



Basketry

Sharing Experiences from the Field

Rachel Gefferie and Weonmo Park Editors-in-Chief



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LIVING HERITAGE SERIES IX

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Sharing Experiences from the Field

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Preface

Imagine a morning in a quiet village: the first rays of sunlight touch baskets hung to dry, their intricate patterns catching the light. These woven forms, humble at first glance, are much more than utilitarian objects. Each basket carries the legacy of centuries—knowledge of plants, techniques honed over generations, and stories of communities whose lives have revolved around the rhythm of nature. Basketry is a craft that binds people to their environment, to their ancestors, and to each other.

Basketry is not merely a practical craft; it is a vessel of cultural memory. Across regions, patterns, materials, and weaving methods reveal social structures, ecological knowledge, and historical identities. Some designs are tied to ritual practices, while others mark seasonal or communal events. In every weave, the hands of skilled artisans encode traditions that might otherwise fade from memory. These baskets do more than store or carry—they speak of resilience, creativity, and the human capacity to transmit knowledge across time.

The practice of basketry is often communal. Elders guide younger generations, teaching not only techniques but also the values and ethics of their craft. The process of weaving cultivates patience, observation, and a respect for natural resources. In doing so, basketry exemplifies the concept of living heritage: it evolves as communities adapt to new circumstances while remaining anchored in the wisdom of the past.

In today's world, basketry continues to inspire innovation and cross-disciplinary creativity. Contemporary artists reinterpret traditional techniques, designers explore sustainable materials, and educators use basketry to teach ecological awareness and cultural heritage. These developments demonstrate that intangible heritage is not frozen in the past—it is a dynamic force, relevant in everyday life and capable of bridging generations, communities, and cultures.

This volume, *Basketry*, is the ninth in the *Living Heritage Series* and is produced in collaboration with the ICH NGO Forum's #HeritageAlive. It brings together the research, field experiences, and reflections of authors, scholars, and artisans, highlighting both technical mastery and the deeper cultural significance of basketry. A publication ceremony will be held in 2025, celebrating this volume and reaffirming the ongoing commitment to safeguarding living heritage.

We hope that readers will not only appreciate the craftsmanship displayed but also recognize the larger context of human ingenuity and cultural continuity that basketry embodies. Each chapter invites exploration of how a simple object can carry complex layers of meaning and sustain connections across time and space. May this publication offer insight, inspiration, and a moment of reflection on the enduring value of living heritage woven into our daily lives.

Weonmo Park

Editor-in-Chief

An Introduction to Basketry

Rachel Gefferie

Editor-in-Chief

An Introduction to Basketry

Rachel Gefferie

Editor-in-Chief

When I was asked to become the new Editor-in-Chief for the publication, I saw it as a very fortunate opportunity to apply my knowledge, skills and experiences as a social anthropologist. Culture, cultural expressions, cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, practices and skills are interchangeable part of my daily vocabulary as an anthropologist. But as the representative of my NGO in Suriname, NAKS Suriname, I have contributed, witnessed, and promoted the need and the value of safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). For communities in Suriname as for individuals. Thus, being appointed to oversee the publication promoting safeguarding experiences with Basketry felt like a full-circle moment.

Born and raised in Suriname, in the small town named Wageningen, rice was the most essential agricultural staple. Well, you might wonder why I am bringing into the mix rice, while the publication is about basketry. This is where a sense of nostalgia with the topic of our newest HeritageAlive publication becomes part of my story as the new Editor-in-Chief. Allow me to take you, the reader, on a journey to one of my childhood memories:

At home with my Javanese auntie. My mum loved bringing us to her during the weekends as she is a very good cook. As usual auntie is in the kitchen preparing a feast. As I stand next to her, I watch her carefully arranging the leftovers of yesterday's cooked white long grain rice unto a flat artistically woven basket. I can still smell the earthiness of the rice. It reminds me of the rice fields at the entrance of our little and peaceful town, Wageningen. The basket she is using is very familiar to me. My dad has several of those hanging on the wall in the shack. With her hands she spreads the rice over the flat basket and then walks towards the rear porch where she places the basket on the railing. Right where the sunlight hits the wooden railing. That's where the rice will spend her time bathing in the sun until she turns firm and dry. Then the rice will be ready to be transformed into this gloriously delicious and crunchy snack called 'bron bron' (a savoury rice crisp). It is a typical Indonesian snack, famous in Suriname, made by most people. And the basket woven from bamboo leaves is one indispensable tool in the process of transforming long grain rice into a crispy, salty, and tasteful yet simple snack.

And that is how I have many nostalgic memories stored about baskets, the use of baskets, the making of baskets, baskets as decoration, baskets to store valuable stuff or dirty laundry...and the list goes on. Baskets of all sorts and forms have been prominent in my upbringing and remain essential in my household till this day. I know, I am not the unique one with such memories. Baskets and the art of basket making has been at the core of daily life since the beginning of humanity. Basketry is one of the ICH that covers more than just one domain of the 2003 convention. It is intertwined with performing arts, which is beautifully described in the article of the NGO CIOFF® Argentina where the authors present Dance and Basketry as an ancestral dialogue. Engraining basketry in performing arts illustrates the role of ICH in social practices, rituals and festive events. As the title of one of their activities, "United in a Single Culture, Weaving Our Identity", so vividly showcases the utilising of byproducts of basketry into performing arts to express their inherited identity, the authors manage to convince us that basketry goes beyond serving as objects of storage or to carry/display stuff. The same goes with the article of author Antoine Gauthier from the NGO Conseil québécois du patrimoine vivant. Pushing us out of our traditional way of thinking and inviting us to view the craft of basketry in a more unconventional way. As a means of transportation. The birchbark canoe. An ancient old tradition in Canada that stood the time of modern technology and continues to inspire the young generation of Canadians to continue the craftsmanship transmitted by their ancestors.

And while we find ourselves in this new and intriguing space of viewing basketry

becoming a birchbark canoe, worn as headpieces, used as palm leaf fans, designed as seed necklaces and woven textiles, we arrive at another domain of the convention relevant to this ICH. One that cannot be neglected. It is its intrinsic relevance to knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. Materials and the skills to utilise the materials to create basketry products is dependant of the existence and availability of these materials in the naturel environment. The authors from the NGO Cobra Collective UK share the experiences of their Indigenous communities in Guyana and demand us to direct our attention to the impact of environmental quests on the availability of naturel materials. They describe the making of baskets from the processed strips of mukuru (*Ischnosiphon* spp.) and nibbi (*Heteropsis flexuosa*). And as they share with us the use of basketry as part of essential food preparing activities such as sifting the cassava meal for cassava bread baking, this resonates with yet another childhood memory of mine. They voice their concerns around the disappearance of essential household items that are intertwined with the use of basketry as a central household tool. The disappearance of these tools is not just about the loss of knowledge of object making, but also knowledge of how to sustainably manage the raw plant materials. Throughout the publication, this concern appears as a red threat highlighting the essence of not just safeguarding the art of basketry making as an ICH, but more so the safeguarding of the raw materials and the knowledge to harvest these materials.

Looking at the craftsmanship that is embedded in Basketry as an ICH, Lithuanian

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Basketry requires a profound set of skills, creativity, knowledge, and precision to obtain the breathtaking basketry products and byproducts that we get to witness in the visuals of this publication

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author Dalia Blažulionytė from the Lithuanian Anthropology Association and the Norwegian authors Hege Aasdal and Hilde Ekeberg from the Norwegian Crafts Institute, demonstrate in their article the essence of the role of the bearers of knowledge in the process of transmitting the ICH. The introduction of a Fellowship project, mentorship programmes, weaving classes, and interactive workshops, all with the purpose of facilitating the continuation of the craftsmanship, proof that engaging with Basketry requires a profound set of skills, creativity, knowledge, and precision to obtain the breathtaking basketry products and byproducts that we get to witness in the visuals of this publication.

Visualising is an important aspect of understanding, engaging with, and then

becoming aware of the value of safeguarding ICH. That is what we aim for with each one of our successfully published publications. To spike interest in ICH and safeguarding activities around the world. But, most importantly, to acknowledge and respect the endless and relentless work done by communities, individuals, and organisations in the field to secure the existence and continuation of ICH as part of people's lived experiences and life history.

The publication about Basketry is another opportunity for you as the reader to learn from our large community of accredited NGOs. This is a free of charge chance to embark on a trip around the world and emerge yourself into the mesmerising world of basketry and become knowledgeable of other people's use, creation, ritual engagements, and material knowledge of baskets. This publication will challenge your mind and drive you beyond the world of baskets. Trust me! It is worth it!

As the new Editor-in-Chief I want to take this opportunity to thank each one of the authors who have submitted an abstract. Unfortunately, we were not able to accommodate all submitted abstracts. In this publication you will encounter the articles that successfully passed all criteria and the different stages of preparing for the publication. I want to thank the former Editor-in-Chief Eivind Falk for his continues support and belief in me. My gratitude goes to all members of the HeritageAlive Editorial board and working group for their dedication and invaluable contribution towards screening, selecting, and proofreading the large number of submissions. And finally, a word of thanks to ICHCAP for funding another publication. The collaboration with ICHCAP is one based on mutual respect and mutual interest in the safeguarding of ICH. Their support to us and commitment to facilitate sufficient funding to realise the publication is of eminent value. Without their support we would not have accomplished yet another vibrant and informative publication. Thank You!

Une introduction à la Vannerie

Rachel Gefferie

Rédacteur en chef

Lorsque l'on m'a demandé de devenir la nouvelle rédactrice en chef de cette publication, j'y ai vu une très belle occasion de mettre à profit mes connaissances, mes compétences et mes expériences en tant qu'anthropologue sociale. Culture, expressions culturelles, patrimoine culturel, savoirs traditionnels, pratiques et savoir-faire font partie intégrante de mon vocabulaire quotidien en tant qu'anthropologue. Mais en tant que représentante de mon ONG au Suriname, NAKS Suriname, j'ai contribué, observé et promu la nécessité et la valeur de la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI), que ce soit pour les communautés du Suriname comme pour les individus. Ainsi, être nommée pour superviser une publication consacrée à la sauvegarde des savoirs liés à la vannerie a eu pour moi des allures de « boucle bouclée ».

Née et élevée au Suriname, dans la petite ville de Wageningen, le riz constituait l'aliment agricole de base le plus essentiel. Vous vous demandez sans doute pourquoi j'évoque le riz alors que cette publication parle de vannerie. C'est que la nostalgie liée au thème de cette nouvelle édition de HeritageAlive fait partie intégrante de mon

histoire de rédactrice en chef. Permettez-moi donc de vous emmener, lecteur, dans l'un de mes souvenirs d'enfance :

À la maison de ma tante javanaise. Ma mère adorait nous y emmener le week-end car c'était une excellente cuisinière. Comme à son habitude, tante préparait un festin en cuisine. À ses côtés, je la regardais disposer avec soin les restes de riz blanc à grains longs de la veille sur un grand panier plat artistiquement tressé. J'en sentais encore la note terreuse, qui me rappelait les rizières à l'entrée de notre paisible petite ville de Wageningen. Ce panier m'était très familier : mon père en avait plusieurs suspendus au mur de l'abri. De ses mains, ma tante étalait le riz sur le panier plat, puis se dirigeait vers l'arrière-véranda pour le poser sur la rambarde, exactement là où les rayons du soleil frappaient le bois. Le riz y séchait ainsi, se raffermissant et devenant prêt à être transformé en ce délicieux et croustillant en-cas appelé « bron bron » (une galette de riz salée), typiquement indonésien mais très apprécié au Suriname. Et ce panier tressé de feuilles de bambou était un outil indispensable dans ce processus de transformation du riz long en une collation simple, croquante, salée et savoureuse.

