

## **COLLABORATION AND THE REIMAGINED SURVIVAL OF THE CO-OPERATIVE: an analysis of the challenges in sustaining a small business textile weaving industry in Botswana**

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### **Keywords**

Botswana, Oodi weavers, textile craft industry, trade and development, Global South

### **Abstract**

This presentation will focus on the complexities of the evolution and implementation of the local textile weaving industry in Botswana, a country located in Sub-Saharan Africa. In a move to reduce commodity dependency on the local, national and international vulnerabilities of its main export activity typically based on diamonds and beef, Botswana, a country of 2 million people, has attempted to develop and recalibrate its textile and garment industry sector over the past decade to diversify its export offerings and boost employment, especially in rural areas. The results of these trading efforts have displayed fluctuating outcomes on account of both macro- and micro- factors, gender dynamics, in addition to wider structural issues. The land-locked geographic location of Botswana, for example, yields challenges for textile and garment industry development given the lack of a seaport or a reliable source of natural fibres, thereby increasing dependency on its neighbours such as South Africa for wool and yarn supplies. Given that the textile and garment industries are often labour intensive, low skilled and rely on profit margins attached to the sourcing of cheap gendered (invariably female) labour, ethical issues inevitably emerge across the supply chain. Calls for a more equitable economic order based on fair labour and fair trade have emerged in response through the use of local co-operatives and corporate social responsibility driven support from local companies and some international bodies. In addition, the need to rethink the dominant neo-capitalist growth and profit formula linked to economic success also has gained traction in broader debates about the contemporary globalized textile and garment production system. In specific terms, this presentation will examine the case of the Oodi Weavers a largely female run textile co-operative situated in Botswana. This analysis will question if localized or regionalized textile initiatives are more relevant, ethical, balanced and sustainable as an alternative to a neo-colonial export-dominated approach in the interests of protecting and fulfilling real human needs located within local communities.

## **Introduction and Context**

This paper focuses on the complexities of the evolution and implementation of the local textile industry in Botswana, Sub-Saharan Africa. In a move to boost local commerce and reduce commodity dependency on the local, national and international vulnerabilities of its main export activity typically based on diamonds and beef, this country of two million people, has attempted to develop its textile and garment industry sector over past few decades to diversify its export offerings and boost employment, especially in rural areas. The results of trading efforts have displayed fluctuating outcomes on account of both macro- and micro- factors, in addition to wider structural issues. Given that the textile and garment industries are often labour intensive, low-skilled and rely on profit margins attached to the sourcing of cheap (invariably female) labour, ethical issues inevitably emerge across the supply chain.

Calls have emerged for a more equitable economic order based on fair labour and fair trade in response though the use of local co-operatives and corporate social responsibility driven by support from local companies. In addition, the need to rethink the dominant neo-capitalist growth and profit formula espoused by the Global North, linked to economic success in ‘glocal’ spaces, also has gained traction in broader debates about the contemporary globalized fashion system. In specific terms, using a case study of a weaving cooperative, the Oodi Weavers, this paper questions if localized or regionalized textile and clothing initiatives are more relevant, ethical, balanced and sustainable as an alternative to a neo-colonial export- dominated approach operating in the interests of protecting and fulfilling real human needs located within local communities in the Global South, or if a hybrid community based and culture-oriented development initiative offers more sustainable solutions.

## **Small is beautiful?**

The notion that small businesses offer a viable, preferable alternative to larger scale commercial operations in a globalised and industrialised world has gained traction and increasing relevance across the past two decades (Schumacher, 1973), while also projecting forwards into concerns about managing a disrupted post-Covid future. Prescriptive business and management approaches suggest that smaller commercial units are, and will be more creative, agile and efficient enabling innovative approaches to doing business resulting in highquality outputs and are embedded with the ability to adapt and survive in volatile markets (Roper, 1997). While the utilisation of local labour and resources adopting alternative businessmodels, such as communal ownership and cooperative systems, are considered by some as preferable future alternatives as an antidote to a centralised global capitalist system driven by dominant producers operating across inefficient, fractured supply and value chains. This latterapproach, in foregrounding concerns for people and planet before profit, has long been a hallmark of development aid initiatives in the Global South.

