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local to global parallels

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form.
building a state of creativity

LIVELIHOODS AND SUSTAINABILITY: LOCAL TO GLOBAL PARALLELS

PROF. TONY CUNNINGHAM

Over the past twenty-five years, **Prof. Tony Cunningham** has worked in Africa, Asia, Australia and Fiji, in habitats ranging from deserts to tropical rainforests. Tony's main interests lie in the links between people and conservation, in particular the economic, medicinal, nutritional, utilitarian values of natural resources to people, and the conflicts between conservation areas and local communities. Here he discusses the local and global parallels which have developed in basket making:

Exhibitions like *Woven Forms* are testament to the creativity of the contributing artists, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Some innovatively use modern materials such as plastic cable and mono-filament. Others have chosen plant fibres, such as pandanus and native grasses, representing strong historical links to land. In a world of rapid globalisation, hand-woven forms link culture, nature and landscape. For artists from remote rural Australia, they also place weaving and Aboriginal arts at the centre of debate on appropriate, sustainable development. Many Aboriginal basket makers live in small communities situated on Aboriginal land, working through community-based art centres.¹ Several of these art centres are represented in *Woven Forms*, including Injalak Arts and Crafts in the Northern Territory's western Arnhem Land, the Tjanpi Desert Weavers from the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Lands in central Australia, and Munupi Arts and Crafts from Melville Island, Northern Territory.

Despite increased interest in Aboriginal arts since the 1970s, few interdisciplinary research studies have yet attempted to establish a better understanding of what influences the livelihoods of Aboriginal artists in terms of social, economic and ecological factors, as well as broader political events. Recent research with Aboriginal wood carvers in Maningrida, Northern Territory², is an exception. Worldwide, most traditional woodcarvers are men, while most basket makers are women. In Australia today, there is considerable interest in small-scale enterprises that encourage continued cultural skills and at the same time, generate economic benefit for Indigenous communities.³ Aboriginal communities in Australia face major challenges with multiple causes.⁴ There is a real need, however, for increased insight into what will sustain basket making and how basket making in Australia differs from other parts of the world.

Worldwide, three connected components are crucial to sustain basketry and woven forms into the future:

- the influence of the market
- the cultural, social and technological factors enabling (or alternatively, discouraging) continued creative, quality production
- the need for a sustained supply of raw materials

Different markets, different styles

In many developing countries, where baskets are in everyday use and basketry skills are widespread, the local market is a driving force and prices for baskets are very low. Australia is at the opposite side of the spectrum. Few baskets are in everyday use in Aboriginal communities. Instead, baskets are marketed at high prices as art pieces (although the quantity presented to the market and their corresponding value falls well below that of painting sales). In addition, innovative new woven forms

are not made for everyday use, but purely for their aesthetic value. Mid-range within this spectrum from local baskets to woven forms, lie baskets made for the commercial markets. These range from baskets of varying quality produced in Asia, Africa and Latin America in large quantities for the tourist market, to high-priced, high-quality basketry, such as Navaho and Hopi baskets in the south-west of the USA, or Zulu Mbukushu and Yei baskets from southern Africa. Based on traditional basketry forms, the commercial market has stimulated innovation and change—extensive use of dyes, rather than the plainness of pre-1960s basketry: fine weaves with thinner, less durable palm fibre.

In a globalised world, the commercial market has had a ripple effect through basketry in Africa, North America and Australia. In the late 1980s, for example, basket makers in Africa were given a book on Native American baskets to show them what baskets looked like in other parts of the world. Several weavers started copying the designs and some Botswana designs look strikingly similar to their Native American counterparts—to the point they are being sold as such by less scrupulous dealers in the south-western USA.⁵ In another case, a 1970s Botswana craft basket poster was sent to Maningrida, where it influenced basket design in that art centre in northern Australia, 10,000 km from Botswana.⁶

Cultural, social and technological factors

What factors have shaped the diversity and design of Aboriginal basketry in Australia compared to other parts of the world? Fine basketry skills and the development of a strong basketry tradition are not spread uniformly across the world, nor, I suggest, were they uniformly spread across Aboriginal Australia.