C'est ainsi que j'ai accumulé dans ma mémoire de nombreux souvenirs liés aux paniers : leur usage, leur fabrication, leur fonction décorative, leur rôle dans le rangement d'objets précieux ou de linge sale... et la liste continue. Les paniers, de toutes sortes et formes, ont marqué mon enfance et restent essentiels dans mon foyer aujourd'hui encore. Je sais que je ne suis pas la seule à entretenir de tels souvenirs. La vannerie et l'art du tressage sont au cœur de la vie quotidienne depuis l'aube de l'humanité.

La vannerie est l'un des éléments du PCI qui recoupe plusieurs domaines de la Convention de 2003. Elle est intimement liée aux arts du spectacle, comme le montre l'article de l'ONG CIOFF® Argentine, qui présente la danse et la vannerie comme un dialogue ancestral. Intégrer la vannerie dans les arts du spectacle illustre le rôle du PCI dans les pratiques sociales, les rituels et les fêtes. Le titre d'une de leurs activités, « Unis dans une seule culture, tissant notre identité », illustre parfaitement la manière dont les sous-produits de la vannerie s'intègrent aux arts du spectacle pour exprimer une identité héritée. De même, l'article d'Antoine Gauthier de l'ONG Conseil québécois du patrimoine vivant nous pousse à dépasser nos conceptions traditionnelles et à

envisager l'art de la vannerie de façon plus originale : comme moyen de transport. La pirogue en écorce de bouleau, tradition ancestrale du Canada, a résisté à l'ère des technologies modernes et continue d'inspirer les jeunes générations, qui perpétuent le savoir-faire transmis par leurs ancêtres.

Et tandis que nous découvrons la vannerie sous des formes nouvelles et intrigantes — devenant pirogue en écorce de bouleau, parure de tête, éventail de feuilles de palmier, collier de graines ou tissu tissé — nous touchons à un autre domaine essentiel de la Convention : les savoirs et pratiques liés à la nature et à l'univers. En effet, les matériaux et les compétences pour les transformer dépendent directement de l'existence et de la disponibilité de ressources naturelles. Les auteurs de l'ONG Cobra Collective UK partagent les expériences des communautés autochtones du Guyana et attirent notre attention sur l'impact des enjeux environnementaux sur la disponibilité de ces matériaux. Ils décrivent la fabrication de paniers à partir de lanières traitées de mukuru (*Ischnosiphon spp.*) et de nibbi (*Heteropsis flexuosa*). Ils expliquent aussi l'usage de la vannerie dans des activités culinaires essentielles, comme le tamisage de la farine de manioc pour la cuisson du pain de manioc — ce qui résonne avec un autre souvenir d'enfance pour moi. Mais ils alertent surtout sur la disparition d'ustensiles domestiques indispensables, intimement liés à l'usage de la vannerie. Leur disparition n'entraîne pas seulement la perte du savoir-faire artisanal, mais aussi celle des connaissances permettant de gérer durablement les plantes nécessaires. Tout au long de cette publication, cette préoccupation constitue un fil rouge : sauvegarder la vannerie en tant que PCI, c'est aussi protéger les matières premières et les savoirs associés à leur récolte.

En observant le savoir-faire inscrit dans la vannerie comme PCI, l'auteure lituanienne Dalia Blažulionyté de l'Association d'anthropologie de Lituanie, ainsi que les auteures norvégiennes Hege Aasdal et Hilde Ekeberg de l'Institut norvégien de l'artisanat, montrent l'importance des détenteurs de savoirs dans la transmission de ce patrimoine. Elles présentent des projets de bourses, de mentorat, des cours de tressage et des ateliers interactifs visant à assurer la continuité de ce savoir-faire.

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Autant d'initiatives qui prouvent que pratiquer la vannerie exige un ensemble profond de compétences, de créativité, de connaissances et de précision, aboutissant à ces superbes produits et dérivés de vannerie que les visuels de la publication mettent en valeur.

”

La visualisation est un aspect clé pour comprendre, s'engager et prendre conscience de la valeur de la sauvegarde du PCI. C'est ce que nous cherchons à accomplir à travers chacune de nos publications. Susciter l'intérêt pour le PCI et pour

les activités de sauvegarde à travers le monde. Mais surtout, reconnaître et respecter le travail incessant des communautés, des individus et des organisations qui œuvrent à préserver et à transmettre ce patrimoine comme partie intégrante des expériences vécues et de l'histoire des peuples.

Cette publication consacrée à la vannerie représente une nouvelle occasion pour vous, lecteur, d'apprendre de notre vaste réseau d'ONG accréditées. C'est une chance, gratuite, de partir pour un tour du monde et de vous immerger dans l'univers fascinant de la vannerie, en découvrant les usages, créations, rituels et savoirs liés aux matériaux employés par d'autres peuples. Cette lecture stimulera votre réflexion et vous emmènera bien au-delà du simple monde des paniers. Croyez-moi : cela en vaut la peine !

En tant que nouvelle rédactrice en chef, je tiens à remercier chacun des auteurs ayant soumis un résumé. Malheureusement, nous n'avons pas pu retenir toutes les propositions. Vous trouverez dans cette publication les articles ayant satisfait à l'ensemble des critères et étapes de préparation. Je remercie également l'ancien rédacteur en chef Eivind Falk pour son soutien constant et sa confiance. Toute ma gratitude va aux membres du comité éditorial et du groupe de travail de HeritageAlive pour leur dévouement et leur contribution précieuse dans la sélection, la relecture et la validation du grand nombre de textes reçus. Enfin, je souhaite exprimer ma reconnaissance à ICHCAP pour le financement de cette publication. Notre collaboration repose sur le respect mutuel et un intérêt partagé pour la sauvegarde du PCI. Leur soutien et leur engagement à garantir les ressources financières nécessaires à cette réalisation sont inestimables. Sans eux, cette nouvelle publication, vivante et riche d'enseignements, n'aurait pas vu le jour.

Merci !

Unveiling the Basketry Traditions of the Benet, an Indigenous Minority Community in Eastern Uganda

Aliguma Ahabyona Akiiki

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU)



01. Unveiling the Basketry Traditions of the Benet, an Indigenous Minority Community in Eastern Uganda

Aliguma Ahabyona Akiiki

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU)

Abstract

This article delves into the rich cultural heritage of the Benet people as reflected in their basket weaving traditions.

Originally living on the upper slopes of Mountain Elgon in Uganda, the Benet community, an indigenous ethnic minority group, faced forced relocation to the lowlands in 1992 when the area was designated as a national park. This displacement resulted in the loss of their land, posing a threat to their cultural identity and traditional practices, including the art of basketry.

In their basketry, materials such as sisal, banana fibers, bamboo, papyrus reeds, palm leaves and rapier grass are commonly used, most of which are sourced from the Mountain Elgon National Park. Baskets are often dyed using natural colors obtained from local vegetation to create appealing designs, showcasing the exceptional traditional craftsmanship, skills, and knowledge of the Benet people.

The size, shape, and features of their baskets are determined by their intended use, such as in child naming ceremonies, serving food, food storage (granaries), as well as in cultural festivals.

The Benet women play a significant role in passing down their knowledge and skills in basket weaving to younger generations, especially girls, fostering a sense of cultural pride and generating income. The weaving sessions also serve as a platform for elders to impart wisdom about cultural heritage and traditions, while facilitating discussions on community issues like heritage preservation, conflict resolution, agriculture, and herbal remedies. The women uphold the weaving tradition by preserving the original baskets they used in the forests.

One challenge for the Benet community is negotiating with park authorities for access to bamboo and other raw materials for baskets in their former home, the National Park. To address this, women are planting bamboo shoots in their new settlements and using this opportunity to plant other tree species to prevent landslides and mitigate climate change effects in the community.

Using the example of the Benet community, the article will explore the role of basketry in indigenous knowledge transmission, conservation, social cohesion and its contribution to livelihoods, including cultural tourism.

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) is actively involved in supporting indigenous and ethnic minority women, including the Benet women, through the Cultural Entrepreneurship Project, which aims to promote their cultural identity and provide livelihood opportunities for these communities.

Introduction

The Benet, an Indigenous Minority Community in Eastern Uganda, has a rich cultural heritage reflected in their basketry traditions. Despite forceful eviction from their ancestral lands in Mt. Elgon Forest in 1983, which later became a National Park in 1992, the Benet community continues to preserve their cultural identity through basketry. The baskets are made from natural materials sourced from the National Park and are used for various purposes, including storing and serving food, and in cultural festivals. The practice and associated processes of making baskets also serves as a platform for cultural transmission, language preservation, and, recently, income generation for the community. However, challenges such as limited access to raw materials, climate change, modern education, and the passing on of skilled elders pose threats to the continuation of this tradition. Efforts by Benet local associations and organizations such as the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda aim to support the Benet community in safeguarding their cultural rights, promoting cultural entrepreneurship, and strengthening their income-generating potential.

The Benet people, their Homeland and Basketry

Uganda has a population of 46.5million people according to the National Housing and Population census (UBOS, 2024). The Benet, also known as Benets or Mosopisyek or Ndrobo (meaning the mountain people), estimated at 8,500 people, are among the indigenous minority groups living on the upper slopes of Mt. Elgon in Kapchorwa, Kween and Bukwo districts of the Sebei sub-region in Eastern Uganda (CCFU, 2023). The Benet people lived within the Mount Elgon Forest before it was made a Forest Reserve by the British colonial government in 1920. They were first

displaced in 1983, and in 2008, 178 Indigenous Benet families were evicted from their homes in the Mount Elgon National Park (Amnesty International, 2021). Until now, despite a consent judgment passed by the High Court of Uganda in 2005 to have the Benet resettled, they haven't been resettled.

Due to an almost lost connection with their homeland, the Benet community is at risk of losing its unique and distinct culture, which has guided them in maintaining their cultural values for generations. They attach special attention to the Mt. Elgon National Park and the Forest because they find several resources there, including indigenous medicine, raw materials for making baskets, pasture for cattle, and land for agriculture.

The art of basketry among the Benet is still revered. Baskets are made in different styles and shapes for particular uses and functions in their society. Basketry reflects the exceptional craftsmanship in their society.

Understanding Basketry among the Benet

The Benet people continue to hold basketry in high esteem, cherishing its numerous values within their society as this age-old practice has persisted for centuries. Baskets are made for specific purposes. They relied and still rely on baskets for gathering, storing, and preparing food, as well as for beauty, and performing festivals and rituals such as child-naming and male circumcision. Women use basketry cradles to carry babies at the back and wove basketry caps for personal adornment, although the latter is disappearing due to modernisation in fashion and clothing. Recently, baskets have been used as commodities for sale to their neighbouring communities and tourists.

According to Benna Chebet and David Mande, the Benet community uses more than nine types of baskets. The Kulungut, a large basket, holds great significance as it is used to store and transport the exhumed remains of important individuals such as fortune tellers, cultural leaders, and parents of twins. It also plays a role in divination and worship. On the other hand, the Karabet is used to store valuable items such as food, decorations, fruits, honey, and even money. For daily tasks, the Seswet basket is used for transporting food and winnowing, while the Teset or Kiset is a small basket used for sieving grains and filtering honey. Other types of baskets used in the community include the Ruttoruut, used to serve meat to important guests and in festivals; the Montit, employed to store large quantities of cereals and transport food in bulk; the Testap amisho, used to serve food alongside a calabash that serves as a sauce container; the Soyet, a hollow bamboo pipe used for storing water; and the Tempet, used as a house element, particularly as doors. Each basket has a specific role, highlighting the importance of basket-weaving in the community's culture and daily life.