At the core of national cultural formation lies a tension between positive socio-economic change aimed at elevating and assuring the quality of life for local communities premised on better living standards for local communities versus preserving the social stability and equitable ownership of local culture. In the desire for economic growth social and cultural equity has

been sacrificed by developing countries located in the Global South. This situation is pressured by external forces driven by ethnocentric and discriminatory assumptions that falsely considered imported commercial approaches to be superior, less resistant and assured modern forms of progressive development based on the promise of economic success and behavioural change in the absence of tangible operational structures, or even where indigenous systems exist, including technologies, institutions, or knowledge systems.

Meanwhile, social scientists and educators have foregrounded the need to adapt values and beliefs through training, upskilling or re-socialisation programmes in the interests of innovation, progression and modernity. The economic essentialist versus cultural adaptivity approaches represent extremes, in both theory and practice has a more viable approach located somewhere between the two on a sliding scale of local cultural adaptation (Kosters, et al. 1996).

The development literature polarises into two camps with the development agency view on the one hand premised on using local traditional culture and its varied manifestations as a means of activating development strategies in the indigenous-culture-for-development approach (Kidd & Coletta, 1980). On the other hand, scholars and local groups operating at ground level oppose this approach as being exploitative of local culture and serving external interests, preferring to promote a popular education/structuralist approach (, whereby local community groups determine how culture could be used and developed, thereby avoiding unequal power relations and manipulation by dominant global structures.

The cultural-functional continuum offers more viable, holistic, people-centered solutions at least for initiatives locating the community at the centre of development and as the main unit of intervention, founded on an understanding of traditional, local cultures, formal and informal associations and the flow and interface of influence between grounded socio- cultural systems and an accommodation of the links and gaps between cultural and structural change.

Analyses introducing sustainable change into existing social systems globally across time, space and place consistently highlight the importance of incorporating local cultural patterns and environmental considerations at the risk of developmental initiatives. The foundational concern of the paper is to highlight the importance of preserving and adapting local culture in terms of knowledge, skills, technologies, values and attitudes that legitimise and validate the role and lives of the local inhabitants in development projects that can inform, educate, engage and empower in enabling the expression through the creation of products that communicate symbolically and express different versions of perceived reality (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2011), as in any form of material production such as the traditional textiles in the Oodi weavers case. Equally, material production is also considered to be a critical resource for trade and development and an outlet for cultural heritage (DeMotts, 2017).

### **Oodi Weavers Case Background**

The Lentswe- la-Odi (Rocky Hills of Oodi) Weavers were founded as a Swedish Aid Project in 1974 in the village of Oodi by experienced weavers and aid workers, Ulla and Peter Gowenius, with the intention of providing economic development opportunities intended to

generate income and engender economic self-sufficiency and support for the wider village of 2000 people, building on a local artistic tradition of craft artefacts depicting local life by training the community to spin, dye and weave material artefacts such as tapestries, rugs, mats, wall hangings and blankets. Following approval from the village Chief Lechwe and the Botswanan Government, and financial support the couple themselves and the Botswana Christian Council the largely female workforce of weavers was trained, and the free-standing and vertical shuttle looms built by village men (Mushonga, 1977). The land-locked geographic location of Botswana, devoid of a seaport or reliable source of natural fibres, was then dependent on its neighbour, South Africa for wool and yarn supplies which were carded, spun, dyed and woven in the village (Terry, 2000).

