in ornamentation and quality, with complex, textural detailing, although many were initially copies of European plaits. These fancy Chinese plaits, in turn, influenced some produced in Britain. Japan was another major producer of straw plait, from paler barley straw rather than from wheat or rye.

Most plaits were available in coloured as well as natural straw, which would change in response to seasonal fashion trends. Some combined more than one colour to form contrasting patterns, as below. Hat plaits have a defined 'head', 'body' and 'foot'-the 'foot' normally overlapped by the head of the subsequent row, when sewn into a hat form.



British plaits using mixed colours



Two tone Four Strand Rustic

The plaits in this appendix indicate the substantial nature of the historic millinery plait industry as well as some of their aesthetic characteristics, such as ornate texture. I believe that more research is needed to re-discover the techniques and processes that were used to create these plaits, knowledge of which has largely died with the makers.



Appendix III: Patterns in Ugandan Mekeka



Mats in Kasota, Masaka District, 2011

This appendix records some Ugandan mekeka plaits photographed during six fields trips to Uganda between 2007 and 2011: in Kampala and Jinja; in Bubutya, Kangulumira and Nkagwa in the south-east; and in Kyotera, Kasota and Kalisizo in the south-west. Wherever possible, I have recorded the names of patterns, although these vary slightly from district to district, and even from person to person. Some pattern names were given in Luganda and others in Lusoga, although there are overlaps.



Kawundo (bat), Nkagwa 2010



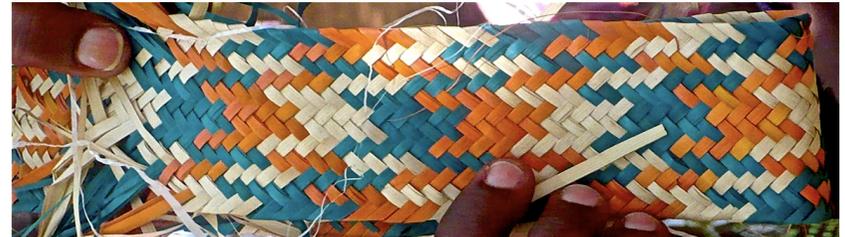
Kalanamye, Kangulumira 2010



Kawundo, Kangulumira 2010



Kalanamye, Kangulumira 2010



Kawundo, Kangulumira 2010



Name unknown, Kangulumira 2010



Kitenge (pattern developed from a garment) Kangulumira 2010



Kitenge, Kangulumira 2010



Kalandama (something that is straight), Bubutya 2010



Kalanamye, Kasota 2011



Jiri- can be made with 2 or 3 colours, Kasota 2011
Passed from generation to generation



Name unknown Jinja 2010 (orange made with 'colour plant')



Name unknown, Kasubi Tombs, Kampala 2009



Name unknown, Kyotera 2011



Name unknown, Kasota 2011



Name unknown, Kasubi Tombs, Kampala 2009



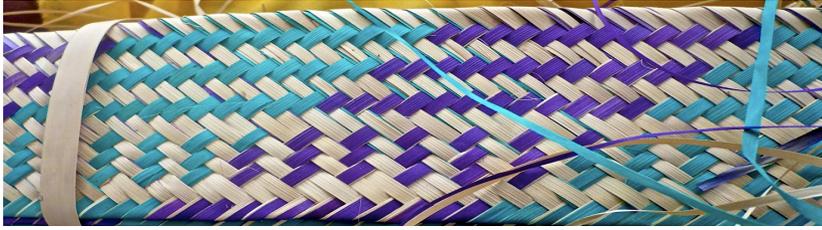
Name unknown, Kasota 2011



Name unknown, Kasubi Tobs, Kampala 2009



Name unknown, Jinja, 2010



Ziringiti (something that is straight) Bubutya 2010



'Zigzag', Bubutya 2011



Kagilisi (drinking glasses), Bubutya 2010 – 3 colour



Kaguudo (stripes going down) Bubutya 2011



Munyenyeye (star), Bubutya 2010



Kagilisi, Bubutya 2009 – 2 colour



'Box', Kangulumira 2010



Pattern like *Kagilisi*, but introducing different colours in stages, Kangulumira 2010



Tilapia (Fish bones), Kangulumira 2010



'Zigzag', Kangulumira 2010



'Tents' (missionaries'tents), Kangulumira 2010



Kaginta, Kalisizo 2011



'The Nile', Kasota 2011



Mwetoloore (diamond and 3 eyes), Kalisizo 2011



'The Nile', Kalisizo 2011



Di (abbreviation of 'diamond'), Kalisizo 2011



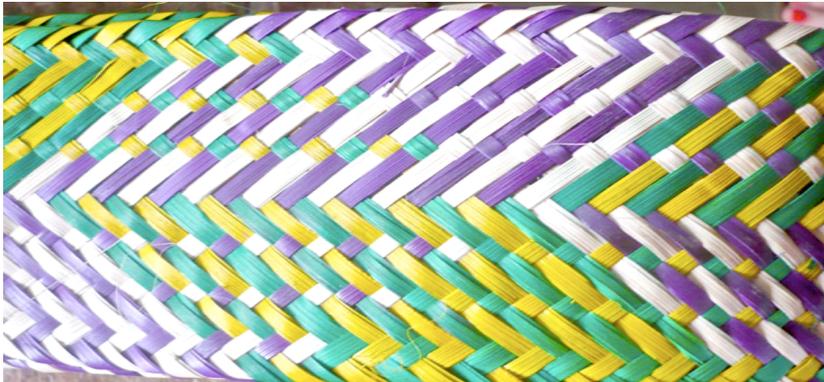
'Missionaries'tents, Jinja 2010



'V', Kalisizo 2011



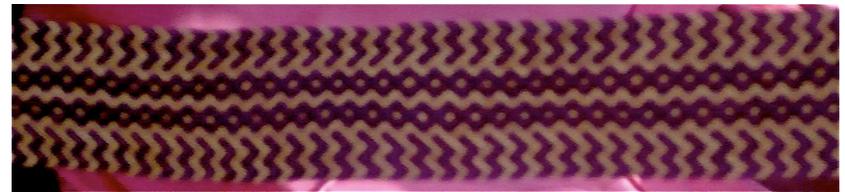
Kepe (stripes on policemen's sleeves), Kangulumira 2010



Kasobi (makers don't know it's meaning) Kasota 2011



Munyenyeye, Bubutya 2009



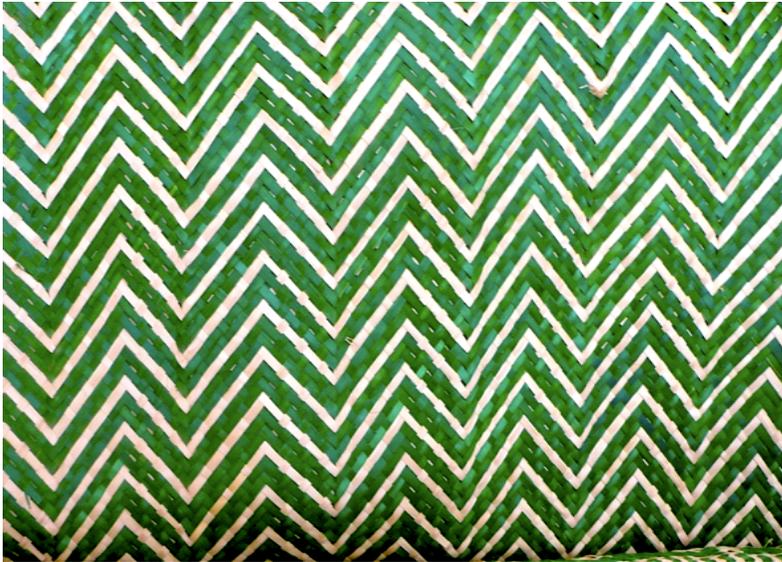
'Railroad tracks', Nkagwa 2010



Omutuma (Heart), Nkagwa 2010



Kamunana (Figure 8), Kalisizo 2011



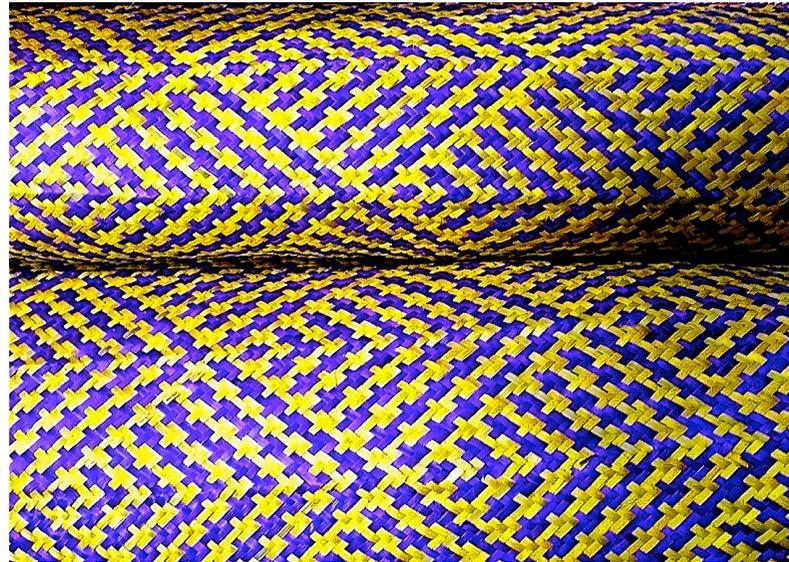
Kepe, Nkagwa 2010



'Railroad tracks'