An elder from the Benet community making crafts2024
© Aliguma Ahabyona Akiiki

Materials such as sisal, banana fibres, bamboo, papyrus reeds, palm leaves, and rapier grass are commonly used to weave the baskets and most of these materials are sourced from the Mount Elgon National Park. Baskets are often dyed using natural colours derived from local vegetation to create appealing designs, showcasing the exceptional traditional craftsmanship, skills, and knowledge of the Benet people. The size, shape, and features of their baskets are determined by their intended use, such as child naming ceremonies, housing, communication, serving food, food storage (granaries), and cultural festivals. Baskets, such as the Karabet, Teset or Kiset, and Seswet are commonly used, whereas Monsit and Ruttoruut are endangered due to the near extinction and limited access to their raw materials.

Basketry is clearly a diverse and multifaceted practice. It serves both practical purposes, such as simplifying household tasks, and broader societal functions. Moreover, the evolving role of basketry significantly contributes to the well-being of communities, including generating income that supports essential needs such as education and healthcare.

Basketry reveals a strong connection between the Benet and their surrounding environment, which they care for deeply. If well understood by modern conservationists, this could renew the Benet's sense of responsibility to further care for their environment, which they regard as their 'true source of life'.

Basketry—A Vehicle for Transmission of Culture, especially among Young People

In the Benet community, basketry serves as a vital platform for preserving cultural heritage, particularly the language and traditional skills. During evening sessions, skilled older women share their expertise with the youth, especially female family members, passing down techniques, patterns, and stories. This approach not only maintains the cultural significance of basketry but also preserves the Benet language, allowing the young generation to stay connected to their roots. Through these intimate sessions, community elders convey traditional values (such as conflict resolution, marriage, and conservation) and stories in their native language, ensuring the community's history and customs continue to thrive through the art of basketry.

However, the fact that many of young people spend a significant amount of time in schools poses a challenge to the transmission of skills and traditions related to basketry. The time spent in schools, although important for modern education, means that the young Benet do not have as much time to engage with their elders and learn about their cultural heritage. Many young Benets, like other Ugandans, are now more focused on acquiring formal education and careers, which do not necessarily involve the transmission of cultural heritage, especially for indigenous minority groups. The Ugandan education policy emphasises a thematic curriculum, which places focus on using a language of the dominant community in the thematic curriculum in lower primary schools (NCDC, 2018). In the case of the Benet, their language, Kumosop, is not used in schools because it has no recognised orthography; hence, the young Benet learn in Kupsabiny, the language of the dominant Sabin community.

This points to decreasing opportunities for cultural transmission and for young people to appreciate their culture and creativity rooted in their traditional practice.

Basketry—Supporting Household Incomes, Community Eco-tourism, and Association Development

Besides the cultural significance related to basketry, the Benet community is leveraging this practice to generate income to support their families in accessing necessities, including health care and education. A well-knit basket (for example, a 'seswet') costs approximately 15,000 Uganda Shillings (\$3).

Cultural tourism is gaining traction in Uganda. The Benet community's proximity to the Mount Elgon National Park, which receives local and foreign tourists who sometimes pass through the Benet community, have supported in buying their crafts that are distinct from other communities. Justine Chelangat, the Chairperson of the Benet Women's Handicraft Association, indicates that, income from their association supported her in educating four of her children, with one at university level. The association is supported by institutions such as the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) and ActionsAid Uganda.

Challenges

The skilled artisans who possess the indigenous knowledge and expertise related to basket weaving are passing away, resulting in limited opportunities for knowledge and skill transmission to the younger generation, ultimately threatening the continuity of the basketry practice among the Benet.

Access to raw materials, which are mostly located in the gazetted Mt. Elgon National Park (the former home of the Benet), is a serious challenge. As noted earlier, their expulsion from the park meant a lost connection with their homeland that they can only access with permission, which is rarely granted, and sometimes they are harassed when they attempt to access the park without permission. To address this, women are planting bamboo trees (the main raw material) in their small settlements. The changing seasons and soil fertility rarely support the growth of the bamboo trees outside the natural forest.

In an effort to monetize the traditional Benet baskets to generate income, the Benet women face the significant challenge of a growing demand for value-added baskets, which poses the risk of compromising the quality of the produced items.

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda’s Cultural Rights Programme and the Cultural Entrepreneurship Project.

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), a non-governmental organisation that promotes the recognition of culture as vital for human development, is actively supporting indigenous minority groups (IMGs) in Uganda through its cultural rights programme and the cultural entrepreneurship project.

As part of the Foundation’s cultural rights promotion programme, CCFU works to safeguard and promote the cultural rights and heritage of IMGs by supporting IMGs platforms in three regions of Uganda, Karamoja, West Nile, and Rwenzori to advocate for their cultural rights, document oral history, and commemorate the annual International Day for the World’s Indigenous Peoples.

The Cultural Entrepreneurship Project specifically targets women from IMGs, such as the Benet community, aiming to preserve and promote their unique cultural identity while empowering women from these communities to use their cultural resources to generate revenue by selling their crafts. The Foundation’s support for the Benet community has been multifaceted, primarily focusing on increasing the production and accessibility of their traditional crafts. Key interventions have included: facilitating access to essential raw materials by fostering partnerships with relevant stakeholders, such as the Uganda Wildlife Authorities; providing mini-grants to support the growth and development of their crafts-based enterprises; offering marketing and publicity



support to increase the visibility of their businesses both locally and regionally; organising and participating in regional and national exhibitions; and providing a platform for the Benet community to showcase their cultural heritage and crafts to a broader audience.

An elder from the Benet community making crafts
2023 © CCFU

Looking ahead

The Benet's basketry traditions hold profound cultural significance, embodying the community's history, identity, and values. Preserving this cultural heritage requires concerted efforts to protect their traditional practices amidst globalisation and cultural assimilation. Acknowledging and valuing the Benet's unique basketry will empower them to take pride in their cultural identity, ensuring the long-term survival of their traditions and skills.

The Benet community's livelihoods have been a longstanding concern since their eviction from the park. By supporting their cultural entrepreneurship endeavours, the Benet will capitalise on their skills to generate income and enhance their well-being, thereby fostering a connection between their socio-economic prosperity and the conservation of nature.



The chairperson of the Benet Women's group displaying crafts during the World's Day for Indigenous Peoples event held in Kween District 2024
© Aliguma Ahabyona Akiiki

To achieve this, institutions such as the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the National Forestry Authority should collaborate with the Benet on conservation efforts. This partnership has the potential to yield a holistic and sustainable conservation strategy, as the park's management benefits from the community's expertise and traditional knowledge, while the Benet simultaneously ensure the long-term viability of their cherished basketry practice.

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Résumé

Ce résumé explore le riche patrimoine culturel du peuple Benet tel qu'il se reflète dans leurs traditions de vannerie.

Originellement installée sur les pentes supérieures du Mont Elgon en Ouganda, la communauté Benet, un groupe ethnique autochtone minoritaire, a été contrainte de se relocaliser vers les plaines en 1992 lorsque la zone a été désignée comme parc national. Ce déplacement a entraîné la perte de leurs terres, mettant en péril leur identité culturelle et leurs pratiques traditionnelles, y compris l'art de la vannerie.

Dans leur vannerie, les matériaux couramment utilisés incluent le sisal, les fibres de bananier, le bambou, les roseaux de papyrus, les feuilles de palmier et l'herbe rapier, la plupart étant prélevés dans le parc national du Mont Elgon. Les paniers sont souvent teints à l'aide de colorants naturels issus de la végétation locale afin de créer des motifs attrayants, témoignant du savoir-faire traditionnel exceptionnel, des

compétences et des connaissances des Benet.

La taille, la forme et les caractéristiques de leurs paniers sont déterminées par leur usage prévu, tels que les cérémonies d'attribution de nom des enfants, le service de nourriture, le stockage des aliments (greniers), ainsi que lors des festivals culturels.

Les femmes Benet jouent un rôle important dans la transmission de leurs connaissances et compétences en vannerie aux jeunes générations, en particulier aux filles, favorisant un sentiment de fierté culturelle et générant un revenu. Les sessions de vannerie servent également de plateforme permettant aux aînés de transmettre leur sagesse sur le patrimoine culturel et les traditions, tout en facilitant des discussions sur des questions communautaires telles que la préservation du patrimoine, la résolution des conflits, l'agriculture et les remèdes à base de plantes. Les femmes perpétuent la tradition du tissage en conservant les paniers originaux qu'elles utilisaient dans les forêts.

L'un des défis auxquels fait face la communauté Benet est la négociation avec les autorités du parc pour accéder au bambou et aux autres matières premières nécessaires à la vannerie dans leur ancien territoire devenu parc national. Pour y faire face, les femmes plantent des pousses de bambou dans leurs nouveaux lieux d'habitation et profitent de cette occasion pour planter d'autres espèces d'arbres afin de prévenir les glissements de terrain et atténuer les effets du changement climatique dans leur communauté.

En prenant l'exemple de la communauté Benet, l'article explorera le rôle de la vannerie dans la transmission des savoirs autochtones, la conservation, la cohésion sociale et sa contribution aux moyens de subsistance, y compris le tourisme culturel.

La Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) s'implique activement dans le soutien aux femmes autochtones et issues de minorités ethniques, y compris les femmes Benet, à travers le projet d'entrepreneuriat culturel, qui vise à promouvoir leur identité culturelle et à offrir des opportunités de subsistance à ces communautés.

Aliguma Ahabyona Akiiki is a heritage conservationist living in Uganda, with 9 years' experience in heritage management, conservation, meaningful youth participation and communications. Aliguma currently holds the position of Heritage Programme and Communication Coordinator at the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU). In this role, Aliguma spearheads CCFU's Cultural Entrepreneurship Project for youth and women from indigenous minority groups, as well as the culture and conservation project. Aliguma has played a key role in documenting the oral history of various indigenous ethnic minority groups, such as the Benet people. Notably, in 2023, Aliguma took part in the UNESCO World Heritage Young Professionals Forum and the Africa World Heritage Youth Forum. Furthermore, Aliguma is a Commonwealth Scholar at the Open University.

Un panier pour transporter les humains : le canot d'écorce au Canada

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02

02. Un panier pour transporter les humains : le canot d'écorce au Canada

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Abstract

L'eau lèche les petites pierres qui forment une grève où venaient jadis accoster les canots faits d'écorce qui transportaient les amérindiens Anishinâbès (Algonquins) ou les voyageurs qui travaillaient pour le compte de la fameuse Compagnie de la Baie-d'Hudson, lesquels parcouraient avant l'avènement du train quelque 25 jours en canot depuis Montréal pour y faire commerce. L'endroit, non loin de Ville-Marie, abrite désormais la reconstruction du Fort Témiscamingue-Obedjiwan, ancien poste de traite de fourrures devenu musée et lieu historique fédéral.

« Oyez! Oyez! » Les employés du Fort attirent les visiteurs à travers les stations en incarnant des personnages truculents. De l'autre côté, à travers les jardins et les bâtiments, se trouve un tipi qui jouxte le hangar servant de lieu d'interprétation avec différents artefacts autochtones. C'est cet endroit, entre le boisé de conifères et le lac, qui a été choisi pour installer temporairement une autre tente, sans mur celle-là, qui cacherà nos secrets du soleil tapant de l'été ou de la pluie curieuse.

