

A Strategy for Developing Local and Traditional Crafts by Marketing Local Arts and Crafts to Tourists: The Case of the Musa Heritage Gallery

A paper presented by Peter Musa, Director, Musa Heritage Gallery (Mus'Art) & Coordinator of the Collective Resources for the Arts and Talents Enrichment (CREATE) during the 6th Annual Conference of the International Network for Cultural Diversity (INCD), Dakar Senegal, 17 to 20 November, 2005.

Introduction

As preparations for the sixth INCD conference were in their final stages, in less than three weeks to be precise, surprisingly for me, I received an e-mail from Garry Neil, INCD Coordinator inviting me to join as a panelist in this workshop on Developing Local and Traditional Crafts. As I read his mail, I wondered why Garry had decided to involve me in this panel. Having started the Musa Heritage Gallery some nine years ago, as a private initiative with the aim of promoting and preserving the arts and crafts of the western grasslands of Cameroon, Garry considered me suitable for this panel. Though I was preparing to participate in this conference, I had no dreams of making a presentation. After all I said to myself, I cannot shy away from a forum that deals with the arts and crafts, else I would be considered a coward by Garry who had known me as far back as during INCD's founding meeting and 1st Conference in Santorini, Greece in September 2000. What else could I then do than to take upon the challenge and accept his invitation, though at short notice?

Before we proceed, it is important to know who is actually a tourist? A tourist can be defined as one who makes a tour or a sightseer. A tourist can be local, national or international. In this paper, my reference to the word tourist shall imply to the international context of the word. The first part of my presentation is a look at how Mus'Art markets local arts and crafts to tourists (non-Cameroonians or foreigners who visit the museum) while the second part is concerned with a strategy for developing local and traditional crafts.

How do we market local crafts to tourists?

Mus'Art is comprised of a permanent collection and a small souvenir shop to cater for the needs of visitors and tourists to the museum. Our marketing approach is therefore not like those of any other arts dealer or arts shop like the ones found in major shopping centers, airports and hotels in Cameroon. Marketing arts and crafts is not a matter of selling items picked up by a customer and a bill prepared. There is much more to it. We have been developing a visitor friendly approach aimed at promoting our local arts and crafts to tourists that do come to Mus'Art.

Being a tourist means that the client is alien to the culture of the place in question, in our case Kumbo town which is the chief-town of the Nso' people of Cameroon. The tourist is not an ordinary or frequent customer of the museum who may be of Nso' origin, the grasslands region or of Cameroonian nationality who may be acquainted with the objects in our souvenir shop or with their usage. Such a customer may come in to purchase a particular item from the souvenir shop and gets just that. The customer knows exactly what he or she wanted. With the tourist, the case may not be same. The tourist knows very little about what Mus'Art has on offer. These items are local and traditional arts and crafts objects from Nso' land, the grasslands and from other parts of Cameroon. They are strange to our tourist.

Usually most tourists that come to Mus'Art visit our permanent collection for which we charge a fee of FCFA 1000, which is about US \$ 2.00. Not all tourists that do come to the gallery have the money to visit the permanent collection. Some come only to shop. Having interacted with diverse tourists of different ages and backgrounds, what I encourage at Mus'Art is to allow a tourist to visit our permanent collection for free depending on the circumstance. After taking a tour of the gallery, the tourist gets acquainted to some of the local arts and crafts. This helps the tourist to choose the type of items he or she would want to buy from the souvenir shop of the gallery.

To us, we find it important for the buyer especially a tourist to get to know the traditional arts and crafts of Nso', and of the grasslands region in order to appreciate and value what the tourist gets from our souvenir shop. Take for example a tourist who comes to Mus'Art. Our visitor is just a few days old in Cameroon and knows very little about the country, its peoples, history, culture and traditions. This tourist has some time to spend at Mus'Art. At our souvenir

shop, our customer finds the tourist map for Cameroon and is excited to get to discover the country. The customer gets into a chat with the shop attendant and is directed to the location of Kumbo and the western grasslands on the map. The location of some of the tribes from where the objects in our souvenir shop come from are presented to the tourist such as the Wimbun and Yamba areas as well as Oku and Nso'. The shop attendant introduces the tourist to the range of arts and crafts items on sale.

For instance he takes time to let the tourist acquainted with a Yamba flute and the Jah bags used by elderly-men and women, the raffia bags used in Nso' by members of the Nwerong and Ngiri secret societies and for women's groups like Chong, Lalir and for rites of passage, rituals and divination, hand-made paper and carved wood statues and masks from Oku, the Wimbun and Nso' trays, drinking cups made out of cow horns which are popular across the grasslands. The tourist gets to appreciate the pieces of arts and crafts objects on display. This leads to a better understanding of the intrinsic qualities of the objects such as from where the objects come from, who makes them and who uses them, information which you hardly get from shopping centers, airports, and hotels selling arts and crafts objects. These salesmen who are businessmen in the real sense of the word hardly have the time to waste in explaining details about the items they sale. Most have no knowledge about the objects they sale in the first place. We should not encourage local arts and crafts to be sold this way. It is understood such sales points for arts and crafts serve many customers daily, but art dealers and art shops should be advised to label their products with information on the origin, maker and usage for example, to give tourists a better understanding of the objects they purchase.