Name unknown, Kasota 2011



Kalanamyé (??), Kasota 2011



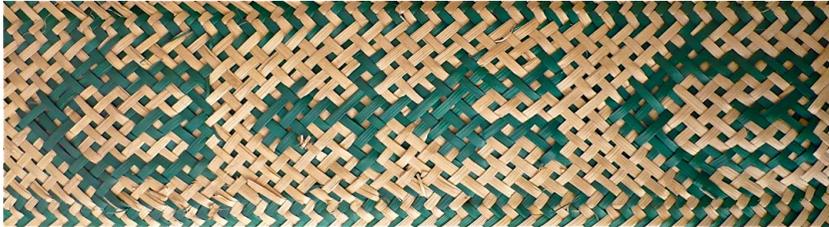
Plait with text, Kalisizo 2011



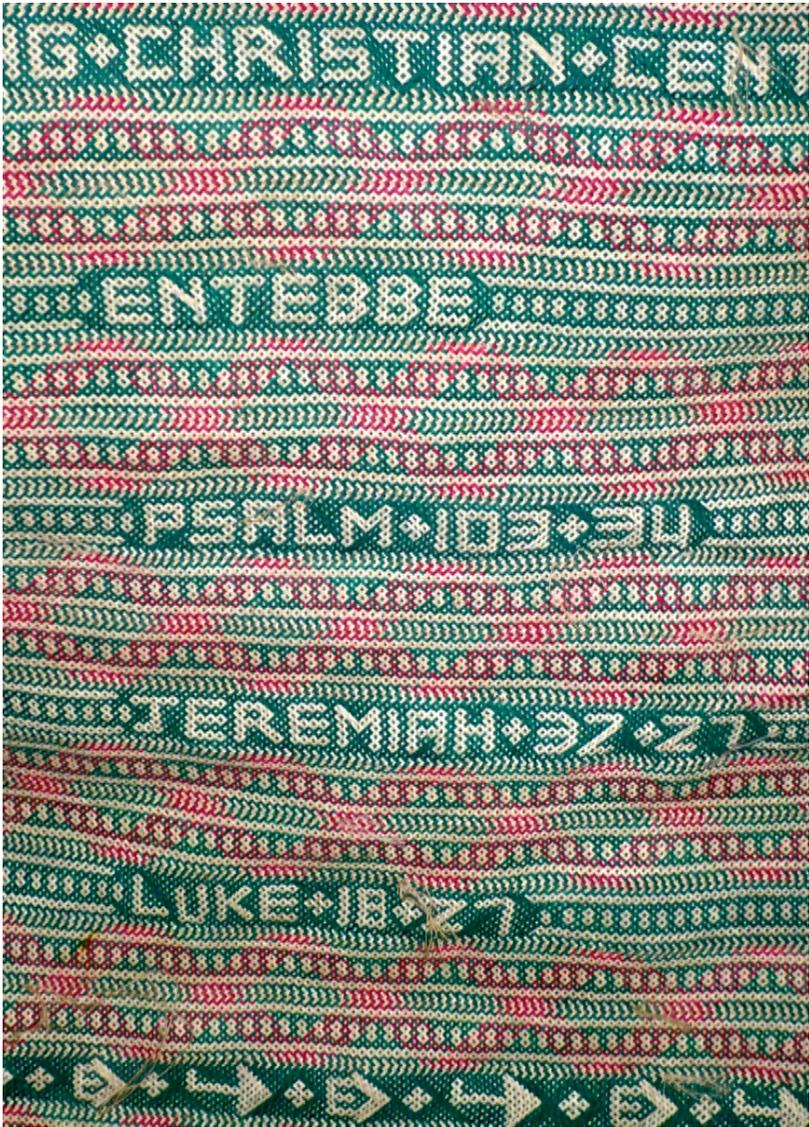
Plait with motifs, Kalisizo 2011



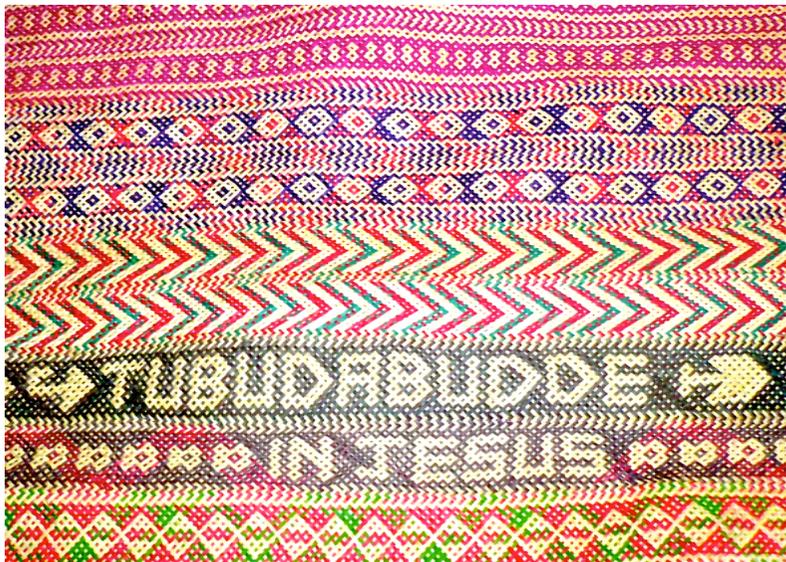
Plait with text, Kalisizo 2011



Plait with motifs, Masaka 2011



Mat with bible references plaited in, Kalisizo 2011



Mat with text and prayers plaited in, Kalisizo 2011



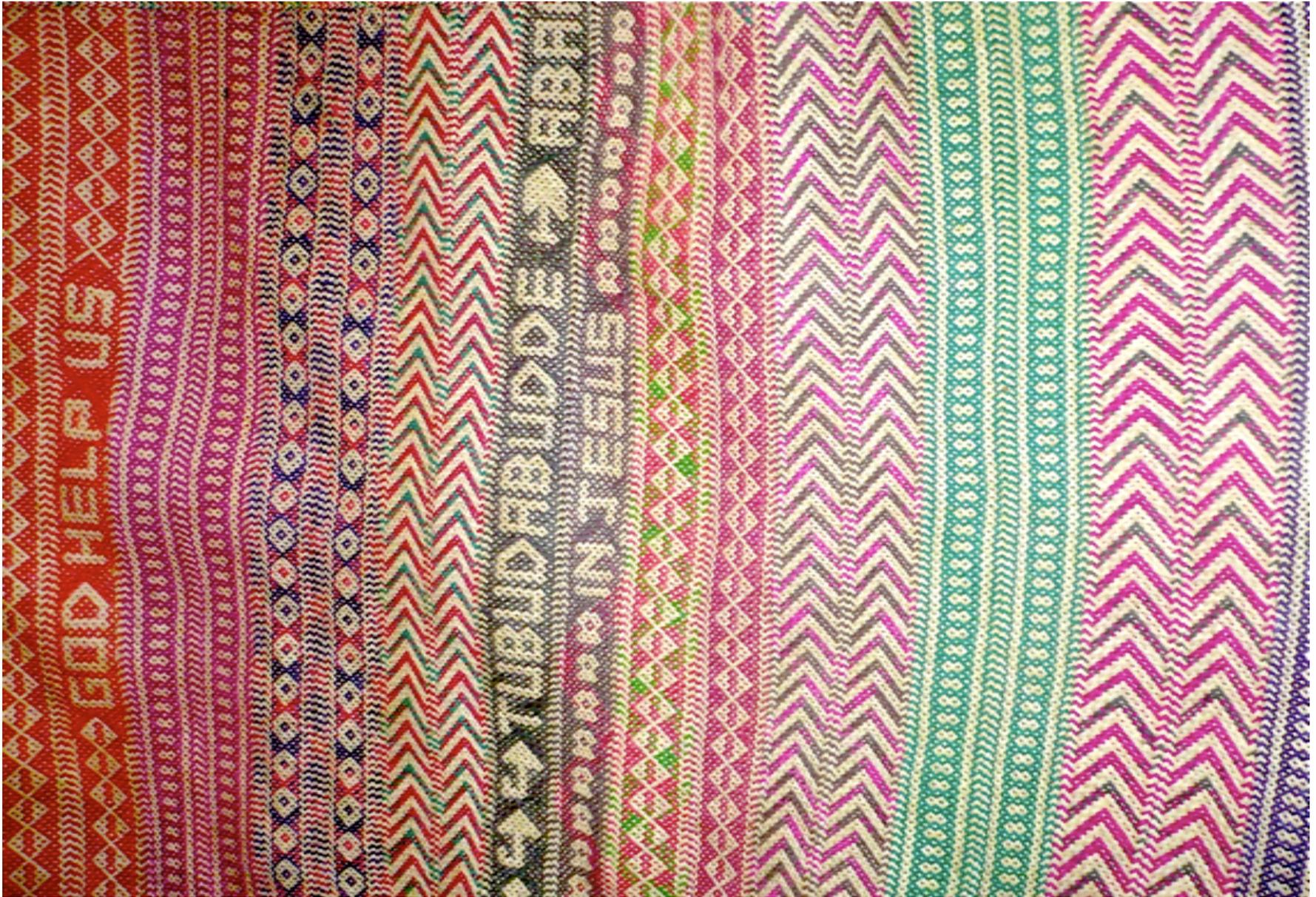
Mat with multiple patterns, Kalisizo 2011



Mat with multiple patterns, Kalisizo 2011



Mat with text and bible references, Kalisizo 2011



Mat with prayers and mutple patterns, Kalisizo 2011



Mat with text, possibly a wedding gift, Kampala 2009



Mat with crucifix motif, Nkagwa 2010



Mat with maker's name plaited throughout, Kasota 2011



Mat with figures and huts plaited in, near Masaka 2011



Strips of plait, waiting to be assembled into a mat, Kalisizo 2011 (note airplane motif towards bottom of image)



Plait in progress, showing reverse side, Kalisizo 2011



Rolls of plait waiting to be stitched, Kangulumira 2010



Roll of plain, folded plait for edging mats, Kasota 2011



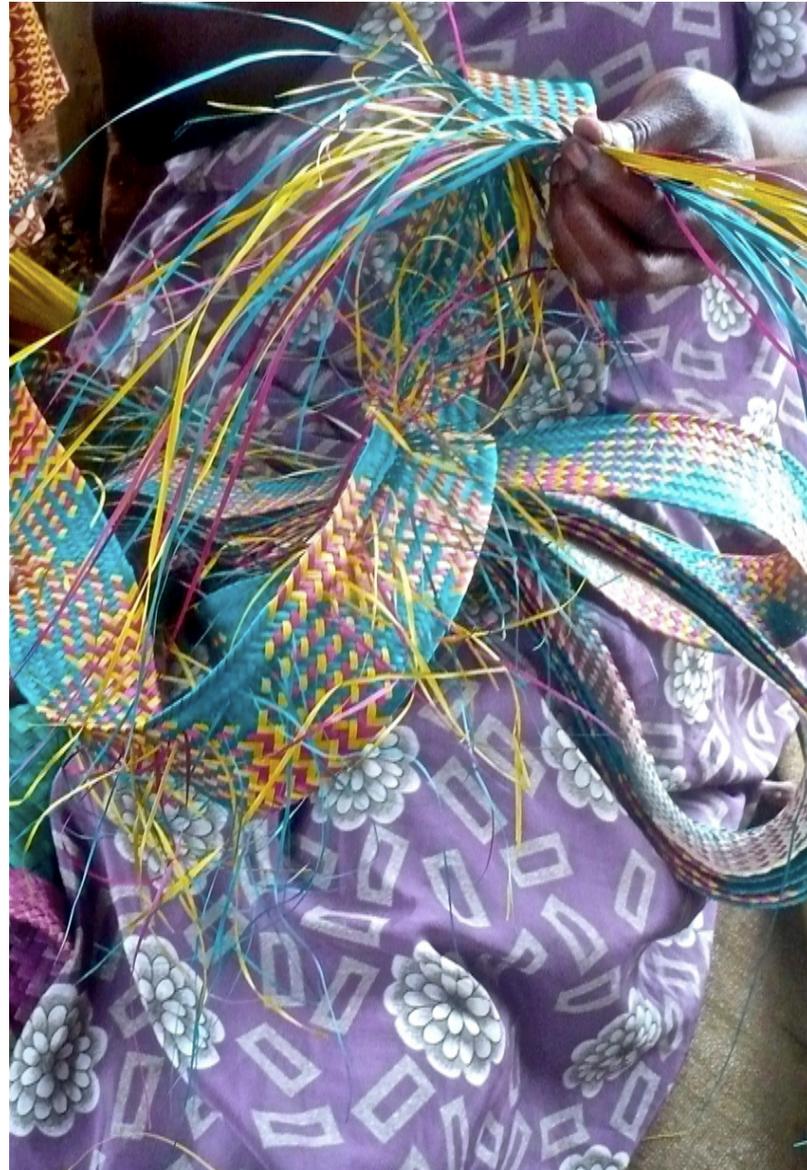
Rolls of plait waiting to be assembled, Kalisizo 2011