Durant quatre semaines de trois jours, six apprentis triés sur le volet¹ travaillent sous les instructions de Karl Chevrier à réaliser un canot traditionnel à base d'écorce de bouleau, autrefois moyen de transport principal sur les nombreux lacs et rivières du nord de l'Amérique du Nord – autant d'anciennes routes d'eau qui coulent encore comme les veines de la terre mère. Le stage est organisé par le Conseil québécois du patrimoine vivant (CQPV), ONG accréditée par la Convention de l'UNESCO de 2003 dont je suis le directeur général, dans le cadre du programme national des Maîtres de traditions vivantes, inspiré des systèmes de Trésors humains vivants de l'UNESCO. Monsieur Chevrier y a été intronisé grâce à la proposition de l'organisme local Minwashin. Cet atelier constitue l'une des très rares occasions d'apprendre cette technique ancestrale des Anishinâbès, ou plus globalement des Premières

1

La priorité a été donnée aux membres des Premières Nations, qui avaient deux semaines pour s'inscrire avant que l'offre ne soit lancée aux non-autochtones possédant un lien professionnel ou des affinités avec l'activité.

Nations, qui s'apparente à la fabrication de paniers en écorce, mais avec un degré de complexité supérieur. À notre connaissance, aucune autre formation de ce type n'a été dispensée dans les dernières décennies, alors que la transmission informelle à l'intérieur des familles ou entre amis est devenue quasi inexistante, en raison de l'utilisation généralisée d'embarcations en matériaux composites. S'il existe bel et bien des livres ou des films documentaires (comme le célèbre *César et son canot d'écorce*) à partir desquels un passionné peut tenter de reconstituer une telle embarcation, l'aide d'un mentor permet d'éviter les erreurs et, surtout, de comprendre la signification profonde de cette entreprise ardue.

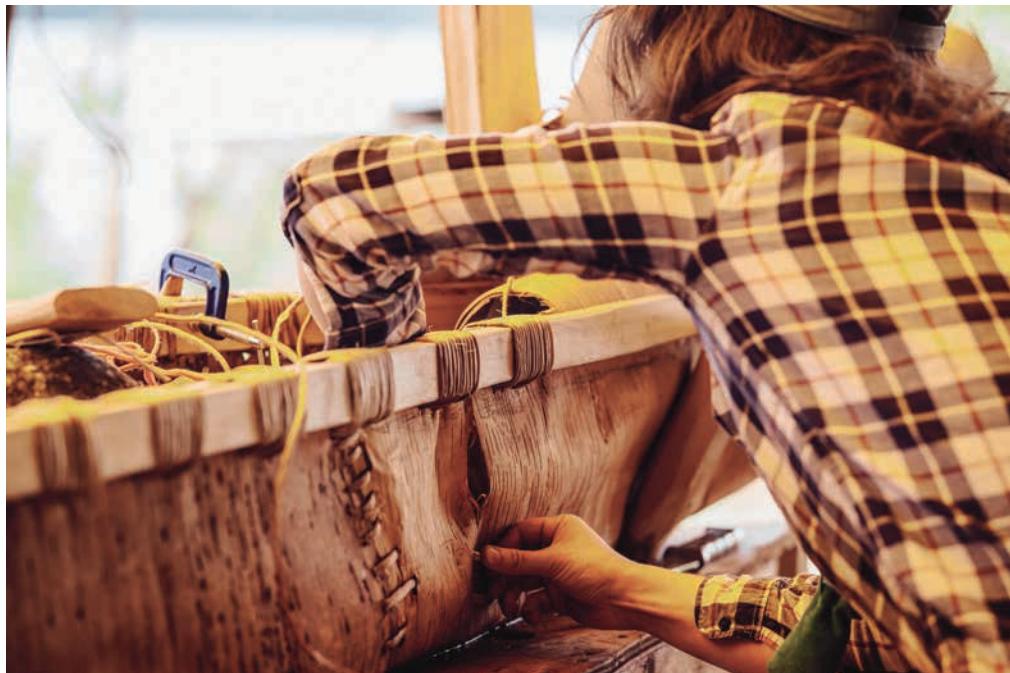
Introduction

Nous sommes sur les bords du majestueux lac Témiscamingue, qui élargit la rivière des Outaouais en traçant au nord la frontière entre les provinces de Québec et de l'Ontario, au Canada.

Attention : construction!

Venus des quatre coins du Québec, mesurant leur chance en parcourant parfois plus de mille kilomètres pour se rendre chaque semaine au Fort, les apprentis Peggy, Manuel, Myriam, Luc, Jeanne et Jacques sont plongés dès la première demi-journée

L'écorce de
bouleau est
cousue grâce
à des racines
d'épinette
© William Daigle



dans la terre. Dans l'effervescence, on entend quelques jurons polis qui s'adressent aux moustiques piqueurs, venus observer la scène. « J'ai fait un pacte avec les maringouins, rigole Karl avec son accent anglais. D'habitude, le ratio est de 100 piqûres pour trois racines. Pour moi, c'est plutôt une seule piqûre, 30 racines! Les mouches vont aller chercher leur repas sur vous autres! » Il faut pour commencer déterrer les racines d'épinette qui serviront à amarrer les parties du canot entre elles. Pas trop petites. Pas trop grosses. Assez longues. Elles seront grattées, séparées en deux sur la longueur, trempées puis bouillies pour garder leur flexibilité durant l'assemblage, avant de sécher et d'assurer une solidité sans faille. Tout de boue vêtu, les participants vont ensuite récolter la gomme d'épinette blanche qui, une fois filtrée, chauffée et mélangée à la graisse d'ours, servira à colmater le bateau en lui conférant ses rayures noires si caractéristiques. Éviter l'autre essence, l'épinette rouge, est salutaire sinon la mixture cristallisera et cassera avec le temps. Ils vont ensuite choisir la grande écorce de bouleau blanc (*Betula papyrifera*) qui servira de coque flottante. C'est une étape cruciale dans le processus : il faut d'abord repérer l'arbre idoine, mesuré à l'aune de nos bras, et détacher finement son écorce en un grand rectangle précieux, tout en le remerciant pour le don qu'il nous fait. « Écoute le son, si c'est sec, tu vas l'entendre », avertit Karl. C'est pour cette raison que notre événement a lieu fin juin, car l'écorce dite « de printemps » se détache mieux à cette époque que plus tôt ou plus tard dans l'été. Elle est aussi plus claire, flexible, assez épaisse et plus facile à enlever que celle d'hiver, également considérée, laquelle exhibe un teint plus brunâtre idéal pour graver des motifs sur certaines parties du canot. « Quand tu vis dans le bois, tu peux savoir qu'aussitôt que les lucioles sortent le soir, il est temps de ramasser l'écorce, précise le maître. Il faut être attentif à tout ce qui nous entoure. La forêt nous parle ».

Durant les jours et les semaines qui suivent, l'équipe assemble patiemment le joyau de bois. Sans clou, sans colle industrielle, sans moule ni outil électrique. Aux doigts et à l'œil! Littéralement. Précisément. Parfois à l'aide du fameux « couteau croche » si prisé des artisans autochtones. On a fabriqué des marteaux de bois, qui feront constamment l'objet de convoitise : « qui a vu le marteau? » Pendant que Jeanne fend et refend finement en feuilles, à mains nues, les lattes de cèdre qui constitueront les varangues – presqu'en dansant pour écarter en longueur le côté le plus épais du plus mince –; le feu, lui, assure la malléabilité des racines, utiles tant pour coudre l'écorce que pour fixer solidement les barrots et les plats-bords. « Une soupe de racines, ça nous rapproche de notre histoire! » blague à demi Manuel, fier représentant innu de Mashteuiatsh au Lac-St-Jean, et tout le monde de rire avant que quelqu'un n'ajoute : « On devrait mettre ça dans un 'Manuel' d'histoire ». Rires additionnels.

Le groupe a décidé d'inclure un joug de portage au lieu d'un simple barrot central, habilement gossé par Jacques, même si ce qui n'était pas pratique courante dans les canots anciens. Plus personne n'a la bosse du canot de nos jours. Ce morceau



Confection
d'un aviron
© William Daigle

de chair, source de fierté, était situé à la jointure du dos et du cou et croissait à force de portages, un peu comme chez les bossus. Une telle protubérance permettait d'appuyer sans douleur l'embarcation lors du transport à pied. Le joug de bois permet maintenant d'épouser la forme du corps et ainsi augmenter le confort.

Peggie, le bras dans le plâtre, arrive en retard aujourd'hui à la *Indian time!* parce qu'elle a cherché ce matin ses paniers en écorce confectionnés avec sa grande famille dans la communauté anishinâbèe au Lac-Simon, à plus de 200 kilomètres d'ici. Tout en travaillant d'une seule main à la façon sûre d'une expérimentée (« façonner ce type de panier est similaire à un canot »), elle raconte les campements communautaires et les ateliers familiaux au cours desquels elle et ses pairs réalisent de l'artisanat, du perlage, des jupes cousues, etc. La veille, elle a conté la légende du brochet et de l'esturgeon ainsi que la vie des Anishinâbès. Peggie évoque aussi les cérémonies comme la tente à suer dans lesquelles de grosses pierres représentant l'âme des grands-pères (les *mushums*) sont installées au centre de la tente, où l'on se purifie l'âme et le corps, accompagné d'un guérisseur chargé de guider spirituellement les participants. Elle a pu observer ce genre de pratique jusqu'au Mexique, où elle a voyagé et où elle a pu échanger avec les autochtones de l'endroit.

Au fur et à mesure qu'avance la construction, parfois en silence, tantôt au son d'un vieil album de Pink Floyd, le chef d'orchestre Karl Chevrier prodigue ses

enseignements. Celui qui est aussi artiste nous montre une photo d'une imposante sculpture incarnant deux femmes, qu'il a réalisé avec un collaborateur. L'œuvre a été choisie pour trôner devant une usine de batteries d'automobiles en Ontario précisément parce que, d'entre toutes les propositions, c'était la seule qui redonnait à la terre-mère en raison du fait que le métal employé rouillait, et donc allait en définitive se désagréger. Écoblanchiment ou réel souci environnemental de la part de l'industrie? Il reste que le message est le même ici : « C'est pas juste montrer à faire un canot que je suis venu faire, dit Karl, c'est enseigner à respecter l'humain et la nature. L'eau à boire. L'air à respirer. Le futur est pas rose, mais on peut le changer! À la fin de ta vie, tu redonnes le canot à la forêt, qui va se décomposer et retourner d'où il est venu. » Tel un panier qui dépose son passager pour une dernière fois, ce cercueil symbolique reverse la vie dans la nature, laquelle en fera d'autres paniers, d'autres humains, d'autres arbres, d'autres animaux... « Tu vas regarder la forêt d'une autre manière après ça. Tu vas marcher droit, avec cœur. Tu vas parcourir le territoire en te laissant imprégner de son sens », ajoute celui qui a lui-même appris auprès d'aînés de sa communauté, désormais l'un des rares porteurs de ce savoir, et qui le transmet à son tour aux jeunes ou à des personnes qui connaissent des difficultés liées à l'alcool ou à la drogue, qui affectent encore bon nombre de communautés au pays. Un chemin de guérison qu'il connaît. Le discours proféré lors de la remise de la statuette des Maîtres de traditions vivantes, devant famille et amis adjoints à l'assemblée pour l'occasion, fut émouvant. Ce n'est sans doute pas pour rien que le canot est *animé* en langue algonquine² : il possède une âme.