Three major environmental features are determinants of this 'patchy' development of extraordinary basketry skills. Firstly, the availability of fibrous plant material suitable for basketry, such as leaves, roots, bark and stems. Secondly, the value of basketry skills in landscapes dominated by sandy soils. Thirdly, crop domestication and settlement, which is limited by water availability and rainfall. In arid areas where cultivation was not possible, traditional hunter-gatherers needed to cover large distances on foot in search of food and water, curtailing what people could carry down to the bare minimum needed for survival. This limited the technical diversity of baskets traditionally made, even when twining and weaving skills were present. On the other hand, poor soils stimulated settled subsistence farmers to produce a diverse range of baskets. Even today, African, Asian and Latin American subsistence farmers living in drought-susceptible landscapes of nutrient-poor sands need to hunt, fish and gather bush foods to supplement crop production, and they often use baskets in the process.

In Australia, plant domestication did not take place and bush foods were traditionally gathered from cultural landscapes managed by fire, and were processed with items more commonly made of wood or stone. In central Australia, men as hunters, carried wooden spears and spear-throwers. Women, as the main plant food gatherers, each had a digging stick, wooden dish and two stones for grinding seed. In some parts of Aboriginal Australia, as in New Guinea, 'dilly bags' (when the fibrous plants for making them were available) were light and efficient at carrying gathered foods. Worldwide, fish traps, usually made by men, were likely to have been the earliest basket type. Similar in form, whether made in Australia, Africa, Asia or Europe, they are widespread globally. Further incentives for using basketry to make containers came from the absence of wood for carving, or in places where pottery was practised, the lack of clay for making earthenware containers. The greatest diversity of baskets were therefore produced by settled, subsistence farmers for planting, reaping, storing, processing or eating crop plants.

Top: Uganda Bakiga basket maker using Simlax creeper. Photo: Tony Cunningham
Bottom: Namibia marketing. Photo: Tony Cunningham



Basketry materials: sustained supply

For millennia, as people have moved from one vegetation type to another, they have tested and chosen plants for their qualities as fibre, food, medicines or useful wood. Experimentation and the astute observations of plant chemistry also led to local people identifying vegetable dyes. Subsistence production of baskets is almost certainly sustainable, but large-scale commercial harvest of some dyes and basketry fibres can cause local depletion. Harvest of plants for basketry pales into insignificance compared to clearing of forests, woodlands and wetlands for farmland, or grazing and trampling by livestock. Nevertheless, basketry resource depletion has social costs, as women walk farther or pay more for increasingly scarce resources. With resource scarcity, less time is spent on household activities, agriculture, or on basket making itself, as more time is spent gathering raw materials. This has important implications for the lives of the basket makers and the commercial basketry industry. Many sources of fibre and dye are however, sustainably harvested, easily meeting demand due to rapid growth rates and resilience.

Fibres

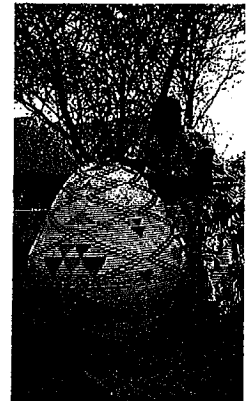
Basket fibre sources can be sub-divided into three main plant groups. Probably the easiest to manage are basketry fibres from the first group, the monocotyledons. These are plants whose seeds produce a single seed-leaf (or cotyledon), usually with long, parallel-veined leaves: the grasses and bamboos (Gramineae), the palms and rattans (Palmæ), the pandanus palms (Pandanaceae), mat-rushes (Juncaceae) and sedges (Cyperaceae). The long, flexible leaves and the fact that monocotyledons often form flexible stems make them useful for basketry fibre. Growth rates can be rapid. Harvest is often sustained, unless intensive leaf harvest takes place (such as with *Juncus kruassii* in South Africa where over 4,000 Zulu women arrive annually to seasonally cut the mat-rush in a single area). Some rattans and palms are also susceptible to commercial harvest⁷, as are some Marantaceae. In Brazil, for example, researchers found that *aruma* (*Ischnosiphon polyphyllus*) plants recovered very slowly after harvest, and that current harvesting strategies may not be conservative enough to ensure long-term population survival.⁸