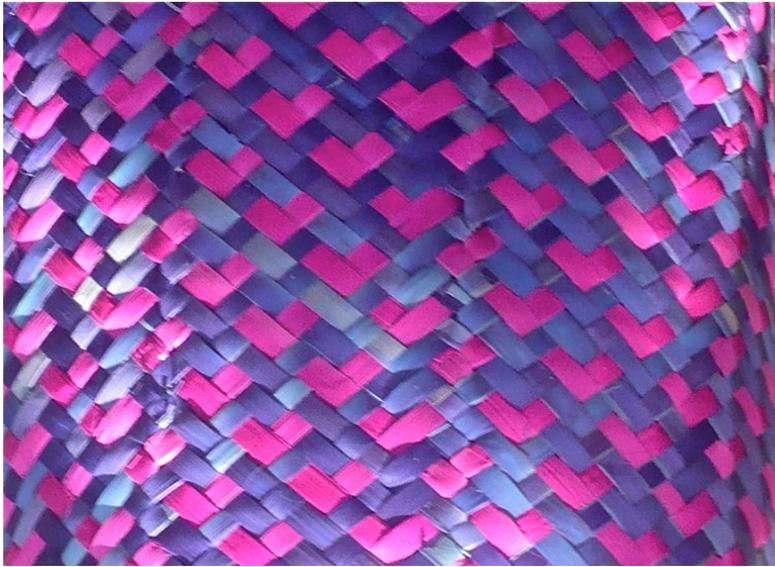
Roll of plait waiting to be assembled, Kasota 2011



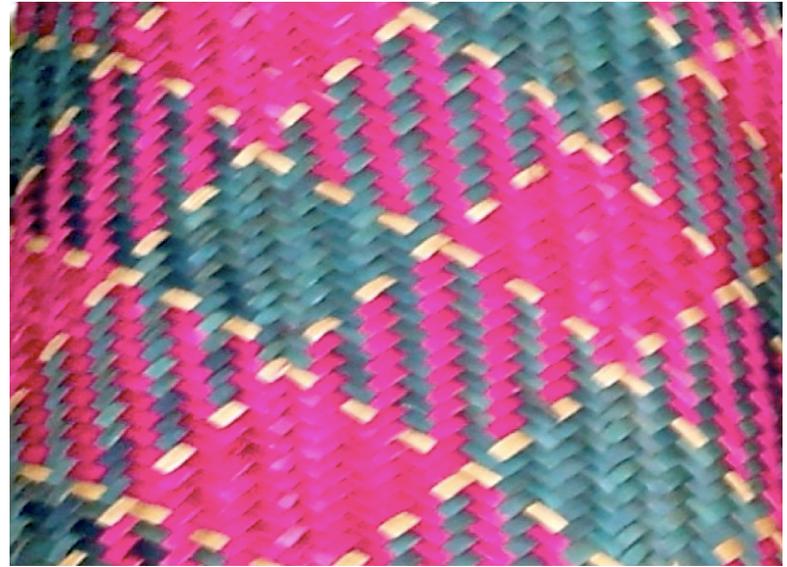
Dip-dyed plait sewn into mat, Nkagwa 2010



Plait in progress, some debate about name, Nkagwa 2010



Bulange (tiles on roof of king's palace), Kangulumira 2010



'Check' pattern, Kangulumira 2010



Mats in craft shop in Jinja, 2007



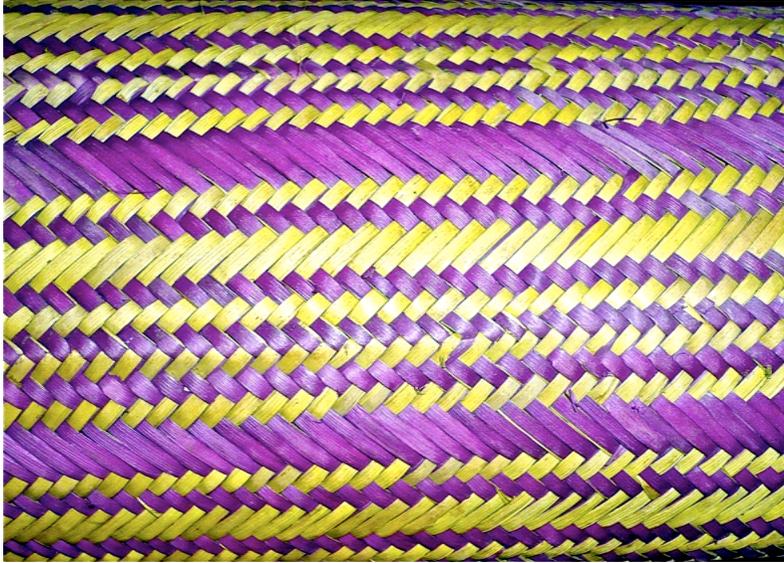
Mats in craft shop in Jinja, 2007



Mat with text, a commission, Masaka 2011



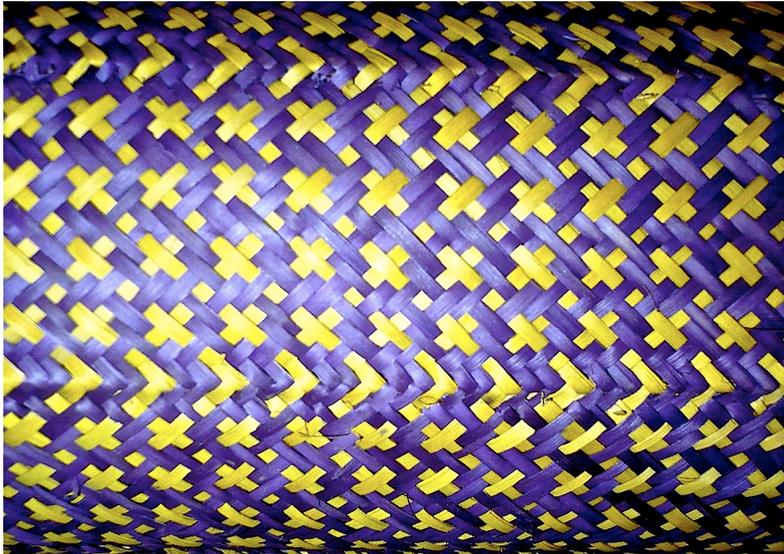
Mat with text, Masaka 2011



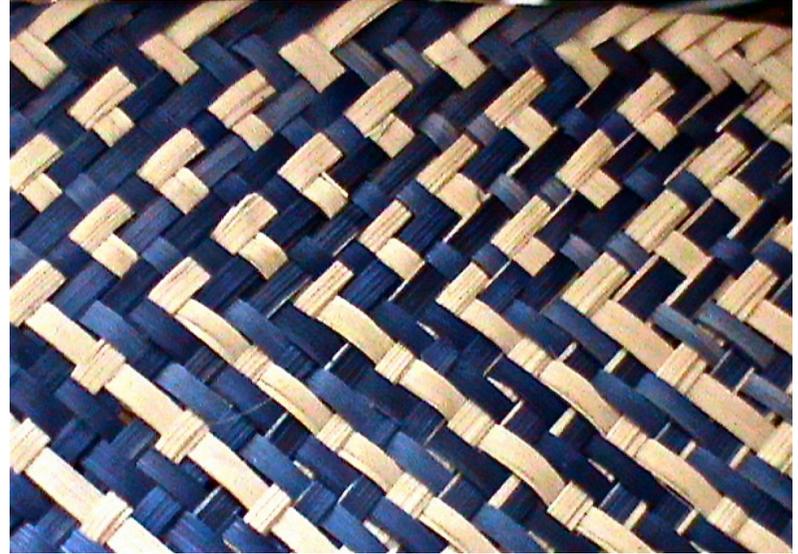
Kasota 2011



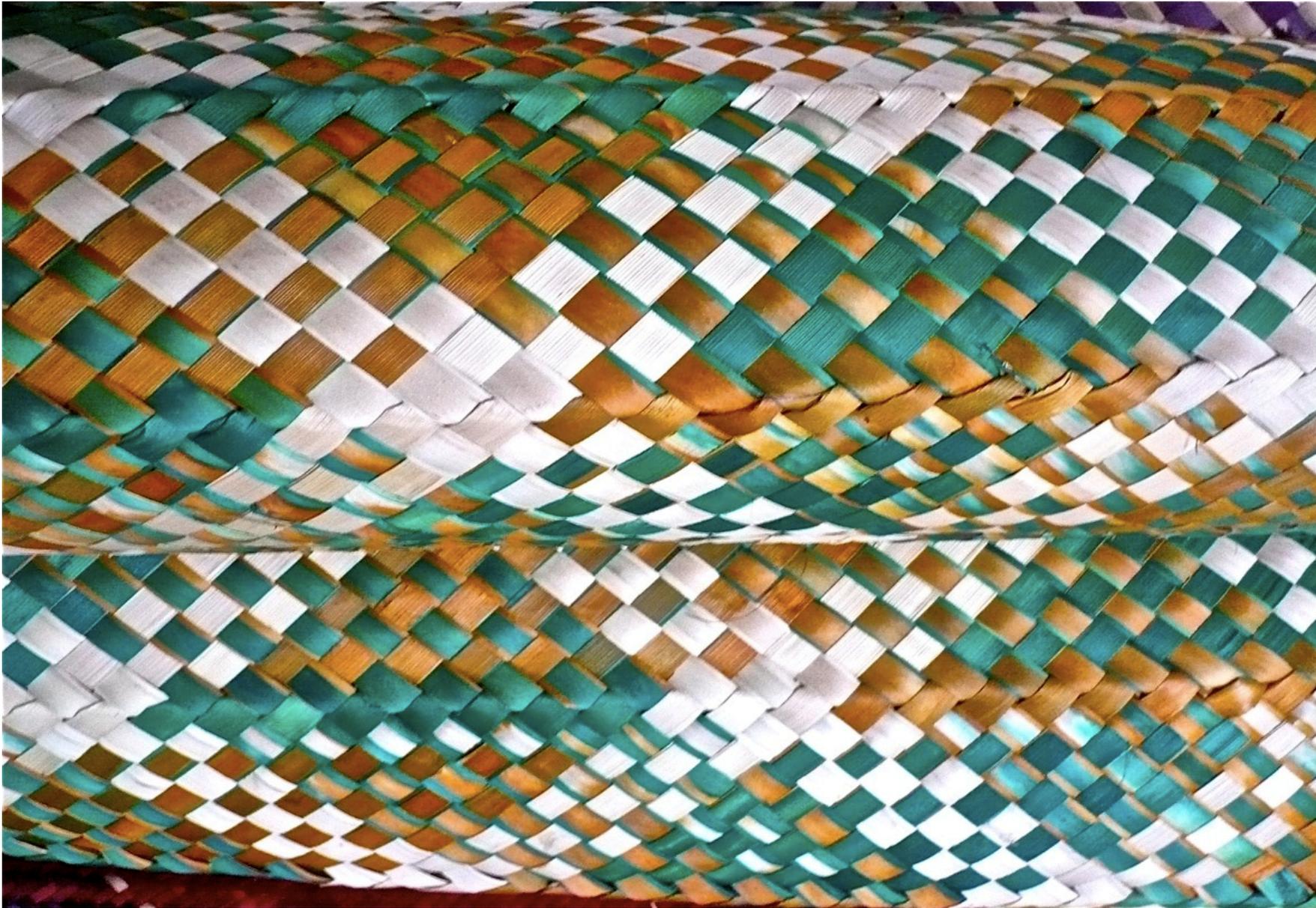
Dr Catherine Gombe's sample, Kyambogo 2011