Voici le moment d'incorporer des pièces d'une impressionnante technologie, invisibles une fois le bateau terminé, qui formeront de leur volute la proue et la poupe (en réalité interchangeable parce que symétrique), avec leur caisson respectif. La construction de l'embarcation d'une longueur d'environ 15 pieds en est à ses dernières étapes, qu'un aviron taillé dans un billot viendra compléter. Sa forme éprouvée depuis la nuit des temps permet à la fois légèreté, bonne charge, maniabilité, faible tirant d'eau et excellente ligne sur l'eau. Elle permet aussi d'éviter de « dessaler » trop facilement, mot inventé par les anciens voyageurs lorsque chavirer dans les rapides propulsait leur réserve de viande salée dans l'eau, la dessalant par la même occasion³.

Le cinéaste que nous avons embauché pour documenter l'aventure réalise en parallèle un film sur la forêt pour la télévision. En mangeant nos sandwichs du midi, il me fait part de la saga de la protection d'une forêt mature de 500 ans, objet de son documentaire, dont l'âge n'était pas suffisant en lui-même pour assurer la pérennité; les protagonistes se sont plutôt servis d'une rare orchidée endémique qui, elle, a tenu tête à l'industrie forestière. Le canot d'écorce contribuera peut-être à sa

1
Les mots en anishnabè-mowen, et dans les langues algonquiennes en général, se divisent en catégories syntaxiques animée et inanimée, un peu comme le féminin et le masculin en français.

2
L'Office québécois de la langue française avance sur son site web une origine alternative à ce terme: « L'origine du mot dessalage est intéressante. Il semble qu'à la suite de leurs voyages en mer, les Inuits, inventeurs du kayak, avaient l'habitude de se retourner avec leur embarcation dans une étendue d'eau non salée. Ils rinçaient ainsi les peaux dont étaient fabriqués leurs vêtements et leur kayak pour éviter que le sel de la mer ne les détériore. Le retournement était donc effectué pour dessaler les peaux. Le nom a ensuite été conservé pour désigner la manœuvre elle-même. » (vitrinelinguistique. oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/ fiche-gdt/ fiche/17050247/ dessalage : page consultée le 26 sept. 2024)

façon à mieux protéger nos ressources naturelles par le message qu'il véhiculera aux générations présentes et futures.

Des retombées

Le canot d'écorce est bien plus qu'un simple moyen de transport; il symbolise une connexion profonde avec la nature et un savoir-faire ancestral transmis de génération en génération au sein des nations autochtones, notamment les Anishinâbës de la région de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue, puis des aventuriers qui ont sillonné le vaste territoire jusqu'au 20e siècle. Aujourd'hui, alors que le monde moderne a largement remplacé ces techniques par des procédés industriels, la sauvegarde de cette tradition est essentielle pour préserver non seulement une technologie séculaire, mais aussi une relation spirituelle et culturelle à l'environnement. Une vision du territoire.



Autour
de la proue
© William Daigle

transmission des savoir-faire traditionnels au Québec et au Canada. À l'heure où l'importance des cultures et des identités autochtones est de plus en plus célébrée, ce genre d'expérience permet de tisser des ponts entre les communautés et d'ancrer un respect mutuel autour d'un projet concret.

L'objectif des séances d'apprentissage à Ville-Marie était moins d'assurer la formation d'une main-d'œuvre qualifiée pour un marché de vente, lequel demeure passablement limité, que de générer une relève pour transmettre adéquatement la façon et les valeurs associées au canot d'écorce – dans des cas comme celui-ci, la logique de production est remplacée en quelque sorte par une offre de services de médiation ou de pédagogie. Cet atelier pratique fait partie d'une série de formations professionnelles organisées par le CQPV sur des connaissances qui sont souvent peu ou pas présentes dans les cursus de l'école publique. Certaines formations s'inscrivent

Une conception alternative du temps. Grâce à des initiatives comme celle-ci, le canot d'écorce, loin de tomber dans l'oubli, trouve une nouvelle vie et inspire des projets qui mêlent médiation culturelle et développement durable. Pour beaucoup, cet apprentissage représente aussi un acte de réconciliation avec le passé, à la fois récent et millénaire, ainsi qu'une reconnaissance de la richesse de l'héritage autochtone au pays. L'atelier s'inscrit dans une démarche plus large de



au sein de l'initiative des Maîtres de traditions vivantes, qui a reconnu par ailleurs un fabricant micmac de paniers tressés traditionnels en frêne noir nommé Stephen Jerome, originaire de de Gesgapegiag, avec lequel nous avons monté des ateliers de démonstration et un balado (podcast) en compagnie de l'artiste vannière Nathalie Levasseur. Ce stage fait également suite à une étude des besoins en formation réalisée par l'ONG dans le secteur des embarcations de bois, qui avait notamment repéré des enjeux majeurs de transmission intergénérationnelle. Le document, paru en 2021 dans la collection « Les traditions culturelles du Québec en chiffres » (volume 7), est disponible en PDF pour consultation gratuite en ligne. J'en profite pour remercier la Commission des partenaires du marché du travail et le ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec pour leur soutien, de même que Gilles Pitre, chargé de projet au CQPV, et le conseiller pédagogique Sébastien Gauthier pour son accompagnement préparatoire.

**Discussion
technique entre
deux fabricants
de canots**
© Antoine Gauthier

En Conclusion

À la fin des quatre semaines de chantier, le canot n'était pas tout à fait terminé – à l'image du chemin qu'il reste à la tradition pour nous enseigner tous ses secrets.



**Remise
honorifique du
titre de Maître
de traditions
vivantes à Karl
Chevrier**
© William Daigle

Luc était le seul fabricant professionnel de canots du groupe : il construit depuis des décennies des canots de cèdre entoilés, dignes descendants des canots d'écorce, avec son entreprise artisanale Les Canots Lost River. Son vieux rêve d'apprendre à réaliser une embarcation à base d'écorce de bouleau assouvi, il ira chercher le produit fini au Témiscamingue une fois la dernière main appliquée par Karl Chevrier, profitant de l'occasion pour l'essayer sur un lac, tel un coureur des bois des temps modernes. Peut-être chantera-t-il en pagayant le refrain de la vieille chanson traditionnelle « Canot d'écorce qui vole, qui vole / canot d'écorce qui va voler! » L'histoire ne le dit pas! Peut-être aussi que Myriam, participante au projet et d'ordinaire éclusière pour Parcs Canada, développera des initiatives de médiation culturelle tout en maniant son ascenseur pour bateaux! Qui sait, le CQPV se servira-t-il pour sa part de cet esquif pour piloter de nouvelles expériences culturelles au gré des vagues. En tout cas, si on regarde à travers les branches, d'autres initiatives découlant du projet semblent déjà se profiler à l'horizon.

Summary

On the shores of majestic Lake Temiscaming, which widens the Ottawa River and forms the northern boundary between the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario, six apprentices are working under the instruction of Karl Chevrier to create a traditional birchbark canoe, built using the same technique as the smaller bark baskets, but in a more complex form. The four-week, three-day course is organised by the NGO Quebec Council for Living Heritage (CQPV) as part of the national Masters of Living Traditions programme. It represents one of the rare opportunities to learn this ancestral technique of the Anishinaabe, or more generally of the First Nations of North America. Few training courses of this type have been offered in recent decades, and informal transmission within families or between friends has become virtually non-existent.

Coming from all over Quebec, participants consider themselves fortunate by traveling sometimes over a thousand kilometres to reach the workshop site. The team patiently builds the boat without nails, industrial glue, or power tools. From harvesting spruce gum, birch bark, and cedar trunks in the forest, to patching the seams made from roots, and installing ribs and bowsprits, the boat is built in several demanding stages. Mr. Chevrier guides the process—documented for educational purposes thanks to the work of a filmmaker—with humour and rigour.

The birchbark canoe is much more than a simple means of transport; it symbolises a deep connection with nature and ancestral know-how handed down from generation to generation. Today, as the modern world has largely replaced these techniques with industrial processes, safeguarding this tradition is essential to not only for preserving an age-old technology, but also for maintaining a spiritual and cultural relationship with the environment. A vision of the land. Thanks to initiatives like this one, the birchbark canoe, far from falling into oblivion, is finding new life and inspiring projects that combine cultural mediation and sustainable development. For many, this learning also represents an act of reconciliation with the past, both recent and ancient, as well as a celebration of the country's rich heritage.

The workshop is part of a broader initiative to pass on traditional know-how in Quebec and Canada. At a time when the importance of native cultures and identities is increasingly recognised, this kind of initiative helps to build bridges between communities and anchor mutual respect around a concrete project. Other spin-offs from the project are already on the horizon.

Antoine Gauthier a agi comme directeur général du Conseil québécois du patrimoine vivant (CQPV) de 2009 à 2025, une ONG accréditée dans le cadre de la Convention de 2003 élue membre de l'Organe d'évaluation en 2023. Au sein de cet organisme de regroupement, il a mené plusieurs projets, consultations, colloques, formations et publications. À titre d'expert en patrimoine culturel immatériel et de spécialiste de cette Convention de l'UNESCO de 2003, il est régulièrement amené à donner des conférences et des ateliers. Plusieurs de ses articles sont parus dans des ouvrages nationaux ou internationaux. Le Forum des ONG du PCI a également été co-fondé par ses soins. M. Gauthier détient une maîtrise des Hautes études internationales de l'Université Laval ainsi qu'une maîtrise en philosophie de l'Université de Montréal. Il a précédemment œuvré au sein de l'Organisation des villes du patrimoine mondial. À titre de musicien folklorique et de chercheur, il a été plusieurs fois boursier des conseils des arts du Québec et du Canada.

Traditional Basketry at the Musteika Weaving Week

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03

03. Traditional Basketry at the Musteika Weaving Week

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Abstract

The traditional Weaving Week (a camp for crafts teaching) has been organized since 2000. The Weaving Week is well known throughout Lithuania. The Camp takes place annually in Musteika Village (Southern Lithuania) and is very popular for the preservation of and bringing back of the hollow tree apiary business, ancient fencing and roofing methods as well as weaving of "kašelės" (sapwood baskets) and bread baking. The traditional village is surrounded by the forests, far away from civilization, where the traditions of the craft had been preserved for a very long time.

The goal of the Weaving Week is to pass on the weaving craft and ensure its viability and continuity. Local craftsmen offer their help during the Camp in teaching the craft of weaving as well as introducing other crafts of this region. Every year at the end of July the village is filled with weaving of "kašikai" (baskets), "kašelės" (sapwood baskets), "gorčiai" (wooden boxes), ropes and other household utensils, making of traditional musical instruments used by herds, tying straw decorations, candle making and other traditions. The attendees of the Weaving Week learn about various forms of craftsmanship by working with different natural materials (which they are encouraged to prepare themselves on the site) and by trying out different craft techniques. They use pine roots, withes, chips, birch bark, cat's-tails, and straws for weaving, make ropes of linden fibre and arrange tied straw decorations and birds.