The next major sources of basketry fibre in the tropics are the dicotyledons. Unlike monocotyledons, dicotyledons usually have net-veined leaves that are often broad in shape and so have little value in traditional basketry, so other fibrous parts of the plant are used: stems, bark or flexible roots. In some cases, this bark is from fast-growing abundant plants such as the plant families of nettles (Urticaceae), cannabis (Cannabaceae), mulberries (Moraceae), cottons (Malvaceae) and Tiliaceae, and so is often sustainable. In other cases, resource management is needed. In Europe and temperate North America, for example, willow (*Salix*, Salicaceae) and hazel (*Corylus*, Betulaceae) trees were historically managed to produce pliant coppice shoots (called wands or withies) for basketry. Fibrous bark from several tree species in the Salicaceae and Betulaceae (particularly birch bark) was also commonly used. Birch bark is still used in mountain areas of Asia, such as in the Himalaya, and in Finland and Russia. In the absence of these pliant stems, tree species with rigid stems such as oak (*Quercus*), ash and sweet chestnut were felled and split into thin flexible splints.

The third group of plants used for basket fibre are cone-bearing (coniferous) plants. In the tropics, bark twine from one ancient gymnosperm family, the Gnetaceae, is used in the Pacific and also to make 'bilum' bags in New Guinea. Conifers are more widely used as weaving fibre in northern temperate countries, such as the western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*, Cupressaceae) in Canada. Conifers, which are

Top: Malawi large woven container. Photo: Tony Cunningham

Bottom: Palm harvest Botswana high impact use. Photo: Tony Cunningham



uncommon in the tropics but diverse and abundant in temperate parts of the world, are also sources of flexible roots for basketry. Roots of Norwegian spruce trees (*Picea abies*), used for fine basketry by Salish, Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw peoples of British Columbia, Canada, are a good example. Concerns about sustainability apply to logging and fire, not basketry.

Dyes

Although a wide range of dyes can be used to colour basketry fibre, relatively few species are used for commercial basketry compared to the species used for dyes on a local, subsistence scale. The subset of dye resources used in commercial trade represents the most colourful and colourfast sources from plants. The use of silty mud to colour weaving fibre a grey-black shade is also widespread in tropical Africa and Asia. Indigo dyes, derived from the leaves of *Indigofera* species such as *Indigofera arrecta* and *Indigofera tinctoria*, are easily cultivated and the harvest can be sustained. The commercial-scale harvest of dyes derived from stem and root bark or from heartwood, often has a high impact and is more difficult to sustain from wild harvest. The debarking and subsequent deaths of *Berchemia discolor* trees in Botswana, due to demand for commercial basketry, not only makes life difficult for weavers but also represents the loss of a popular and nutritionally valuable bush tucker.

Weaving livelihoods

In developing nations, most basket makers are people from low-income families, living in remote rural areas, commonly subsistence farmers with no livestock aside from chickens and goats, with little or no formal education. For many, the only significant and consistent source of cash income is through the production and sale of handicrafts, especially baskets. In Brazil, for example, income from production of *aruma* (*Ischnosiphon polyphyllus*) baskets generated up to 56 per cent of the official annual minimum wage, even if families only crafted items for a portion of the year.⁹ In Botswana, basket sales are also significant for many families, including payment of children's school fees.¹⁰

Aside from income, many African basket makers say that quality commercial basket production for an external market has boosted their confidence as well as their local social status. For these livelihood reasons, it is important that baskets and woven forms are part of a sustainable arts industry and we learn how to avoid the 'boom and bust' situations that have affected so many rural industries. These steps are suggested:

- Get marketing support and raise public awareness: if you want to support people's livelihoods through basketry, employ a marketing strategy which includes branding technologies embracing cultural identity. Few people (apart from basket makers) appreciate the time and effort required to make baskets or the often difficult conditions under which people live. Research market prices, nationally and internationally
- For Aboriginal artists: access support networks such as ANKAAA (Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists) and Desert
- Avoid resource depletion: sustainable harvest cannot be assumed - particularly with commercial harvest and where land and resource tenure are weak. For this reason, base commercial production on species which are resilient to harvest and where there is a surplus above

subsistence need; and if necessary, develop participatory resource management plans.¹¹ If cultivation of basketry plants is planned, then production has to be designed in socially and culturally appropriate ways

Maintain quality and promote creative individuals: museums, commercial galleries and private art collectors have a particular responsibility to demonstrate a good understanding of the economic and cultural value of basketry. Artistry in fibre work will not be maintained unless there is demand for special pieces which are valued appropriately by collectors and the market

Endnotes

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- 11 for example, see F Walsh and P Mitchell, *Planning for country: cross-cultural approaches to decision-making on Aboriginal lands*, 2002