Kamunyenye (star) Kalisizo 2011



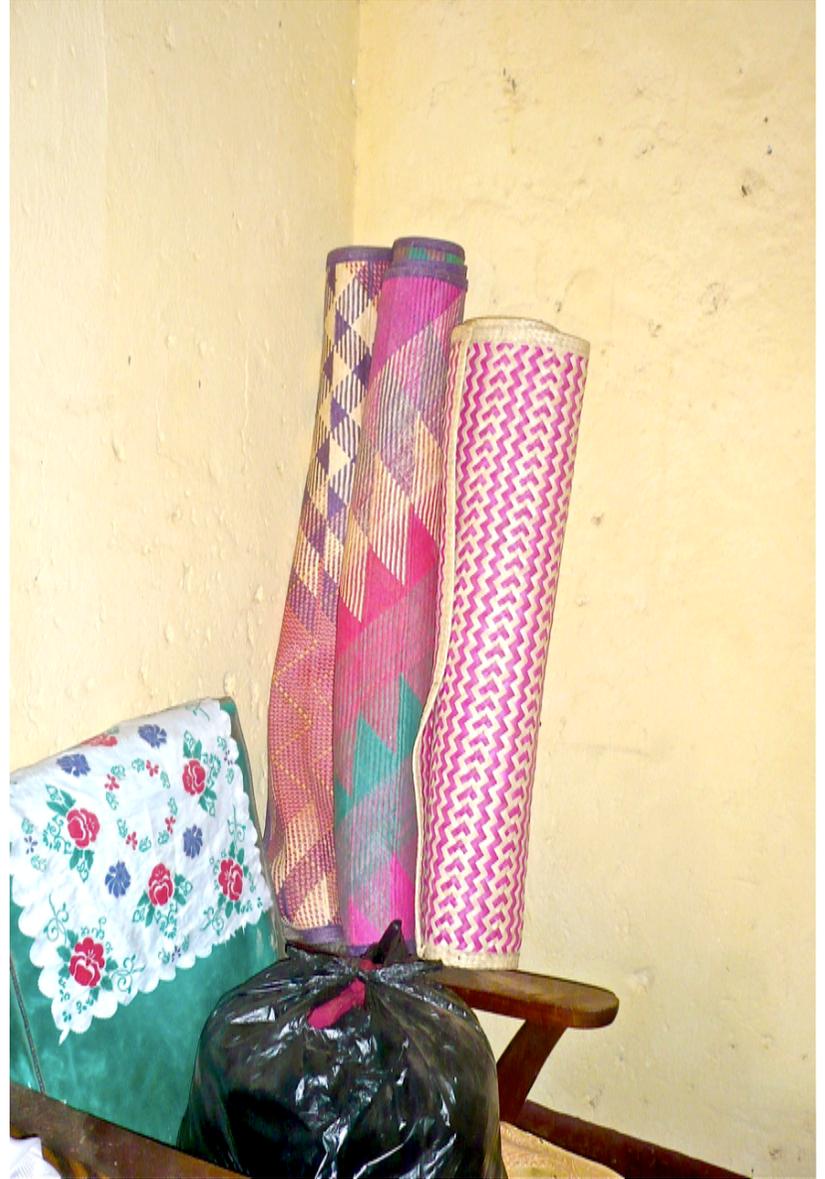
Dr Catherine Gombe's sample, Kyambogo 2011



Chachi –over 1 under 1. A simple, coarser plait for general domestic functions. Kaasota 2011



Mats in private home, Kasota 2011



Mats in private home, Kalisizo 2011



Mats in private home, Kasota 2011



Mats in private home, Kalisizo 2011

While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, sometimes the same names have been given for very different plaits. *Kalanamyé*, for example, has been applied to a number of patterns, from zigzag to those that look like others called *kitenge*. The number of colours introduced can also transform the appearance of plaits of any given pattern.

The group at Kalisizo were particularly proficient, able to make plaits of great complexity, and claimed that they could work out how to create any motif in plait. Some of their plaits were very similar to those produced in Tanzania, as part of Swahili culture, where different patterns are mixed within the same mat. Text has been plaited in Swahili mats for hundreds of years, although normally of Arabic script.

The plaits recorded in this appendix represent a small fraction of those produced in Uganda. The relationship between the patterns and techniques used in Uganda and those of Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique is of interest. I am convinced that more research is needed into the origins of these processes, as well as further documentation of the patterns and their formulas, in order to ensure their survival for future generations.



Mat bought in Jinja but made in Masaka, 2009

Appendix IV: Pidgin Plaits

This appendix records the design and development of my plaits, from sampling and experimentation in London through to their realisation in Uganda. My aim was to create a series of textural plaits for use in millinery and accessories to be made in Uganda. These plaits needed to offer different aesthetic qualities to millinery materials currently available and to be ethically and sustainably produced. I was particularly keen to develop textural effects within the plaits, as an alternative to the relative smoothness of contemporary 'straw' millinery materials such as sinamay, pinok-pok, parasisal and panama. This also reflected my own aesthetic preference for surface texture.

I learned to plait from Main's *Swiss Straw Work* (2003) in 2006. Three years later the NAWW kindly donated a copy of their *Plait Directory* (1998) to me, containing a series of plaiting techniques used in the US. These books have been invaluable in helping me to understand how certain effects are created. However, the knowledge of how to create many of the historical plaits for the millinery industry has been lost. Through sampling and experimentation, trying to recreate various patterns, I found many to be very complex and time-consuming to produce. Some were difficult to achieve in palm leaves as opposed to wheat straw which comes from the stalk of the wheat), as they require a fibre of greater body. Multiple layers of palm leaves, worked together to give a firmer fibre, were tricky to control when forming intricate loops or other raised, textural effects. Two to three layers of split palm leaf were normally the maximum number that I used at any point in plaiting.

My plaits needed to be relatively narrow in order to be supple enough to curve into forms that related to the head. They needed to be thick enough not to be weak, but also able to be blocked with steam over a shape. The characteristic structure of millinery plaits was used for all the textural plaits that I developed: with a head, body and foot.

Later, after several field trips to Uganda, I became increasingly influenced by indigenous Ugandan patterned plaits and developed samples of some narrower versions that would work for western millinery. Although I felt hat pattern in a hat can restrict what it may be worn with, I am convinced that there is a lot more work to be done with both textural plaits and plaits with patterns (created by contrasting colours or materials). I document the samples to date in this appendix

Samples of traditional millinery plaits using palm leaves



4 Strand Rustic



10 Straw Diamond



11 Straw Raised Diamond



Expanded Single Batswing



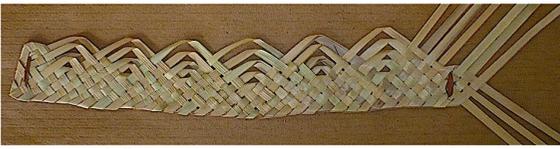
3 Straw Rick Rack



13 Straw Waves/Finchingfield Diamond



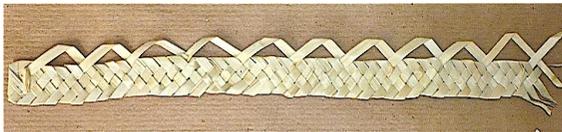
Single Batswing



Paddock?



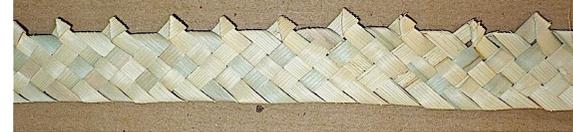
Twist



Dunstable with One Floater



Dunstable with 4 Floaters on one side

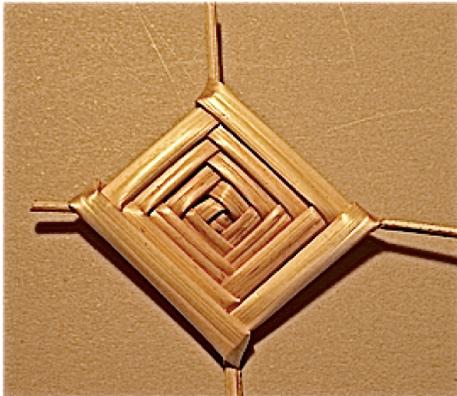


Purl

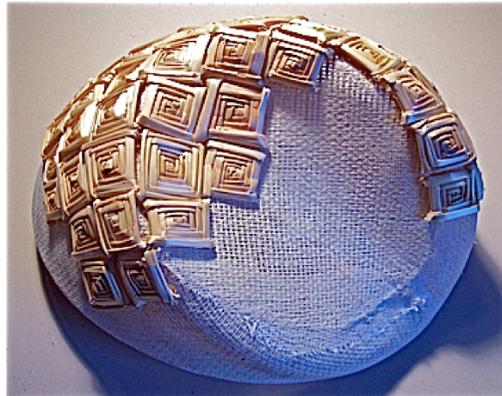
My own plaits and textures, developed through experimentation

My first experiments began by trying out Swiss strawcraft techniques, starting with the 'God's eye' motif. I have since seen this technique used by several very different cultures, for example American Indian, Mayan and Ugandan. I have concluded that, to some extent, there are certain techniques and motifs that are a natural or easily discovered way of working with strands of matter and that this is one of them.

God's Eye



God's eye motif in wheat straw



God's eye motif on sarterie base



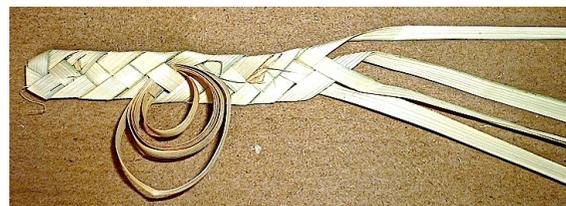
Dyed palm God's eyes on canvas base

In dyed, split palm leaves (right), individual motifs were made, by wrapping splints of palm leaves around small crosses of wire, then attached to a blocked base of sarterie. This was a very time-consuming process that would probably not be commercially viable.