Cameroon is not yet a tourist destination attracting slightly over 300.000 tourists a year, so at Mus'Art, we deal with very few tourists a year, maybe this is why we devote a lot of time to get our tourists know more about the objects we sale. This is however good for Mus'Art as well as for the tourists, because the arts and crafts objects sold by Mus'Art go with value, they may be cheap but the tourist knows exactly what he or she buys. The tourist knows where the object came from, what it is used for, he or she appreciates and values what he or she gets as a souvenir from our shop. An arts or crafts object from Mus'Art is considered as an outcome of traditional knowledge, creativity and unique style of the Nso' and of the grasslands people of Cameroon as a whole for which the tourist treasures.

In my opinion, I strongly think that if local arts and crafts have to compete in a global economy, then local and national labeling must accompany the products. This is the identity that makes a Cameroonian arts or crafts item different from let's say an arts or crafts item from Egypt, China, Spain or Argentina in a globalize market. The national ministries responsible for culture together with national artist networks could lay down minimum standards for labeling local and traditional arts and crafts, and enforce its strict application for all those who do engage in the sales of such items. If tourists have to value local arts and crafts, information about the item should be made available to them. A basket made in Ghana with local material such as fiber may not be used for the same function in Cameroon. You may find a similar looking basket weave in Kenya with a different material entirely and the function may be different from that of Ghana or Cameroon. Arts and crafts objects are made from varying materials, perform various functions, may look almost the same, but they come from different cultures and may have a history behind them. Let our tourists know these. This gives more value to arts and crafts objects; they are not mere commercial products. Let us give local and traditional craft items their cultural face and drive away the commercial face attached to them today in most countries.

Developing Local and Traditional Crafts

It is important for us to get a working knowledge of what local and traditional crafts really are before we examine how we can develop them. In our context local refers to 'a particular place' and traditional defined as 'belief, custom, narrative, etc transmitted by word of the mouth from age to age' while craft is defined as 'skill or dexterity, a skilled trade; occupation; a body of persons engaged in any particular skilled trade' these definitions are from the Collins New English Dictionary. What are therefore local and traditional crafts? Local and traditional crafts are unique since they are produced in a particular place, they are an outcome of traditional knowledge or have been transmitted by word of mouth from age to age and they are results of skillful activity. Examples of local and traditional crafts are carving, sculpture, pottery, basketry, weaving, blacksmithing, dyeing, engraving, etc.

If we therefore consider local and traditional arts and crafts not to be mere commercial products, we must work together to protect them from being considered as such by trade authorities in our countries. Local and traditional arts and crafts production in many countries

tends to fall directly under the administrative control of departments responsible for trade. This gives local and traditional crafts products, artists and artisans a commercial face.

To me, a price for an arts or crafts object supports the local artist or craftsman to continue engaging in creative ventures and earn a livelihood as they mainly depend on their works for survival, raising their families, providing health care and education for the household, including extended family responsibilities which is common in Africa and most third world countries. When arts or crafts production turns to be considered as a commercial undertaking it kills creativity, uniqueness and the traditional knowledge associated with a particular arts or crafts. The artists or artisans for fear of harassment go underground or stop their creative endeavors completely.

Local or traditional artisans possess empirical [I would add indigenous here] knowledge which needs the protection of governments if their creations are to survive our modern times. A few years ago, I traveled to Abong-Mbang in the Eastern province of Cameroon. Abong-Mbang is the divisional headquarters of the Upper-Nyong division and the Baka pygmies of the equatorial rainforests are found in this division. During my brief stay in Abong-Mbang I found an old hand-crafted bag made by a Baka many years ago with a woman. I was very much interested to purchase it and preserve at the Musa Heritage Gallery, but did not have sufficient money on me. The lone bag was priced at FCFA 6000. By the time I returned the next day to buy the bag, I was told a European had bought it just after I had left. This bag was superbly made using the bark of trees. The technique used in designing the bag looked so advanced, yet this bag was done by an un-known artist deep in the equatorial rain forest a long time ago. The Bakas continue to be wonderful artisans producing a cloth like material from the bark of trees. The pygmies extract barks of trees, pound them, straighten them, sun them to form the material known as Obom in Maka (spoken in the East province) or Akwag in Beti (spoken in the Centre and South provinces). This material is today widely used by local artists and artisans in the Centre, East, Littoral and South provinces of Cameroon to do wall decors, carpets, clothes etc. I have also used it for wall applique. See the old web site of Mus'Art www.musartgallery.net.ms on the contents page look for Peter Musa. However, this material is very scarce and expensive. Government needs to protect such indigenous peoples, their lifestyles and habitats. Sadly, the equatorial rainforests continue to be destroyed by

logging companies, how do we therefore guarantee the survival of indigenous peoples such as the Bakas who solely depend on the rainforests for their food, medicines and existence?

