

Katherine Ladd

“My skill is exhausted”: Issues of Authenticity and Sustainable Development in the Revival of West African Strip Weaving

The title of this paper refers to a traditional Ghanaian pattern in strip weaving, *adwiniasa*, describing how the weaver cannot exceed the great skill displayed in its intricate and painstaking creation. Today the weaving of such cloths is extremely rare and the title could equally refer to the lack of such artisanship in West Africa.

Compare this idea of supreme workmanship to the well-meaning efforts of NGOs seeking to create products for Western markets. The ‘ethnic’ goods from development projects hold a special place in the market and are generally squarely aimed at the ethical, or fair-trade, consumer, with little regard to taste or trends. Moreover, they sometimes seem to promote an infantilised vision of Africa; cheerful animals and willowy village women. Are the artisans making what they want or what they think (or have been told) the Western consumer wants?

Katherine Ladd’s research has taken her to Burkina Faso in West Africa to explore the state of the country’s cotton weaving traditions and to attempt to design a collection of products based on the ancient craft of strip weaving. Observing one particular project that is funded by Shell Foundation, Katherine has visited remote villages where traditional weaving and dyeing is in serious decline. This project’s stated aim is to revive ancient skills and give the people back their “cultural heritage and pride” through the production of an “authentic” collection of naturally-dyed, hand-spun, hand-woven couvertures that will be bought by museums and galleries in Europe and North America as the “antiques of tomorrow.” The project also intends to produce a contemporary collection that uses these traditional weaving skills, one that is aimed at the higher end, design-led market for handmade goods, which will be launched at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York in May 2009. The work of the project has already resulted in an exhibition at the Musée Nationale de Burkina, where traditional woven clothes, wooden looms and other artefacts have been displayed for the first time.

With some serious questions about the nature of development in the craft sector, this paper discusses the implications of interpreting the work of artisans through a Western aesthetic in addition to the introduction of sustainable materials and production processes. How “authentic” is the end result if it can only survive in a global export market rather than a local one?

Katherine Ladd is a product designer with many years’ experience on the international design circuit. Her company specialised in architectural lighting and digital printed textiles, with clients such as Wilkinson Eyre, Pret a Manger, Saks Fifth Avenue, Heal’s and Conran. She lectures in Cultural Studies to 3D Design and Fashion/Textiles students at the University of Brighton, where she is also undertaking an AHRC funded practice-based doctorate. Her research is focused on contemporary design in traditional West African craft as a tool for sustainable development.