Watch Spring



'Watch spring'



Watch spring inserted in basic plait



Sample of watch spring plait stitched up



Watch springs joined with thread



Watch springs joined with coiled copper telephone wire

The watch spring motif was easy to make in wheat straw and in palm. I liked the texture it created when assembled by itself or integrated in a plait. It was time-consuming however, and took a lot of fiddling to hide the join in each spring, so I decided against offering it in the range of plaits at that time.



Ruth working 'watch springs into plait, with colour
November 2007



Some 'watch springs' joined to one another –
a jewellery idea we tried, November 2008



Monika with 'watch springs'
November 2008

Plaits with twists

I tried a number of variations of plaits with a twist at one edge, inspired by some very textural New Brunswick basketry that I saw. The first one I developed later became Plait No 2 for the Bushfire group. I later found a very similar plait called a Tory Twist, historically produced in Nova Scotia. It felt very natural and easy to produce, with a good rhythm of one twist every fourth turning of the edge.



Plait No 2, with twist on every fourth edge-turn



Plait No



Loop plait (No. 3) coils easily to form hat shapes

The more looped, twisted plait (left) gives a very different appearance and texture to any other millinery materials available at this time. It is easy to hand-stitch into a variety of shapes. I initially made the loops by introducing a strand to the plait formed from several very fine, discarded splints of palm leaf – often the spines of the leaves.

The group in Uganda simplified it by using a regular splint of palm to make the loops, deciding it was too fiddly to use the finer strips as one.



First version of Plait No 3, using fine shreds of palm leaf that are normally discarded



Second version with larger loops



Plait No 3, with larger looped twists in basic plait- finer shreds ignored by the Bushfire group



Double row of twisted loops in plait



Close up of Plait No 3 stitched into hat brim shape

The double looped plait, bottom left, is one I plan to teach the Bushfire group at some point. It is fiddlier than Plait No 3, but seems to hold the loops quite well and is reasonably robust.

Cordonet Plaits

The 'cordonet' technique was used to create decorative, concertina-like cords that were integrated in some 19th century millinery plaits. I developed a two-stranded version that grew out plaits and was worked for various lengths before re-integrating them into the main plait.



First attempt at cordonet on edge of plait



Cordonet coming from centre of plait



Short cordonets every fourth edge turn



Longer, scrolling cordonets every fourth turn



Cordonets starting on one edge, re-integrated on the other



Alternates of small cordonets with floaters



Lovisa's plait with cordonet, November 2009

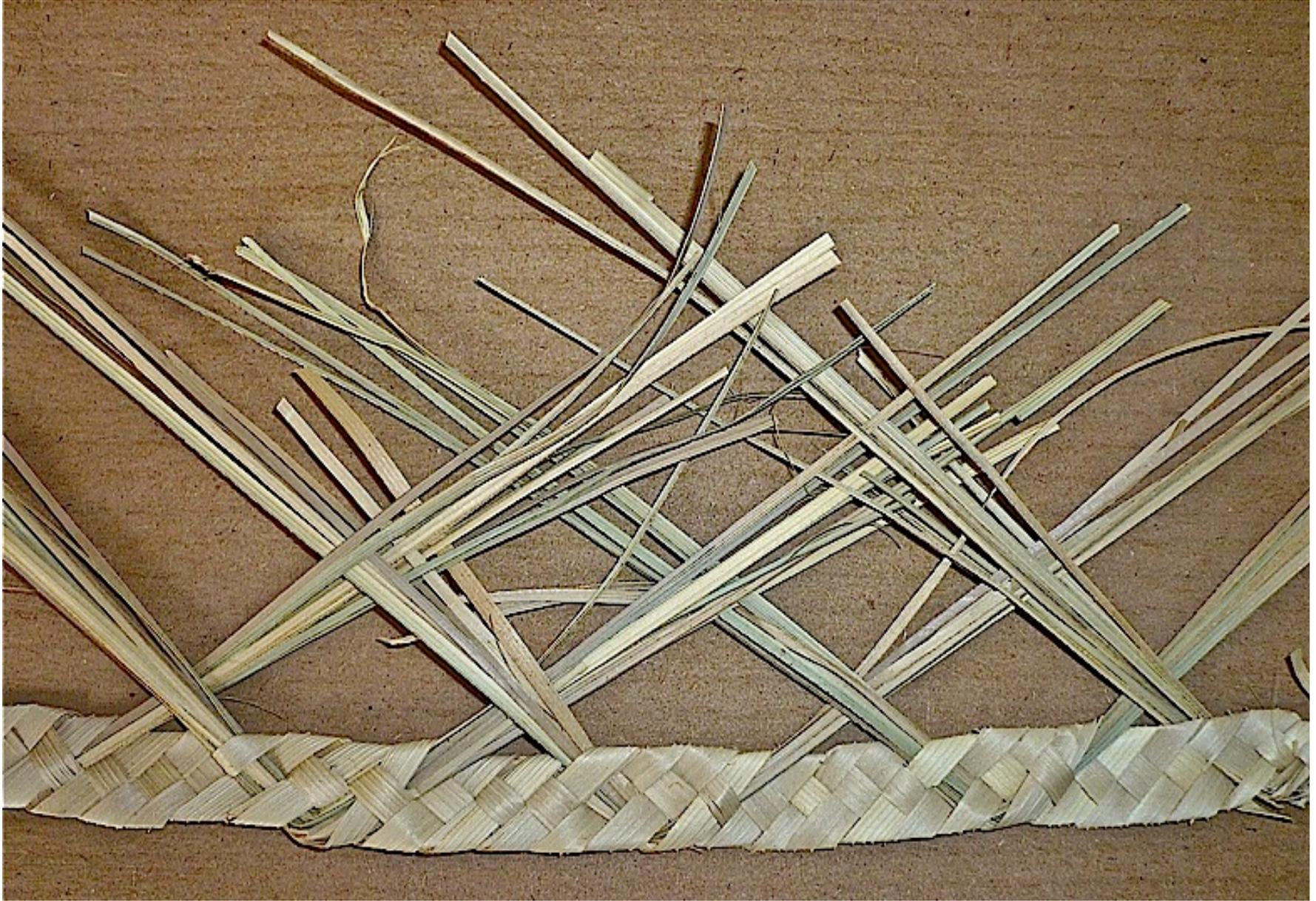


Tolofisa's cordonet plait

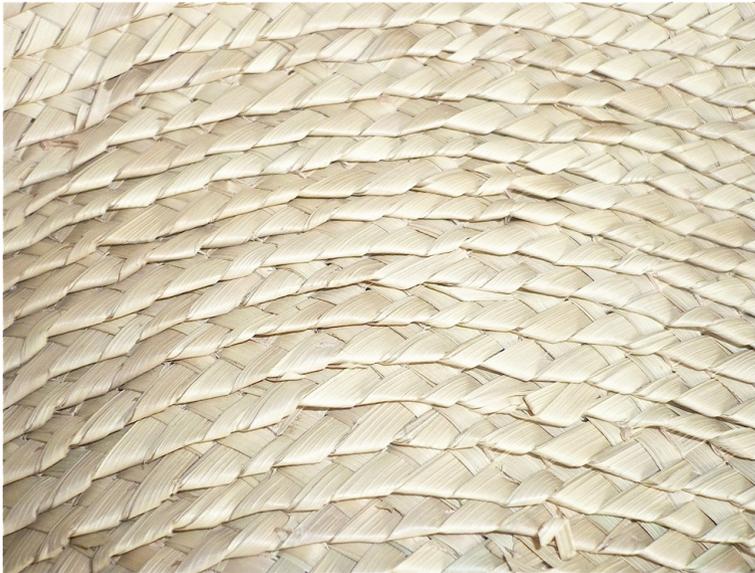


Alternating cordonet and floaters, 2009

The longer lengths of cordonet, if re-integrated after only a few turns of the edge, would curl and form a scrolling effect. Shorter lengths would give little punctuations of texture along the plait's edge. I felt the last sample, with the alternating cordonets and floaters (above: bottom right), was the most successful and could easily envision its use in millinery. However in palm, which is more fragile than wheat straw, the fine strips of leaf can easily tear when folding over one another to form the cordonet, so I decided not to pursue this with the group, although I did go through it with them once to see how they got on.



Plait with strips of discarded palm woven through, with their ends allowed to merge and splay out and regular intervals, 2009



Underside of Plait no. 3 when stitched up



Tip of hat in Plait no. 1, sides and brim of Plait no. 3



Combinations of Plaits 1, 2 and 3



Combinations of Plaits 1, 2 and 3



Rick-rack plait



Four strand rustic (Plait no. 1), dyed with annatto

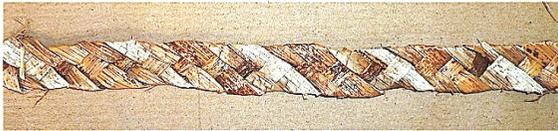


Plait no. 1 in 'black'



Plait no. 1 in 'black' stitched into tip of hat

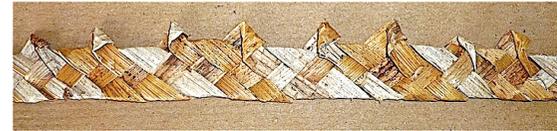
Experiments with banana (*matooke*) fibre