According to Romas Norkūnas, the organizer of the Weaving Week and the resident of Musteika Village, a wicker woven cradle, a self-made axe handle, a small item made of bark or clay, and even the possibility to stay over night in a tent by a campfire stimulate imagination and inspire the desire to get together again, to learn and create. He believes that the opportunity to experience the past lies in

every activity when a freshly pine root is touched or bitch bark peeled off. It is not about learning how to mould amateur clay cups but rather about contributing to the living heritage, he says. This message was already conveyed to as many as 1165 participants of the Weaving Camp. As the photo-gallery proves, which is being displayed here since 2000, approximately 90 people come to this camp every year, and many of them have experienced this more than once. Also, there is a generation of children who grew up and keeps attending this safeguarding practice.

Introduction

Weaving Week is organized by the Dzūkija National Park Directorate. Weaving Week takes place in Musteika, a village renowned for its traditional crafts and trades. It has nurtured a new generation of weavers, keeping the art of weaving alive. Residents of Musteika village share their knowledge, organize, and showcase their skills at events facilitated by crafters or performers. Some members of NGOs (such as "Musteikos pirkia," "Dangaus soda,i" "Samanukės," "Verpéjos," and "Lietuvos drevininkai") participate and get inspired by Weaving Week and afterward integrate weaving practices or skills into their activities.

Over the years, a close-knit community of Weaving Week participants has emerged, maintaining connections year-round and even planning their vacations to coincide with the camp's schedule. Long-time participants have naturally transitioned

Annual tradition
of the Weaving
Camp - a
common photo of
the participants
2024 © Jonas
Tumasonis



into mentoring roles, guiding newcomers, introducing innovative weaving techniques, and inspiring fresh activities. Much like a basket woven from diverse natural materials, Weaving Week is woven from diverse contributions brought by institutional and individual, public and non-governmental initiatives.

Basketry, one of the oldest crafts in human history, is related to four of the five domains of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as outlined in UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: oral traditions, social practices, knowledge concerning nature, and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003). Weaving in Lithuania is an ancient craft, with each village having its own weaver who made baskets for the everyday needs of the community. Such baskets were primarily used for storing potatoes and other vegetables, mushrooms, and berries. Weavers also crafted seedlips, sifters, covered woven containers for storing feed, grain, flour, and cheese, as well as bast shoes and cradles. Seedlings and young plants in farms, gardens, pastures, and forests were often protected by woven fences. The materials for weaving—hazel and willow rods and chips, bark, reeds, osiers, spruce and pine roots, and rye straws—were readily available in nature. In Lithuania today, weaving activities and basketry serve as both artistic endeavors and ways to strengthen community ties, promote environmental stewardship, and safeguard cultural heritage.

Weaving from natural materials such as roots, bark, birch bark, reeds, straw, and other organic resources is a traditional craft that has been preserved to this day. For example, in 2023, the tradition of splitting logs and making split-rail fences (Lith. štankietai) was proposed by the Musteika village community "*Musteikos pirkia*," and included in the Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory of Lithuania. Musteika village crafters Antanas Zaliauskas and Romas Norkūnas have been transmitting the tradition of wood splitting, basket weaving, and making split-rail fences to members of the village community (Tradition of Splitting, 2024)

In Lithuania, the art of weaving has not only been a way of producing essential items for everyday use but also a cultural expression deeply rooted in rural daily life. Today, this craft has gained renewed interest through various educational programs and events, such as the annual Weaving Week, a camp for teaching crafts, in Musteika village. This event brings people from all walks of life together to learn traditional knowledge and skills while experiencing a sense of community in nature. An article on Weaving Week at Dzūkija National Park is published on the website of good safeguarding practices in the Baltic and Nordic regions. (Good practice, 2024)

Every year, the village of Musteika, located in Dzūkija National Park, becomes a meeting place for weavers and craft enthusiasts. The weaving camp here takes on more meaning than simply imparting technical skills—it fosters traditional weaving practices, strengthens the community, and opens doors to new creative experiments. The phenomenon of Musteika Weaving Week not only demonstrates how traditions

can be preserved but also creates new methods to pass them on to the next generation.

This article explores ongoing projects related to weaving and basketry during Musteika Weaving Week, examining the challenges of safeguarding traditional skills and the methodologies adopted to ensure their transmission.

The Origins and Development of Weaving Camps

Weaving Week began in 2000, when the first camp was held by the Gruda River in Marcinkonys village. The early years were full of challenges, from rainy weather and swollen pine roots to the heat of the sun and swarms of mosquitoes. However, the first camp participants defied the odds, as each person had the opportunity to connect with a traditional craft and experience harmony with nature.

Weaving from
willow wicker
2024 © Dalia
Blažulionytė

Romas Norkūnas, the founder and organizer of the camp, and a resident of Musteika community, recalls the first camp: It was in 2000, by the Gruda River. "I remember being very tired; I felt like my body was made of stone. I could fall asleep



anywhere. We slept outside by the fire, collecting oregano and soaking weaving materials in the Gruda River. The materials sometimes floated away. We caught them, returned them to the weaving area, and then they floated away again. Later, we learned how to handle these materials in still waters."

The first camp was just the beginning, but soon the weavers began gaining more experience. Each year, not only did their technical skills improve, but the camp itself also evolved—becoming a place where masters and beginners from all corners of Lithuania gather to learn the secrets of this delicate craft.



Pine root weaving is particularly delicate 2024
© Jonas Tumasonis

Challenges in Safeguarding Traditional Basketry

One of the primary challenges in safeguarding the craft of basketry is ensuring the availability of raw materials. Weaving has always been closely linked to nature and the choice of materials, with weavers using various natural resources: pine roots, strips, spruce needles, and birch bark. When used for weaving, plants and trees like willows and birches require careful management and sustainable harvesting practices.

The following vignette reflects the experience of the organizer. Birch bark is a natural treasure that I value highly, as well as birch wood. The birch bark was used to make traditional shoes. Old sawdust was also good for that. We even have two archaic baskets of birch bark in the tree-related beekeeping exhibition of the museum. It is an extraordinary material for crafts and those who understand it can enjoy the possibilities it offers. Birch bark should be prepared in consultation with a forester because the tree must also be respected. That is why we try to find out in advance about where deforestation is planned, where we can procure some birch bark (Norkūnas, 2025).

While traditional methods were the predominant approach in the initial camps, over the years weavers have begun to explore new techniques and materials, adapting modern methods. One of the most interesting traditions of the camp is the experimental approach to weaving. For example, Musteika camp participants have begun to use not only traditional roots but also modern materials and techniques, keeping the craft alive and relevant to today's society.

Another challenge is the transmission of knowledge. Many artisans practicing traditional basketry are growing old, and engaging younger generations has proven

difficult. To address this, certain NGOs have introduced flexible learning schedules, digital tools to document techniques, and adapted workshops to be more inclusive for different age groups. For example, in 2024, the local festival "Čiulba ulba" (organized by the NGO "Samanukės"), dedicated to the promotion of the traditional culture of the Dzūkija region, included not only weaving lessons but also a separate event for basketry, where artisans who had learned to weave baskets during the Musteika Weaving Week shared their experience. (Paporyk apé, 2024)

Methodologies for Transmitting Traditional Knowledge

The transmission of traditional basketry knowledge relies heavily on apprenticeship programs, where younger participants are paired with experienced master weavers. This hands-on approach facilitates the transfer of skills and cultural context. The staff of Dzūkija National Park uses this practice for the transmission of tree beekeeping skills as well.

During Musteika Weaving Week, workshops emphasize experiential learning, encouraging participants to not only master the technical aspects of weaving but also appreciate the social and cultural significance of the craft. By framing the craft within its historical and environmental context, these programs help instill a deeper connection to the tradition.

This approach has been particularly effective with baskets (Lith. *kašelės*) woven from pine strips. Romas Norkūnas had long observed the master crafter of Musteika village and learned how to weave them. The need to weave these baskets arose when the mushroom-picking tradition was included in the Lithuanian Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory and introduced in Weaving Week as an activity. Light and strong baskets (*kašelės*) woven from strips obtained by splitting logs are an indispensable tool for mushroom and berry picking in the region of Southern Dzūkija.

Baskets of pine strips 2024
© Jonas Tumasonis



However, the most important aspect of developing weaving techniques is skill. Romas notes that the skill of braiding Baskets of Pine strip fully be developed after about twenty years. However, there are examples of young people who have learned this technique in just two years of attending Weaving Week. The key is having the opportunity to observe, try, and learn. Sometimes this need can be met by recording information. The National Park's specialists are documenting techniques



through digital archives that include videos, written instructions, and interviews with master artisans. This ensures that even if direct transmission becomes difficult, the knowledge will remain accessible. The National Park's cultural heritage archive contains audio, video, and photo material on different crafts.

Since the first weaving camp, one of the main objectives has been to pass on the tradition of weaving to the younger generation. What made the Musteika camps remarkable was that there was no boundary between masters and beginners—everyone was welcome to join in and learn. For example, the children's braiding group established at the camp became not only a weaving school but also a means of bringing the community together. Children and their parents worked together to weave baskets, share knowledge, and create new ways of communication.

The camps' organizer Romas Norkūnas gained experience working with children while organizing an after-school activity group. His experience is reflected in the following quote.

Evaldas learned to weave basket at the Weaving Week 2024 © Dalia Blažulionytė

Weaving Week originated from the work done with the children's weaving group. During the winter, up to 20 children used to come to the weaving group. It's unbelievable how you can work with such a group. Children should first have time to run and frolic freely after 6–7 lessons without movement. When they came to our basement, they stayed hyperactive for about an hour. Children used to make big snowbanks and jump from the second-floor balcony into them. And nobody got hurt, it was just a bit of adrenaline, which the children missed a lot during lessons. We used to play with the ball too. But the best way to restart after school was to pour cold water over it... At times our weaving class was full of water. We were soaking the weaving materials and each other. And despite all this, or because of it, a very lively relationship developed between us. It wasn't just the weaving that was important to us. The spark of trust between us was also key. It was worth sacrificing a comfortable, no-risk situation, where everything is done very methodically and tidily. I also remember moments when all 20 children had braiding materials in their hands. And it wasn't important what and how much they used weaving; it was important to feel that everyone could do it. (Norkūnas, 2025)

As the rural population declines and schools close, children have gone to other schools—some to Varėna, some to Merkinė, and others to Druskininkai. But thanks to the initiative of Romas Norkūnas, the weaving group is still alive. Adults are joining the weaving group, with a lot of potential and desire to weave. There is a great wish to revive this dying craft. At the moment, their groups are working extensively with different ethnographic finds, copying or restoring them.

This intergenerational connection was particularly important because the craft of basket weaving is not only a technique but also a community tradition that needs to be passed on along with cultural values. Through these activity groups and camps, the active participation of the community is encouraged, contributing to a deeper understanding of why it is important to preserve this heritage.

Basketry as a Tool for Community Strengthening

In addition to safeguarding skills, basketry plays a vital role in **community strengthening**. The process of weaving often requires collaboration, and during the Musteika Weaving Week, participants form strong social bonds as they work together

on larger projects. The natural setting of the event further promotes a sense of connection to both nature and each other.

Many participants in Musteika Weaving Week have shared their experiences, highlighting both the personal and cultural significance. For instance, one participant mentioned that learning traditional weaving techniques helped them reconnect with their family's rural heritage. For most attendees, the week is more than just learning a skill—it is about strengthening a sense of identity. The practical act of weaving becomes a medium through which participants explore the interconnectedness of people, nature, and culture.