Local and traditional crafts as well as the artists and artisans must therefore be protected by national and international legislation if they are to flourish especially with the myriad of challenges brought about by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and globalization. Look at my country, during the past three years there has been an influx of Chinese immigrants settling in Cameroon. The Chinese are engaged in almost all spheres of commercial activity. Their products are very cheap as compared to other Cameroonian made products, or products imported elsewhere into the country. They have arts and crafts products too. Why therefore spend much money to buy local arts and crafts though of high aesthetic quality when there is a cheap fancy looking Chinese competitive product such as a basket for instance on the market? The local arts and crafts industry is forced to suffer. This is the effect of globalization on the sector in Cameroon - there are many more examples. Recently a senior Microsoft official was in Cameroon to work out a strategy with the Copyright Corporation for Literature and Dramatic Arts (SOCILADRA) in combating pirated software by computer owners in the country. The mission of SOCILADRA newly created is yet to be known across the country, it is yet to combat local piracy problems associated with the book industry and the theatre sector in Cameroon, but Microsoft comes in. Will such a corporation accomplish its national responsibilities and meet the cry of authors, playwrights and actors while seeking to put an end to the problem raised by Microsoft about pirated or unlicensed software usage in Cameroon? Globalization is thus a big threat to the survival of local and traditional crafts, and the cultural sector as a whole in developing countries.

One option is to work with diaspora community to develop the market Another option and possibly related to that is to develop ecommerce system that parallels NGO presence. In other words, people can support communities by purchasing high quality hand made goods rather than simply donating money to an organization like OVF. Therefore, what we are talking about is developing a socially conscious market for locally produced goods. There are three core communities that should be targeted 1) diaspora community 2) African American community and 3) socially conscious cultural creative consumers.

African governments are challenged with providing for the basic needs of their people and they are having a hard time developing innovative strategies to promote and support local

artists. In many cases, the government actually makes it more difficult by levying high taxes for those entering the sector. Yet these governments are crusaders against unemployment and poverty and advocates for social justice, equity and globalization. How then can we develop local and traditional crafts?

One solution might be to consider cultural development as not simply an issue of artist livelihood but as part of healthy community development. The culture of any community is its lifeblood and so there are many important reasons to support the artist. We should aim for the development of integrated program that see art as vital to the goal of building an ecologically and socially sustainable society. In such a scenario, we might consider how to develop global support networks whereby socially conscious consumers are encouraged to change their behaviors. This must proceed on a very interrelated level so that the development and rediscovery of a full-bodied cultural life in America coincides with the discovery of high quality African art and craft. Therefore, it has to do with instilling people with the understanding that it is not the quantity of what they consume but the quality. Rather seeing simply as issue of competitiveness or globalization the real is developing a new way to exchange and communicate knowledge and experiences. So what is the human story behind the numbers? America is faced with the challenge of rebuilding its society which is every bit as challenging as Africans rediscovering what it means for Africa to rediscovery its creative and cultural roots. Can there be a beneficial exchange that is more than what it exists with Africa being stripped bare to sustain American addictions to consumables?

Conclusion

In summary to market local arts and crafts to tourists, we should understand that in order for the tourist to appreciate local arts and crafts items, we must provide relevant background information about the products. This should comprise details like where was the product made, what is it called, the local name, who made it and what is it used for. Such information gives value to the object and the tourist appreciates it more. It makes the difference with any other product on the market and cannot be considered as a commercial commodity by whosoever. The adoption of such labeling for arts and crafts products could be the first step towards informing the global community that arts and crafts products are not commercial products and should cease to be considered as such.

Developing local and traditional crafts can work out well only when governments cease to consider the arts and crafts sector as part of mainstream commercial activity or trade. Local and traditional crafts constitute part of a nation's collective or common cultural wealth and thus the need for governments to protect and recognize the role played by artists and artisans in pursuit for creativity. The local and traditional crafts sector is unique in each country and if protected and developed as part of the cultural sector could become the breadwinner for most African and developing countries now and in the future. Where local and traditional crafts are protected, encouraged or supported by the state, the artists and artisans strive to maintain the tradition of passing on the skills acquired from their forebears to the younger generation, thus sustaining the sector for generations to generations. Is the global cultural community and we, members of the INCD going to allow our local and traditional art and craft sector in our respective countries to die? We must together with local artists and artisans individually or collectively grouped under artist networks or craft guilds tell our governments that the time has come for us to:

1. Defend local and traditional crafts;
2. Defend the rights of every creative individual;
3. Defend what they do and their right to work;
4. Defend their works;
5. Defend the right to a livelihood from their creative endeavors.

Unless the global cultural community becomes actively committed to this cause, developing local and traditional crafts may not be as simple as we may think especially in this era of globalization and the liberalization of trade.