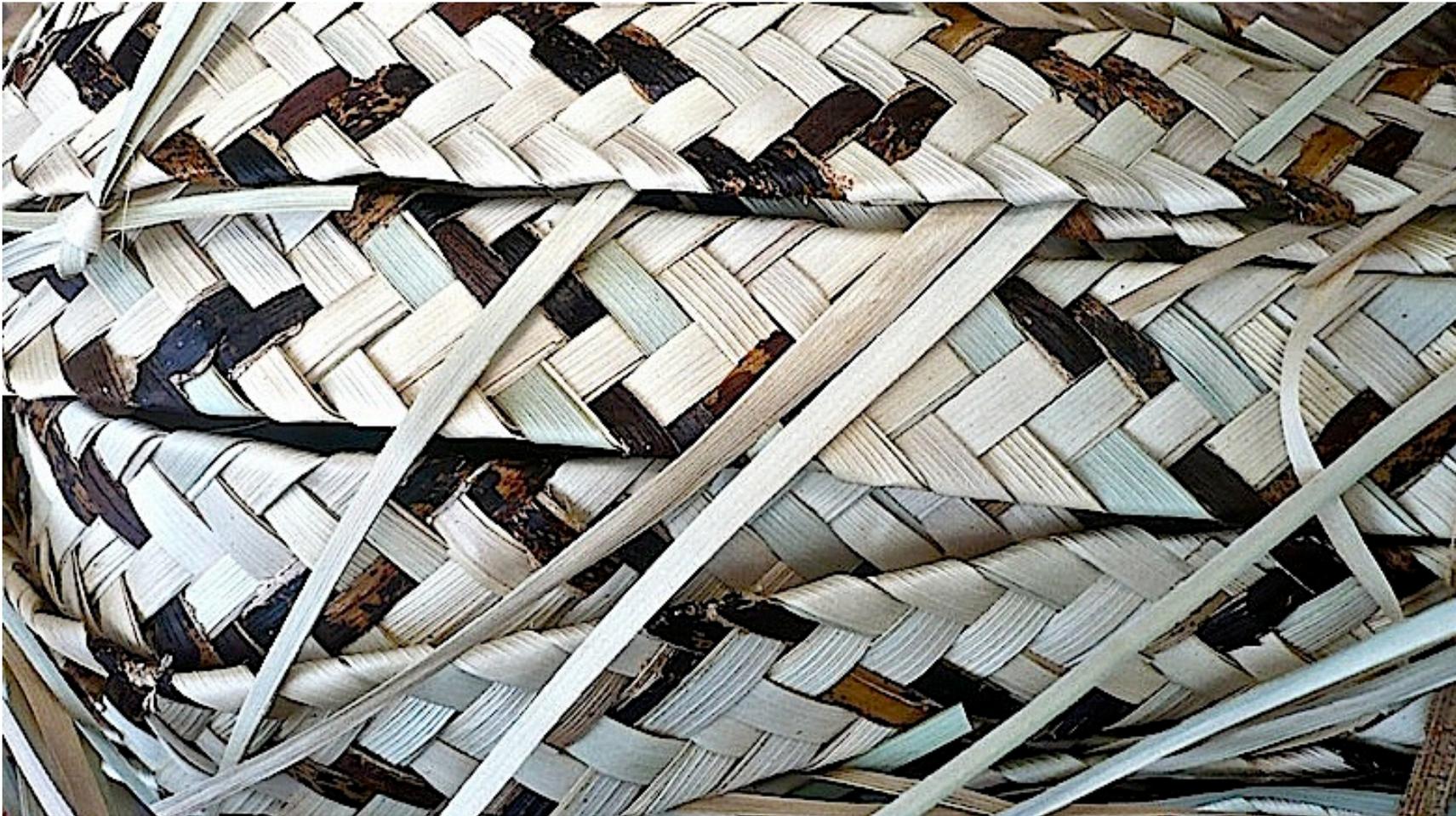
Plain four-end plait



Four-strand rustic (No 1)



Twist plait (No 2)



Plait made by Edith with matooke and palm

Experiments with plaits based on Ugandan mat patterns



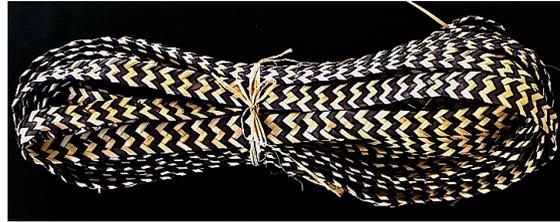


I started sampling for these plaits by trying to replicate a few basic patterns I found instructions for in Warner Dendel's *African Fabric Crafts* (1974) and Trowell's *African Arts and Crafts, Their Development in the School* (1937). However, as Ugandan plaits are usually much broader and thicker than is desirable for millinery, I tried to reduce the number of strands used while still creating patterns.



After research with mat-makers in Uganda I began to understand the different formulae for the plaits: how to organize contrasting colours to create different patterns. These samples have been realized through trial and error, by trying out different combinations and organisations of contrasting strands. Their individual recipes have been recorded in my sample books. They vary in width between 1.8 and 3.2 centimeters, as I believe plaits of more than 2.5 centimeters width to have much more limited applications for millinery, although they may work well for other accessories such as bags.

Narrower versions of Ugandan plaits, made by Bushfire group in 2011



The samples above were made by Ruth, Scovia and Edith in 2011. I asked whether it would be possible to make some narrower versions of the *mekeka* plaits. At first they were unsure, but I reminded them of the bookmarks we have made two years earlier that were – in effect – narrower patterned plaits. The patterns that can be created are more limited than those for *mekeka*, which are produced by using many more strands of palm, and thus give a greater range of options.



Plait by Damali, 2011



Plait by Damali, 2011



Plait bundles 2011



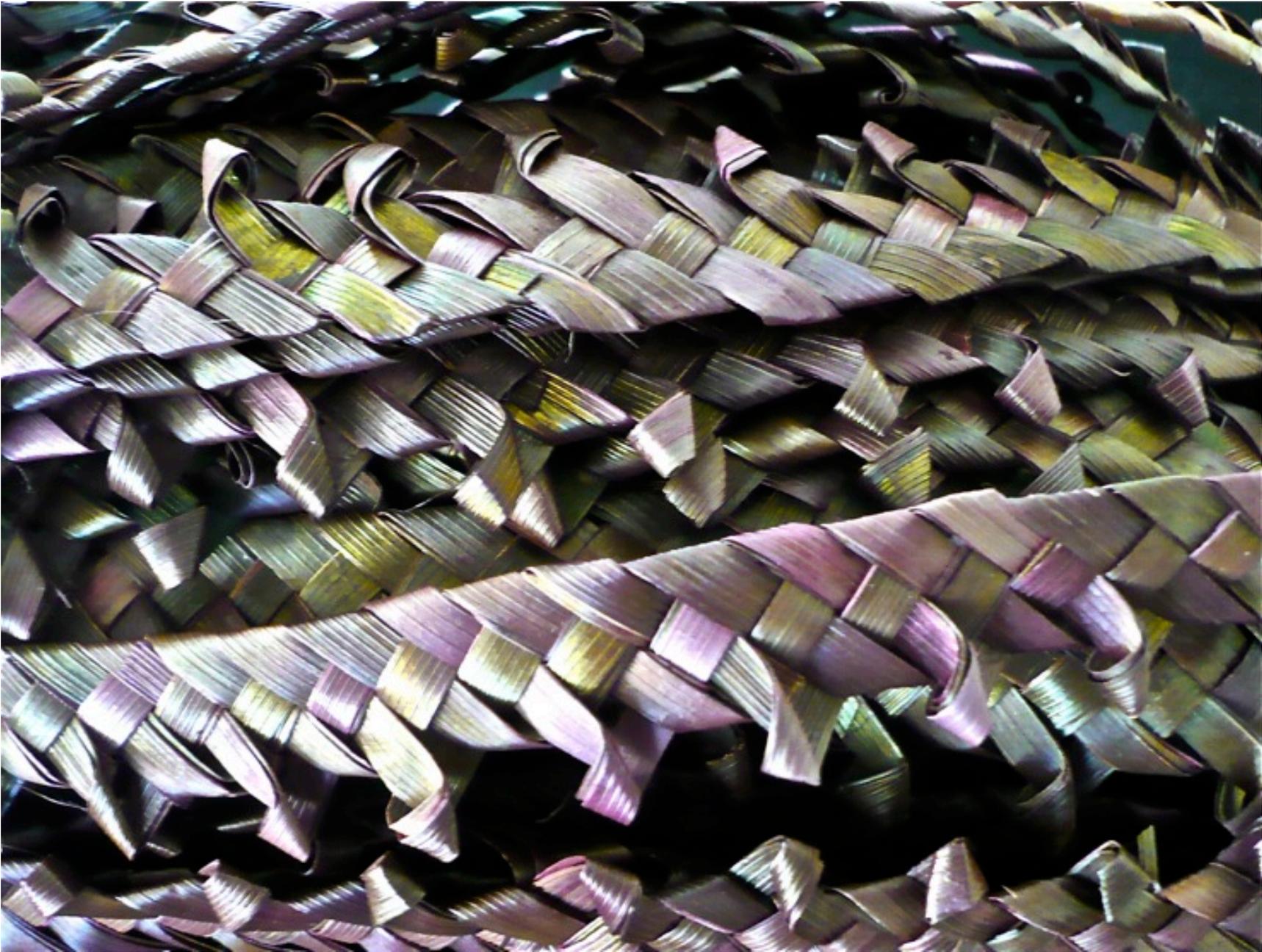
Plait bundles 2011



Plait bundles 2010



Plait bundles 2010



Plait bundle 2011 in 'black'

Appendix V: The Hat Designer of the Year Competition 2009

Introduction

The Hat Designer of the Year is an annual competition for experienced milliners established by The Hat Magazine. Previous winners include Karen Henriksen, Yvonne Bussemaker, Justin Smith, Ian Bennett, Yasmin Rivzi, Lolita Aguado, Eugenie van Oirshchot and Sarah Cant. Entrants must submit design drawings for two day or sports style hats, two occasion wear hats and two experimental/theatrical hats. Short-listed entrants make up one hat selected from each category, displayed at Première Classe trade fair in Paris, from which a panel of judges decides the winners. The first prize is a stand at Première Classe the following season, where the winner can show his or her own hat collection. Other prizes include equipment, materials and placements from industry professionals.

In January 2009 The Hat Magazine selected Pidgin Plait to be a compulsory component of all competition entries that year and decided the design brief. Their brief was:

‘To design a range of six hats in the new ‘plaited palm braid’ for a contemporary hat shop as part of their 2010 summer collection. The hats must be fashionable, wearable and, reflecting the African spirit, be in positive colours or colour combinations.’ (Denford Jan 2009:25)

Each hat could be made entirely or in part out of the plait. Applicants were sent samples of Plait 1 and Plait 2 in its natural colour. The plaits were to be dyed to match short-listed entrants’ designs at a later stage. Carole and Nigel Denford, editors of The Hat Magazine, and I were the sole judges at that point of the competition.

Over 40 entries were received by the deadline of March 30th 2009. From these we selected 12 semi-finalists and chose the three hats each would make. The range of design ideas submitted to meet the brief reflected the entrants’ perceptions of ‘the African spirit’. Some were very literal interpretations or regurgitations of the tropes of an ‘African’ aesthetic, others were more subtle and sophisticated.