Participants learn all this in the shelter of nature, near the tree-beekeeping apiary and museum on the outskirts of the village, where the bees also live. The participants of the camp, some of whom come with their families and small children, are not deterred by the occasional drizzle or swarms of mosquitoes. Living in tents and cooking meals on a campfire is even exotic for some. One of the camp's regulars, Ana Says, "My friends laugh: haven't you learned to weave in all these years? Of Course I have, but now, I don't just go to weave, I also go to talk to people interested in weaving, and I go to meditate by the fire in nature" (Averkiene, 2019).

The most experienced weaver has been involved in the activities since the first Weaving Week 2024 © Dalia Blažulionytė





Members of the Musteika village community also participate in the camp 2024 © Dalia Blažulionytė

Preserving Tradition and Community: The Musteika Phenomenon

The village of Musteika has become a center of weaving traditions not only because of its longevity but also because of the enthusiasm of the local community. One of the ambassadors of this tradition is Antanas Zaliauskas, a 95-year-old elder of Musteika, who actively participated in the organization of the camp and encouraged the local population to join. Musteika has become a living example of how a rural community can preserve and develop a traditional craft while promoting social and cultural interaction.

How did Musteika come to be a hub of the weaving? Romas Norkunas answers that the community here is very active and embraces both tree beekeeping and modern beekeeping as part of its identity. The village community is also very keen to take on the weaving camp, as well as traditions like hunting, which are deeply ingrained in the identity of Musteika.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Although Musteika weaving camps are attracting more visitors every year, they also face new challenges. First, the drop in the number of young people in the villages is making it more difficult to attract the younger generation to the craft of weaving. Changes in nature, limited availability of materials, climate change, and the loss of skilled masters are all affecting traditional weaving technologies. Passing on knowledge and skills requires significant time and perseverance, but the generational turnover is too rapid without urgent preventive actions. Despite these challenges, Musteika weavers continue to keep the craft alive. Cooperation with local and international partners, new training programs, and camps are ways to ensure this tradition survives.

Conclusion: Good Safeguarding Practices to Preserve Traditional Basketry

The Musteika Weaving Week demonstrates that traditional crafts like basketry can thrive when integrated into broader cultural and community initiatives. By focusing

on education, environmental sustainability, and social engagement, the staff of the Dzūkija National Park, NGOs, and local artisans create a robust model for safeguarding traditional crafts and cultural practices.

Challenges remain, such as the transmission of knowledge and the sustainable use of resources. However, innovative approaches like apprenticeships and digital documentation offer hope. Basketry, as a living tradition, continues to evolve and adapt, ensuring its relevance in contemporary society.

By supporting projects that enhance cultural traditions and community engagement, we help safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, ensuring it remains a vital part of our communities for generations to come.

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Résumé

Depuis l'an 2000, la Semaine du Tissage (un camp consacré à l'enseignement des savoir-faire artisanaux) est organisée chaque année. Bien connue à travers toute la Lituanie, cette semaine se déroule dans le village traditionnel de Musteika, situé dans le sud du pays. Le camp est particulièrement réputé pour la préservation et la relance de l'apiculture dans les arbres creux, des techniques anciennes de clôture et de couverture, ainsi que pour le tressage de « kašelės » (paniers en bois tendre) et la cuisson traditionnelle du pain. Ce village, isolé au cœur des forêts et éloigné de la civilisation, a su conserver ces traditions artisanales pendant de longues années.

L'objectif principal de la Semaine du Tissage est de transmettre le savoir-faire lié au tressage et d'en assurer la viabilité et la continuité. Les artisans locaux participent activement au camp en enseignant leur métier et en présentant d'autres savoir-faire propres à la région. Chaque année, à la fin du mois de juillet, le village s'anime autour de nombreuses activités : tressage de « kašikai » (paniers), de « kašelės » (paniers en bois tendre), de « gorčiai » (boîtes en bois), fabrication de cordes, d'ustensiles domestiques, d'instruments de musique traditionnels utilisés par les bergers, confection de décos en paille nouée, fabrication de bougies, et bien d'autres traditions encore.

Les participants de la Semaine du Tissage découvrent ainsi une large palette de savoir-faire en travaillant directement avec des matériaux naturels qu'ils sont encouragés à récolter sur place : racines de pin, rameaux, copeaux, écorce de bouleau, massettes, paille... Ils fabriquent des cordes en fibres de tilleul, des décos de paille nouée, des oiseaux en paille, etc.

Selon Romas Norkūnas, organisateur de la Semaine du Tissage et habitant du village de Musteika, un berceau en osier, un manche de hache fait main, un petit objet en écorce ou en argile, et même le simple fait de passer la nuit sous une tente près du feu de camp, stimulent l'imagination et nourrissent le désir de se retrouver, d'apprendre et de créer. Il affirme que chaque activité, qu'il s'agisse de toucher une racine de pin fraîche ou de décoller l'écorce d'un bouleau, permet de renouer avec le passé vivant. Il ne s'agit pas simplement d'apprendre à modeler des tasses en argile, mais de participer à un patrimoine vivant, dit-il.

Depuis sa création, le camp de tissage a accueilli pas moins de 1165 participants. Comme en témoigne la galerie photo visible sur place depuis 2000, environ 90 personnes participent chaque année, et beaucoup reviennent d'une année sur l'autre. Une génération d'enfants a même grandi avec cette pratique de sauvegarde, qu'elle continue à faire vivre.

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Milda Valančiauskienė is a PhD student in the Faculty of History of the Vilnius University (Department of the Theory of History and Cultural History, since 2020). Since 1998 she has worked as Cultural Programmes Coordinator at the Secretariat of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO, following the implementation process of the UNESCO's 2003 Convention and taking part in its statutory meetings. Since 2019 she has been the Chair of the Council of Ethnic Culture and Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the Member of the Council of Culture and Arts – both advisory bodies to the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. Since 2021 she has been a member of the Association of Lithuanian Anthropologists.

Fostering Basketry Making in a Museum

Frank Hemeltjen

Susanne Bergwerff

Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage



04. Fostering Basketry Making in a Museum

Frank Hemeltjen

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Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage

Abstract

Crafts are a special focus of the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage (KIEN). Among other projects, this has resulted in the Crafts Workplace, situated in the Dutch Open Air Museum, that has been developed in partnership between the Dutch Openair Museum and KIEN. This Workplace offers many opportunities to make visitors acquainted with crafts(persons) and their important and current role in our society. Visitors of the museum can participate for example in workshops in blue printing or wood working.

This year basketry is one of the themes in the Crafts Workplace. In three activities the craft of basketry will be made visible. There will be a workshop for visitors, a masterclass for those who want to increase their basketry skills and a day of demonstrations in the museum. In this last activity attention is given to different styles and functions of baskets that suit the different historical buildings in the museum: from fruit baskets to bee hives.

In the article for #HeritageAlive we would focus on the relationship between the basket makers and the museum and the role that museums can play in safeguarding through the three different activities described above. In addition, we will discuss the role of the crafts people towards visitors of the museum and current functions of baskets and basketry in for example, a more sustainable way of producing and living.

Through interviews we will incorporate the voices of the makers. Main questions would be: How did the craftspeople experience the cooperation with the museum? How do the activities contribute to safeguarding the craft? What role does the historical perspective on the craft of basketry play in safeguarding? On the other hand, we will present the perspective of the museum. What role do they see for themselves in safeguarding this craft?

Introduction

One of the primary tasks of the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage (DCICH) is to make intangible heritage visible. One of the main ways the DCICH does this is through the Inventory Intangible Heritage in the Netherlands. Since 2014, 'weaving of objects' has been inscribed in this inventory, and via this catalogue, the Association of Weavers (Vereniging van Vlechters) shows how they safeguard the craft of weaving. Members of the association practise not only basketry but also chair caning or the weaving of other objects such as carpet beaters or artistic and decorative pieces. The Association has around 250 members from both the Netherlands and Belgium.

As advisor Safeguarding and Public awareness at DCICH, a department of the Dutch Open Air Museum, Frank Hemeltjen initiated the collaboration between the Association of Weavers and the museum by suggesting celebrating the association's 20th anniversary at the Open Air Museum. The result, a two-day Masterclass in basketry by Mieke Langenhuizen and a two-day Weaving Festival took place at the Dutch Open Air Museum in 2024. These events gave the craft of basketry and weaving a broad stage and supported the community of Weavers.

In this article, we, as part of the team at DCICH, focus on the collaboration between the heritage community (the Association of Weavers) and the Dutch Open-Air Museum, and the role that museums can play in safeguarding. Which aspects of safeguarding emerged in this cooperation? We focus on the visibility of the craft, social connections between the weavers, knowledge exchange, recruiting new weavers, and room for innovation of the craft. We will also discuss the collaboration itself, the benefits for the museum, and the possibilities for a more sustainable collaboration.

Intangible Heritage in Museums

A lot of research has been done in recent years on the collaboration between museums and practitioners of intangible heritage, and what steps are necessary to take (Alivizatou, 2012; Sousa, 2018; Blake, 2018). Important within this research is, in our view, the Intangible Cultural Heritage & Museum Project (2017–2020) that explored practices surrounding intangible cultural heritage within museums in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, and France, and the practical tools developed in this project (Nikolić Derić, 2020). In addition, ICOM's renewed museum definition in 2022 also gave an extra boost to museums to include intangible heritage in their practice. Based on its own experiences, the DCICH also released the publication 'A Museum Stage for Intangible Heritage: Experiences with Co-creation' in 2023. In this publication, lessons learned are shared from four case studies, intended to offer inspiration to museum professionals. A key conclusion that emerged is that collaboration between heritage communities and a museum can create win-win situations. Important conditions for this are the genuine involvement of both parties and shared ownership of the project (Bakels, 2023).

The Crafts Workplace

Crafts are a special focus of the DCICH. Among other projects, this has resulted in the Crafts Workplace, situated in the Dutch Open Air Museum. In this Workplace, the two-day Masterclass Basketry took place. Since its foundation in 1918, there has been a focus on crafts at the Open Air Museum, originally stemming from a fear that crafts would disappear due to the Industrial Revolution. Demonstrations were started to keep these crafts alive.

This Crafts Workplace offers many opportunities to make visitors acquainted with crafts (persons). Visitors can participate in workshops in, for example, blue printing or woodworking. For Frank Hemeltjen, who was involved in the development of the Workplace, it is an important place: 'The Crafts Workplace offers many opportunities for the museum to play a role in the future of crafts. We involve schools in the workshops, and we provide a place for craftspeople to share knowledge.' Within the museum, the Workplace is also a place for innovation, says Carianne van Dorst, researcher at the Dutch Open Air Museum: 'There, we talk about the innovations within old crafts and how you can use these techniques to make contemporary things.'



Masterclass participants are working on a basket in the Crafts Workplace in the Dutch Open Air Museum. (Arnhem), 2024
© Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage

Creating a Programme Together

To create an engaging programme for the Weaving Festival and the Masterclass, the first talks between the Association of Weavers and the Open-Air Museum started in September 2023. Programme maker at the museum, Liesbeth Niemans, told us that while she coordinated the cooperation from the museum, Hans Meuleman and Vincent Struik from the board of the association mainly came up with proposals for the festival themselves. They visited the museum to see what suitable locations would be. 'Then I mainly looked at what was practically needed to show a basketry demonstration at that location in the museum.'

There was also good cooperation in the eyes of the weavers. Struik, chairman of the association, says: 'In the personal contacts, the cooperation went very well. The Open Air Museum employs friendly, professional, and driven people who have a heart for the museum. We think it's a really nice place to put our craft in the spotlight, and we are happy that the Open Air Museum offered us this stage.'