### **Methodology and data collection**

The case analysis is based on a site visit from one of the research team based in Botswana who interviewed the workers in their own language, supplemented by company records and reports dating from the company's inception in 1970s to elicit their perceptions of how the company had evolved and their role in that development based on their own lived experiences. Data was transcribed and analysed according to themes that emerged in framing the Oodi Weavers story to date and to interrogate the effectiveness of local development based on creative labour and material outputs and the role of cultural accommodation, gendered empowerment, collaboration and leadership.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Gendered strength: economic, creative and knowledge capital**

The remaining female workforce, many of whom had been there since the start of the company were proud of their past achievements as a successful weaving cooperative, creating employment, contributing to tourism and disseminating the high-quality material culture of Oodi for both the export and domestic markets alike. They reflected on the strong sense of community in the factory among the Oodi weaving sisterhood and the sense of creative achievement that had been afforded in spinning, weaving, dyeing and creating the colourful tapestries that embodied local and regional stories and legends. The technical and creative textile competencies in addition to the accounting, business and managerial skills imparted by the original founders, and acquired by some workers were valued, while they also acknowledged that salaries had provided financial support for their families and a sense of purpose and achievement in their lives overall. The workers acknowledged that in its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s, and showroom were a hive of industrial output by the 40-50 staff satisfying demand for their unique, local woven craft artefacts (Etherington, 1982).

### **Collaborative support and cooperative freedoms**

The workers acknowledged that from the outset external collaboration had kickstarted the trade and development initiative yet had worked as they saw it from inside-out, from the founders to later assistance from the 1990s, including the Japanese Development Assistance Programme, which upgraded the looms and introduced new textile design methods, to input of an American Peace Corp. volunteer who through marketing efforts to tourists and regional retail outlets had enabled a fourfold expansion of the business with resulting promotional media coverage, all collaborators had followed the lead of the founder in being culturally and community-led and focussed enabling the workers to acquire skills that matched their individual competencies and ambition and encouraged them to make sense of their lives in the aesthetic content of the woven tapestries and pieces based on mythic legends and contemporary political events. Equally, workers had been encouraged to take responsibility for the creation and management of their business operations via a cooperative system, enabling the workers to collectively buy out the business, encouraged by the Swedish and Botswanan governments when the Swedish founders left once their investment was recouped. However, the weaving Cooperative is not without its problems, including the shift in the pay system from a daily fixed rate based on production hours and final work quality, judged by peers, to a piece rate based on the number of metres of textile produced each month.

### **Recognising cultural and business challenges**

Despite representing a trade and developmental success story premised on enhancing local culture as community-controlled development, issues have accompanied the evolution of the weaving cooperatives. Primarily, this was a recognition that without external leadership for management, design, prosecution and marketing the cooperative lacked direction and the ability to thrive. The weavers are a diminishing ageing group now whittled down to as handful of dedicated workers, many of whom have been there from the outset, creating their textiles more slowly given the inefficient looms and the lack of capital flow to invest in pricey raw materials, such as wool, for production. Equally, many of the looms are inactive and the workers are not paid a full or living wage, with income from sporadic special orders being divided among the workers, with proprietary accounting systems being long forgotten and a cash-only business limiting online retail engagement, while pricing is an issue with uncertainty among the Cooperative about the current value of products and associated price points. The labour-intensive, handmade textile production process lacks longevity and is not attracting a younger workforce to train and employ. The latter are now more educated and gravitate to urban professional jobs or work in government departments in Gaborone or larger factories in Francistown with higher wages and assured income and career progression.

### **Conclusion**

While the future for the Oodi Weaving Cooperative remains very uncertain, its longevity to date is a testament to the motivation and sustained efforts of a committed, core working team

of women weavers, whose creative and technical labour espouses their personal identity, increasingly in name and possibly because they have no workplace alternative. Offers to buy out the company have been met with resistance by the worker Cooperative determined to retain their independence from external intervention, which has also caused tension among the remaining workforce which further weakens its market position. The original small-scale, community-centered industrial experiment at Oodi was founded on consciousness raising, combined with technical, business and creative upskilling having survived four decades, albeit now in diminished form. In sum, it represents the potential, but increasingly compromised, sustainable power of material culture to attract attention and admiration, while consequently generating economic, educational and development support for a small-scale, traditional craft community when connected-up and working collaboratively.

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