Caroline Sinclair (Scotland)



Derya Delice (Turkey)



Jane Stoddart (Australia)



Janet Spriggs (England)



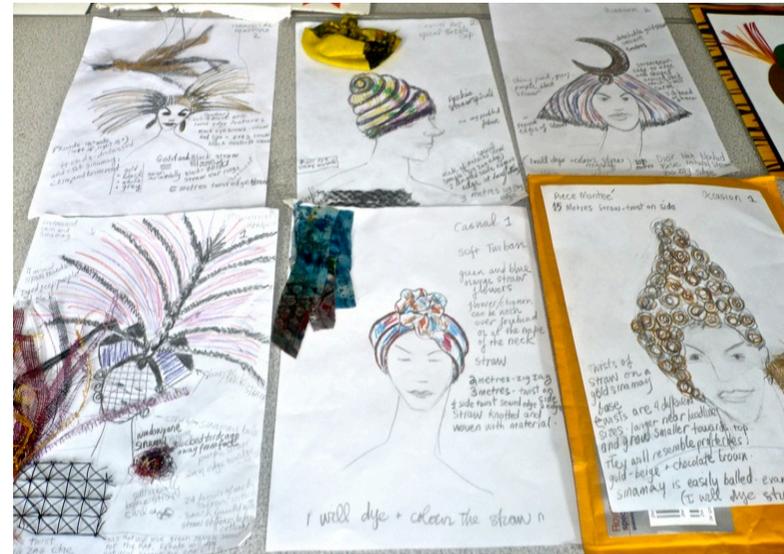
Sarah McAllister (England)



Entrant from Belgium



Hat Designer of the year entry 2009



Hat Designer of the year entry 2009



Hat Designer of the Year entry 2009



Hat Designer of the year entry 2009



Karen Henriksen (England)



Rachel Richardson (England)

Six finalists were chosen from the 12 semi-finalists by the judging team, who now included Sylvie Pourrat – sales director of Première Classe – at the Première Classe offices in Saint Germain, Paris. Those finalists were Caroline Sinclair (Scotland), Emmy Jaarsma (The Netherlands), Karen Henriksen (England), Paula Cooper (Scotland), Rachel Richardson (England), Svenja Otten (Germany). The judging was difficult. As straw plait has become less commonly used than in the past, many new or young milliners have little or no experience of using it. This was reflected in the quality of finish of some entries. However, working with the plait in a way that was free of preconceptions about how it should be used enabled some entrants to use it in creative and innovative ways.



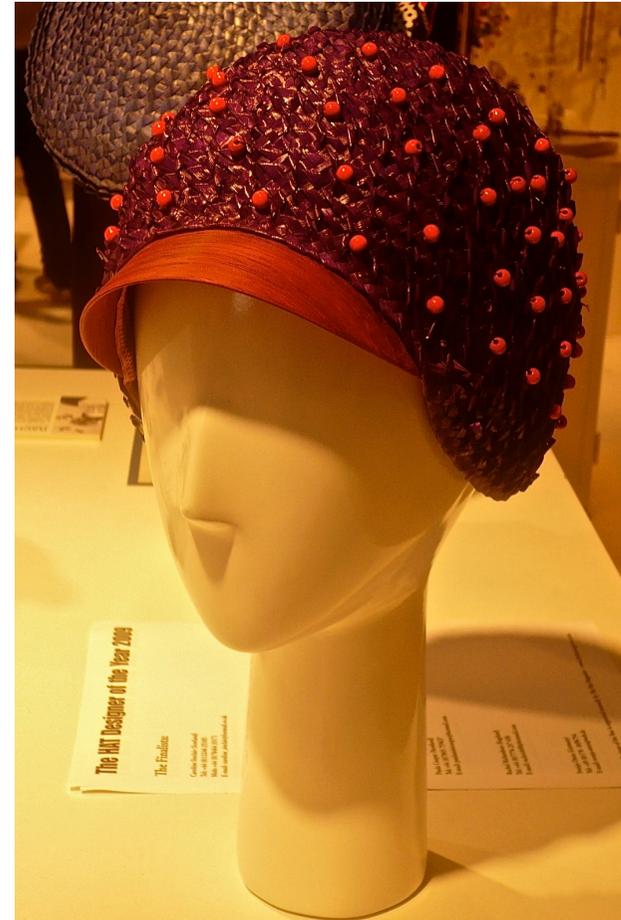
Emmy Jaarsma (3rd Prize-winner)



Emmy Jaarsma



Svenja Otten (Highly Commended)



Svenja Otten

Première Classe is a major international fashion trade fair at Porte de Versailles, Paris, attracting over 50,000 visitors from all over the world. Exhibitors include designers and manufacturers of jewellery, leather goods, shoes, bags, hats, belts and scarves, as well as garments. The exhibition was given an 'African' theme in 2009, with all publicity material incorporating images of models daubed in paint and bright colours, reflecting the project and the competition theme.



Caroline Sinclair (2nd Prize-winner)

Three hats from each of the six Hat Designer of the Year finalists were displayed in a prominent, central location within the exhibition, spread over two large console tables. A Ugandan basket was placed on a nearby table with business cards for the project and samples of the plait for people to take. A large placard gave information about the project and the women who make the plait.



Karen Henriksen (Highly Commended)



Karen Henriksen



Rachel Richardson (1st Prizewinner)



Rachel Richardson



The Hat Designer of the Year entries, 2009

There was a lot of interest in the plait from people visiting the stand. Some fed back their thoughts about it:

Some commercial millinery firms liked the plait but would have preferred a more supple fibre - like some raffia hats on show – as their customers wanted softer, more casual hats that could be stored easily. One business linked to the straw museum in Signa, Italy, expressed an interest in doing something there about the project.

Several firms expressed an interest in using the plait and wanted samples – details of colours, prices, delivery etc. These stressed that delivery must be firm. Another business that liked the plait wanted a guarantee that the width would be the same. They preferred the narrower width sample on display and wanted to see samples in a range of colours.

The largest millinery materials supplier in Europe was keen to stock the plait. They wanted samples in Plaits 1 and 2 in purple, pink, jade, natural, blue and black to use for making up samples to show customers. They were very happy about its ethical nature and wanted to push this with labelling, etc., agreeing that customers would pay a premium for this.

A Dutch business was very interested in some sort of collaboration linked to Cradle to Cradle. They were interested in recyclable aspects of hat materials but were not sure how recyclable the palm is as it breaks down fairly easily. More details were requested.

A well-known high fashion shoe label considered using the plait for a small range they do each season of natural items. They had previously produced a collection using African fabric, which was very successful. They like the ethical aspect.

Conclusion

The Hat Designer of the Year competition was an excellent opportunity to test the performance of the plait in a variety of styles and techniques. The lack of previous experience with plaited braid - common to most entrants - may have impacted on the quality of finish that some were able to achieve. However, their inexperience may have contributed to some innovative approaches to working with the plait.

In dyeing braid to the entrant's specifications, I learned that it is much better to dye the palm prior to plaiting: dyeing afterwards can cause the strands of palm leaf to shrink as they dry, revealing the pale strands underneath (untouched by dye). The plait sometimes shrunk as it dried too, becoming more open, less stable, and lattice-like. Soaking the plait in a solution of water and glycerine (approximately 20:1) caused the plait to plump up a bit after dyeing and to regain its subtle sheen; it also became more supple. Basic dye was used for the braid, as it gave the fastest and most consistent results, meaning that the braid could be submerged in dye solution for less time, and therefore be less likely to shrink.

While many milliners and some suppliers expressed interest in the braid, I decided not to pursue this until I could guarantee colours, rather than risk alienating customers. Work on resolving dye-processes is ongoing.



Appendix VI: Selected craft development actors in Uganda

Introduction

In Uganda some national and international organisations, charities and NGOs are at the forefront of establishing and supporting grassroots craft development projects. International organizations that support the craft sector in Uganda include the United Nations International Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Canadian Crafts Federation (CCF), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and many others. Ugandan organisations that support the crafts sector include Uganda Export Promotion Board (UEPB), Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Limited (UWEAL), AGOA Office, Uganda Small Scale Industries Association (USSIA), National Arts and Crafts Association of Uganda (NACAU), Private Sector Foundation Uganda (PSFU), (UEPB-ITC 2005:8) and the National Association of Women’s Organizations of Uganda (NAWOU).

Christian charities account for approximately 83% of global faith based charities (Charity Commission 2008: 3), with Christian Aid, World Vision, Tearfund, CAFOD and CARITAS being major actors in international aid programmes. There is a biblical imperative to love your neighbour, to give to those in need and to help widows and orphans; many of those attempting to ‘help’ in Uganda are motivated by faith. Development organisations that have been founded upon religious principles, and some other development actors, may communicate faith ideology in their language (Manji and O’Coill 2002: 573). For example Chambers’ use of ‘Putting the Last First’ and later the parable of the talents (Chambers 1983: 160); Christian Aid’s (2006) report title ‘Lifting the burden, weighting the rules’ suggests Matthew 11: 28-30⁹⁵ and the report itself contains verses from Isaiah 65 that describe the world as it is meant to be – free of poverty, sickness and conflict. That Uganda is a predominantly Christian country is reflected in the many Christian NGOs, missionaries and aid organisations operating there, as well as individuals acting in faith to help others.

In this appendix I describe some of the individuals and organisations that have made, or are making, a difference to craft development in Uganda. These interest me because they have made a deeper impact than merely buying, selling or investigating indigenous crafts: they

⁹⁵ Matthew 11: 28-30, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

have positively contributed (in varying degrees) to craft and social or cultural development within Uganda, and their commitment to this has been long term.

Uganda Crafts 2000

Uganda Crafts 2000 is a private sector company, originally established as an NGO in 1983 by an overseas UNICEF worker and a Ugandan craft trader. Uganda Crafts 2000 aims to support disabled and widowed women and their families through handicraft training and production and other income generating schemes such as crop growing initiatives. They export to Canada, Denmark, the UK and the US, with Ten Thousand Villages a regular customer. Producing crafts for overseas markets led to an increased emphasis being placed on quality and the adoption of fair trade principles. Uganda Crafts 2000 became a member of the International Federation of Alternative Trade (IFAT) in 2000. The demand for quality and volume – particularly in basketry - from export markets has affected the demographic of artisan participants over the years: more single mothers or those with less education are now employed than physically disabled artisans. The home retail market, operating through the Uganda Crafts 2000 shop in the Bombo Road, Kampala, was declining by 2004. However, some overseas volunteers helped to re-organize the shop and improve product design, branding and marketing. The company was brought to understand the importance of a local market, where goods that were in the wrong colour or size for export orders could be sold (www.ugandacrafts2000ltd.org).

BeadforLife

BeadforLife has successfully assisted thousands of Ugandan women to lift their families out of poverty through craft. It was founded in 2004 by US visitors to Uganda, who learned how to make paper beads and jewellery from Ugandan women, and then passed that knowledge to other groups of women, finding customers for their work. Candidates from slum areas of Kampala, or from other areas of extreme poverty around Uganda, are interviewed to decide the level of their need and the likelihood of them succeeding on the project before signing up for an eighteen-month programme. During the first fifteen months the women learn to make paper beads that are bought from them by BeadforLife. Robust quality systems are in place. Alongside this the women receive literacy, numeracy and money-management training and mentoring. For a further three months the women train in business skills and are given advice and support in setting up their own businesses (usually in areas such as import-export, agriculture or other small retail ventures unrelated to bead-making).

Training, initially provided in entrepreneurship and money-management, has broadened to include vocational areas such as agriculture, nursing and car mechanics. Access is given to business funds. Fairtrade prices are paid for beads and 100% of the profits are re-invested in community projects. Their goal is to ensure that all their members become self-sufficient within eighteen months of joining. Through BeadforLife's collaboration with Habitat for Humanity⁹⁶ bead-makers have been able to build new homes in a village outside Kampala. Within the first group to graduate 91% said that their housing situation had improved and 80% said that they had purchased new homes or made home improvements⁹⁷. BeadforLife owns a crafts shop in Colorado, US, and a well designed website, and it sells through stockists in the US and in Europe. BeadforLife parties in private homes help to promote the products and poverty awareness as well as education programmes designed for schools. Because of this, I believe they represent a good model for others.

