

Professor Mary Hark and Michael Adashie

Hand Papermaking in the Greater Ashanti Region of Ghana: A Convergence of Craft, Art and Environmental Conservation

Project Description:

In 1969, the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (FORIG) brought fourteen pulp-mulberry plants into the country and planted them in a forest preserve with the intention of evaluating the potential for paper production. This plan was never implemented, as those directing it fell from political favour. Since that time pulp-mulberry has become the most serious non-indigenous woody invasive plant in the closed forest zone of Ghana. These plants have thrived, becoming an invasive weed, dominating the forest preserve and aggressively moving into plots of land that are used by farmers growing food for their families as well as to sell at local markets. Forestry and conservation officials have been working to identify ways to control this invasive plant.

In rural Kumasi, family farm operations and trading are the main income-generating activities. Vegetable, horticulture and staple crops such as plantain, maize and cassava dominate commercial crop production. This activity generates an average yearly household income of \$400.00. The devastating impact of the invasive pulp mulberry plant has created serious challenges for these family farmers.

In 2006, with a Fulbright Senior Research Grant, Mary Hark worked in Kumasi, Ghana. During this time, Hark and Adashie developed a hand papermaking initiative. Using local botanicals (including the invasive pulp mulberry) and improvised equipment, they produced a portfolio of strong and beautiful papers, demonstrating great promise for the development of a high-quality handmade paper from exclusively local materials. The introduction of hand papermaking supports both the control of a serious nuisance plant and the potential to generate additional income for farmers.

Adashie and Hark have created a model cottage industry paper mill, with the intention of supporting local farmers interested in using free, abundant materials to create strong, beautiful papers for sale. This initiative has drawn together the university art community, the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana and local subsistence farmers. The project is located in the Greater Ashanti Region of Ghana. It is historically an important centre of cultural activity. Kente weaving, adinkra cloth-making, batik, wood carving and bronze casting are all activities that are deeply imbedded and currently practiced with the utmost skill and an aesthetic specific to the region. Making things by hand is valued, understood and practiced to some degree by many families. Given this history, the introduction of the craft of papermaking is an activity whose value is implicit.

In addition, high quality papers for artists to use are virtually unavailable in Ghana. KNUST is the most important university art department in Ghana. Professional artists, KNUST faculty and student artists all rely on substandard paper or must resort to paying high prices to import papers for drawing, printmaking, and other creative activities. Artists at KNUST have begun using the handmade papers developed by Adashie and Hark to create artworks.

Adashie and Hark, both practicing artists, will share the challenges and successes of the initial phase of the project with a presentation strongly supported by visual material, as well as a portfolio of the papers.