Since BeadforLife started in 2004, paper beads have become ubiquitous in Uganda, being found in quantity in many craft shops and craft markets, and even in some supermarkets. There appears to be a steady demand for them amongst tourists, but the market must be approaching saturation. BeadforLife circumnavigates this problem by having a defined market within the US, and the women they work with may only sell to them for fifteen months before moving on to other ventures: bead making is a just a stepping stone.

While BeadsforLife's leadership team and advisors have a broad range of experience (in development, fundraising, project foundation and management, medicine, social entrepreneurship, finance and environmental issues), only one is listed as having technical experience, in soap-making – another branch of their operations in Uganda. There appears to be a skills gap in the design and technical experience that might help to develop alternative ways of using the beads for both local and overseas markets. New design approaches might help to increase sales and support the longer-term sustainability of the enterprise. Because of this, I believe that new groups attempting to break into this market must be able to diversify in order to compete effectively and that design is key to this.

Invisible Children

Another approach is taken by Invisible Children, a charity that supports victims of the war in the north of Uganda, many of whom are former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abductees. One of their initiatives is MEND bags: the bags are designed by a US designer for the US market,

⁹⁶ Habitat for Humanity brings together volunteers and communities in house-building projects. <http://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk>

⁹⁷ To read more about BeadforLife, visit <http://www.beadforlife.org/3affordable.html>

but made by young women who have been rescued from the LRA. Each bag has the name of the woman who made it on a label stitched inside. With the purchase of each bag, the owner may register online to see the maker's profile and receive updates about her. MEND's aim is to reconnect maker and consumer in recognition of the distance that mass-manufacturing processes have placed between them. Their innovative approach has proved popular in the US.

Uganda Reflex

Uganda Reflex is a registered UK charity, run on the ground by Ugandans, that was initially started in 2004. It works to support single parents in empowerment and self-employment, building support networks within the community and funding projects such as orphanages and schools. It works closely with the Single Parents Association of Uganda (SPAU), and the scope of its activities is broad, ranging from HIV/AIDS education, to training in chicken farming, pig farming, tailoring, candle-making and crafts. Crafts training is in mat making, basketry, tie-dyed fabrics, bead-making and card-making. For one month groups of single parents are trained in making processes and in the creative use of locally occurring materials. After this period they are given business advice and start-up capital.

Oasis Uganda

Oasis Uganda is part of the Oasis global network: a Christian charity that operates in 10 countries. They work to build community and enable people to experience the 'fullness of life'. Their activities include work in education, health and advocacy, as well as livelihood initiatives. Training is given in money-management and entrepreneurship, life skills, nutrition, family planning and life skills. Vocational training includes catering, hair-dressing, tailoring, and crafts (paper bead making). However, I believe there to be a pressing need for greater creativity and a more contemporary approach to the design of their crafts, which are sold through Jacob's Well. Perhaps as a result of this they have moved more into production for designers or businesses rather than selling their own goods directly to the public.

Ten Thousand Villages

Ten Thousand Villages is an alternative trade organisation (ATO) founded by Mennonites, with 180 storefronts in North America and an online store. They are one of the largest Fairtrade organizations in the world and a founding member of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO), purchasing artisanal crafts from 38 countries around the world, including Uganda. Founded in 1946 by Edna Ruth Byler, who began by selling artisanal crafts from the boot of her car, Ten Thousand Villages encourages artisans to use recycled or otherwise environmentally

sustainable materials and processes. They also provide design training, through NAWOU (an umbrella NGO that provides support for approximately 50 groups of women artisans) and from Uganda Crafts 2000.

One Village

One Village is an ATO, established in 1979, that imports and retails artisanal crafts from many developing countries in Africa, South America and the Far East. In their shop in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, UK, limited quantities of many different craft items are carefully arranged in small groups: the uniqueness of the handmade object is a selling point. A clear mission statement⁹⁸ is prominently displayed, as well as information about the makers and their lives. The shop is well laid out, scented by the handmade soaps on sale, and stocks baskets and trays from Uganda. Wholesale and retail purchases can also be made through their online catalogue. One Village offers an eloquent critique of Fair Trade, aiming to go further by ensuring that working conditions and wages are fair throughout the production process, and by emphasising the importance of building and maintaining relationships with producers and of social justice⁹⁹.

Conclusion

The examples of BeadforLife and Invisible Children are given as particularly effective contemporary organisations that improve the social conditions of groups of artisans through education, trade and capacity building. Both organisations place some value upon design and product development as well as on training for the groups they work with. BeadforLife have so far achieved a great deal in Uganda and established a strong customer base overseas for their goods, but unless those products are further diversified, they may soon reach a limit. Within Uganda there are now competitors such as Mzuri Beads¹⁰⁰. Invisible Children's Mend project demonstrates an innovative approach to connecting makers to consumers that could serve as a model for other craft development initiatives.

⁹⁸ <http://www.onevillage.org/#why>

⁹⁹ For more about One Village's operating methodology, visit <http://onevillage.info/towards-fair-trade/>

¹⁰⁰ For more information on Mzuri Beads' activities, visit www.mzuribeads.com

LIST OF THOSE INVOLVED IN THE PIDGIN PLAIT PROJECT

Sam Kitilya	Pastor, establisher of Bushfire, helped to set up the project, organised transport to Jinja/Kampala
Eva Kitilya	Head of Uganda Family Resources Link, married to Sam, helps with orders
Sarah	House parent at Bushfire, interpreter with group
Ayesha	House parent at Bushfire, interpreter with group
Apollo	Pastor at Bushfire, interpreter with group
Rose	Headmistress of Bushfire school and organises the group's orders, checks quality
Catherine	House parent at Bushfire, interpreter with group, host
Willy	House parent at Bushfire, host, made <i>magadi</i> for me
Herith	Bushfire staff member, working on the farm, helped with dye experiments
Paul	House parent at Bushfire, driver on trips to Jinja/Kampala
Ben	Driver on trips to Jinja/Kampala, helped me interview a craft shop owner in Jinja
Mama Ruth	Chairperson of the group, group member
Mama Tolofisa	Treasurer of the group, group member
Mama Joyce	Vice Chairperson, group member
Edith	Group member
Lovinas	Group member
Scovia Nakasita	Group member
Apofya	Group member
Tapenansi	Group member
Damali	Group member
Scovia Timogibwe	Group member
Scovia Ngudo	Group member
Nuru	Group member
Araisa	Group member
Getulida	Group member

Lovisa	Group member
Zeulens	Group member
Robina	Former group member, helped with dye experiments
Ellie (Eleanor Cain)	Former designer for IndigoLime, accompanied me on two field trips
Richard Randall	Former general manager for IndigoLime, financial support of my expenses in Uganda (trips 4 and 5)
Molly	Organises Mothers of Hope, set up their craft shop in Jinja, helped me to learn more about <i>mekeka</i>

GLOSSARY

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council	Iganga	Town in south-eastern Uganda
ATO	Alternative Trade Organization	IndigoLime	UK-based accessory design agency
Baganda	One of the larger people groups in Uganda	ITC	International Trade Centre
Basoga	A people group in Uganda	Jinja	Town in south-eastern Uganda
Bugiri	Town in south-eastern Uganda, near Kenya	Kalisizo	Town and surrounding area in south-western Uganda
Bulange	Sub-county of Namutumba district, Uganda	Kampala	Capital of Uganda
Busoga	Kingdom in south-eastern Uganda	Kamuli	Area in south-eastern Uganda
CCF	Canadian Crafts Federation	Kangulumira	Village in south-eastern Uganda
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo	Kanzu	Long, shirt-like garment worn by men in Uganda
Ensansa	Palm used for plaiting (Lusoga)	Kasota	Area in south-western Uganda, near Masaka
FJ1	Field Journal 1	Kausia	Ancient Macedonian flat hat
FJ2	Field Journal 2	Kitenge	Printed African-style fabric
FJ3	Field Journal 3	Kyotera	Town in south-western Uganda
FJ4	Field Journal 4		
FJ5	Field Journal 5		
Gomesi	Traditional dress worn by women in Uganda		

LRA	Lord's Resistance Army	Obuso	Lusoga word for Raffia
Luganda	Language of the Baganda people	Petanus	Sun hat worn by Ancient Greeks and Romans
Lusoga	Language of the Basoga people		
Matooke	Green banana that is part fo staple diet in Uganda	UEPB	Uganda Export Promotion Board
		UGX	Ugandan Shilling
Mekeka	Ugandan plaited sleeping mats	UK	United Kingdom
MOH	Mothers of Hope- craft groups based in Jinja	UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
Muzungu	Ugandan name for white or lighter skinned person	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
NACAU	National Arts and Crafts Association of Uganda	UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
NAWOU	National Association of Women's Organizations of Uganda	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization	UNIDO	United Nations International Development Organization
Nkagwa	Name of a small village and district near Jinja		
USAID	Unites States Agency for International Development		
UWEAL	Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Limited		
US	United States		
USSIA	Uganda Small Scale Industries Association		
YWAM	Youth With A Mission – global Christian organization		

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The British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG, UK

Wardown Park, Old Bedford Road, Luton, LU2 7HA, UK

Kasubi Tombs, Kasubi, Kampala, Uganda

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Figure 2: authors adaptation of map of area of operations

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Figures 17-19: Makartgallery, Kampala

Figure 20: Illustrated London News, 1853, image of plaiters available from <http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk>

Figure 21: Painting of a plait school by George W. Brownlow, available from <http://www.wing-ops.org.uk/straw.html>

Figures 22-24: Author's own, taken with permission at Wardown Park Museum, Luton

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Figure 28: Leon Poirier and George Sprecht (1925), rights Elisofon Archive, Smithsonian Institute, found at australianmuseum.net.au

Figure 29-30: Carol Beckwith, found at <http://www.africantribal.livejournal.com>

Figure 31: Photographer unknown, in Sieber (1980:99)

Figure 32: Photographer unknown, found at <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/craft/basktech.html>

Figure 33: Photographer unknown, found at gazingthroughglassdarkly.blogspot.com

Figure 34: Carol Beckwith (1983:136)

Figure 35: Carol Beckwith (1983: 39)

Figure 36: Carol Beckwith (1983:33)

Figure 37: Angela Fisher (1996:253)

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Figure 69: Photographer unknown, found at <http://toocutemagazine.com>

Figure 70: Photographer unknown, found at <http://hautefashionafrica.com>

Figure 71: Left - photographer unknown, found at <http://curlytailanimals.wordpress.com>; middle – author's own; right – photographer unknown found at <http://hydroponiconline.com>

Figures 72-7: Author's own photos

Figure 78: Dominic Tchudin

Figure 79-80: Author's own

Figure 81: Dominic Tchudin