A challenge sometimes lies in the size of the museum. With 44 hectares of land and 740 staff members and volunteers, decision-making goes through several

stages. Struik says: 'Sometimes the decision-making process was slowed down a bit because different departments of the museum were involved in the festival. It also required a lot of work from individual museum employees.' Although Niemans agrees that organising the Weaving Festival takes a lot of time, she thinks it is important for the museum to invest that time: 'It fits with our mission and vision as a museum.' In this collaboration, it was important to navigate practicalities, but it also shows the importance of personal relationships in working together.

Recruitment of New Members

During the Weaving Festival visitors could participate in workshops. (Arnhem), 2024
© Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage

During the festival, demonstrations and (small) exhibitions were held at a dozen places in the museum. Visitors were able to take part in various workshops. In Struik's view, the event at the Open Air Museum also contributes to passing on the craft. 'I see it as an opportunity to introduce visitors to the museum to the craft. Who knows, maybe there will be someone among them who becomes more interested and delves into the craft after our demonstrations and workshops.' For Meuleman, the situation



is slightly different: 'To really safeguard the craft, more is needed. A lot of specific knowledge is still only in the heads of weavers. I do see a real need to do something about that.' Struik responds, 'Yes, that's true. I see the festival as a first step to getting new people excited.'

The Basketry Masterclass, also aimed to get new people excited about the craft. Mieke Langenhuizen, who taught the Masterclass, started as a hobby weaver in 2004, which grew into the establishment of Vlechterij 't Wilgennest. Meanwhile, as an experienced weaver with master's from Denmark and Germany, Langenhuizen teaches plenty of courses and workshops. For her, the courses are a way of passing on the craft. For her it is not yet a foregone conclusion whether the Masterclass appealed to new people. She doubts whether the term 'masterclass' put people off: 'Masterclass' sounds a bit pretentious. That might have been a barrier for people to sign up.' Indeed, there were limited sign-ups for the Masterclass, and in the end, three of the seven participants were employees of the Open Air Museum. For Langenhuizen, this did not detract from the Masterclass itself, but she suggests that the name of this activity is important to think about.

Room for Innovation?

The craft of (basket) weaving is practised in the here and now. Yet, the many different weaving techniques stand in a long historical tradition. During the Weaving Festival, and in the lecture preceding the Masterclass given by Hans Pien, curator at the Netherlands Open Air Museum, this was discussed in detail.

At the same time, it is also important to provide room for innovation. 'The aim for me of the festival is to show that the craft is still alive and that you can also make it your job', shares Vincent Struik. Hans Meuleman adds: 'Many members who come during the festival show that. They bring special and creative baskets.' This goal is also important for Mieke Langenhuizen: 'I also show the modern side of the craft in the museum. The historical side is nice, and you can talk about it, but I think it's important that you also show that there is still a way ahead.'

These goals were clearly achieved during the Weaving Festival: there were artistic woven objects and baskets made from sustainably sourced materials on display at the museum. But also, other sustainability aspects of the craft received attention. For instance, Jan de Vos and Nico Burggraaf shared their knowledge on growing willows, and Judith Schuitert shared how to make a beautiful leather-like material from self-harvested birch bark for weaving.

Tool to learn
basketry -
by Mieke
Langenhuizen,
2024 © Dutch
Centre for
Intangible
Cultural Heritage





Basket maker
Jan de Vos
is explaining
to Susanne
Bergwerff
more about the
kinds of willows
that grow in
the museum.
(Arnhem), 2024
© Dutch Centre
for Intangible
Cultural Heritage

Liesbeth Niemans confirms that both historical and contemporary perspectives fit well in the museum. 'I saw some more traditional baskets reflected in the demonstrations, but in the workshops, there were birdhouses and wind catchers to be made by visitors. For me, it is important for the community to show what they want to show. We looked to connect with the museum's story, but it is mainly their presentation.'

Knowledge Sharing

As Hans Meuleman mentioned earlier, knowledge transfer is an important aspect in safeguarding intangible heritage. During the Masterclass and the Weaving Festival, the focus was mainly on the visibility of weaving, but Vincent and Hans wonder whether there are opportunities to cooperate with the museum in other ways. For example, using the weavers' knowledge to interpret woven objects from the museum. Meuleman talks about Corry Hansen, a member of the association: 'She made a reconstruction of a fish trap found at an archaeological site.' In this way, the archaeologists learned a lot about the making process of the found basket. Vincent Struik adds: 'I wonder to what extent we can expand the cooperation with the museum and use our knowledge in the depots. Which baskets are in the collection

and how can we help record the techniques?’

Carianne van Dorst says the museum is working on making the depots more accessible. ‘So that the depot is a place where heritage communities themselves can research collection relevant to their tradition or craft.’ At the same time, she also sees this as an opportunity for the museum’s curators: ‘Curators can learn from the weavers, because they look at the objects with different eyes.’

At the same time, there is a need among the weavers to document different weaving techniques. This is not a priority for the Open Air Museum at the moment. Van Dorst explains that the museum has an ambition to be a knowledge centre, but the priority at the moment is to document and present the collection.

Benefits in This Collaboration

In a good collaboration, both parties get something out of it. When asked how a collaboration with the Association of Weavers benefits the Open Air Museum, Liesbeth Niemans responds positively: ‘For heritage communities, the museum is a great place to showcase their heritage to visitors. For us it fits into the activity programme, it brings liveliness to the park. So, there are lots of positive aspects to it.’ Carianne van Dorst also finds the collaboration with the weavers valuable: ‘For us, it is interesting to bring in experts to look at the museum with different eyes. It gives you a better understanding of what you have, both in the collection and in the museum



Visitors of the Dutch Open Air Museum could learn more about basketry during the Weaving Festival. (Arnhem), 2024 © Ronald Bloemen and Huub Joosten

Mieke
Langenhuizen
makes basketry
objects from
different kinds of
materials, from
pit cane and
willow to jeans,
2024
© Dutch Centre
for Intangible
Cultural Heritage



park.' In addition, the museum calls attention to sustainability, and (basket) weaving with sustainable materials fits in well with that.

This is not the first time the festival has been organised by the Association. Three times before, the association organised such a festival in different places in the Netherlands. This edition has a special significance; Hans Meuleman explains that the corona crisis had a major effect on the Weavers' Association: 'After corona, a lot of contact had subsided. And now, for this lustrum, we wanted to go out bigger than we have done so far.'

As well as being an important event for showcasing the craft to the public, the event is also important in sustaining the network of the members of the association. It provides an opportunity for members to come together and feel a part of something. Although the members of the association were spread out across the large museum,

that did not dampen the feeling of 'together'. The weavers themselves took time to visit each other's locations and ended the day all together.

Not just for the community, but also on an individual level there were benefits. The Masterclass was a real boost for Mieke Langenhuizen: 'Besides teaching myself at home, I still develop and learn new things myself. I regularly visit other (fellow) weavers to learn or refine new techniques. In such courses, there is always someone above me, who has more knowledge. And during this Masterclass here at the museum, I really felt that I was that person now.' Her position as a 'master' and professional was underlined during Hans Pieno's lecture. 'Hans' lecture was interesting, I also learnt things I didn't know. But at one point it became an interaction between the two of us, where I could also share my knowledge. That was a lot of fun.'

Conclusion

The cooperation between the Dutch Open Air Museum and the Association of Weavers contributed to the safeguarding of (basket) weaving in several ways.

The Basketry Masterclass and the Weaving Festival both contributed to the visibility of the craft and knowledge transfer to new audiences. Visitors could see the craft, experience it in the workshops, and talk to the makers. In addition, the festival contributed to the connection between the weavers. It was a moment for them to talk to each other again and exchange ideas.

There was clearly a win-win situation for the museum and Association. A fascinating and varied programme was put together for visitors, and by facilitating the Masterclass, the museum took a position as a place for knowledge sharing. The

weavers connected to the museum's historical and sustainability story. Traditional baskets were displayed and their techniques demonstrated, and through artistic objects and the use of new materials, weaving was placed in the present and future.

It is clear from the enthusiasm and active role played by both parties within the collaboration that there was shared ownership in the project.

Whether a more sustainable collaboration will also emerge from the activities remains to be seen. Opportunities are seen from both sides for more knowledge sharing and deployment of this knowledge for the benefit of the museum's collection and for the craft of basketry.

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Résumé

L'artisanat constitue un axe majeur du Centre néerlandais pour le patrimoine culturel immatériel (KIEN). Parmi les projets menés, la création de l'**Atelier des Métiers**, situé au Musée en plein air des Pays-Bas, est l'un des plus emblématiques. Développé en partenariat entre le Musée en plein air et KIEN, cet atelier offre de nombreuses opportunités pour sensibiliser le public aux métiers d'art et à leur rôle essentiel et actuel dans notre société. Les visiteurs du musée peuvent notamment participer à des ateliers tels que l'impression au bleu (blue printing) ou le travail du bois.

Cette année, la **vannerie** est mise à l'honneur dans l'Atelier des Métiers. Trois activités permettront de rendre ce savoir-faire visible : un atelier pratique ouvert aux visiteurs, une masterclass destinée à ceux qui souhaitent approfondir leurs compétences en vannerie, et une journée de démonstrations dans le musée. Lors de cette dernière activité, une attention particulière sera portée aux différents styles et fonctions des paniers en lien avec les bâtiments historiques du musée : des paniers à fruits aux ruches en vannerie.

Dans l'article pour #HeritageAlive, nous nous concentrerons sur la **relation entre les vanniers et le musée**, ainsi que sur le rôle que les musées peuvent jouer dans la **sauvegarde** de ces savoir-faire à travers les trois activités mentionnées. Nous discuterons également du **rôle des artisans** vis-à-vis des visiteurs du musée, ainsi que des usages contemporains des paniers et de la vannerie dans une optique de production et de mode de vie plus **durables**.

L'article intégrera la **voix des artisans** par le biais d'entretiens. Les principales questions abordées seront : *Comment les artisans ont-ils vécu leur collaboration avec le musée ? En quoi ces activités contribuent-elles à la sauvegarde de la vannerie ? Quel rôle joue la perspective historique dans cette sauvegarde ?* En parallèle, nous présenterons également le **point de vue du musée** : *Quel rôle estime-t-il devoir jouer dans la transmission et la valorisation de ce métier ?*

Frank Hemeltjen is working as Advisor Safeguarding and Public Awareness at the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage. Here he developed the Crafts Lab, a to innovate crafts in museums in museums. He has a background in consulting municipalities on cultural matters in public spaces and teaches drawing at the School for Architecture in Arnhem.

Susanne Bergwerff is working as the coordinator of the Research and Development team at the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage. In her research she focused on the role of young people in ICH and did projects on ICH and policy making. She is a member of the board of the Dutch Platform Climate & Heritage.

Fellowship as a Means of Promoting Basketry Traditions

Hege Aasdal
Hilde Ekeberg
Norwegian Crafts Institute



05. Fellowship as a Means of Promoting Basketry Traditions

Hege Aasdal
Hilde Ekeberg

Norwegian Crafts Institute

Abstract

Baskets in many forms and shapes have been a part of both rural and urban culture for centuries. These traditions have however covered different functions and techniques. As for the urban tradition, it has evolved around imported materials and decorative baskets. The rural tradition on the other hand, has been based on local materials and adapted to their practical needs either related to animal food, harvesting or storage.

In modern education of basket makers in Norway, the rural tradition has been totally excluded. As a result, the modern basketry craft is very much in line with the urban tradition and the traditional knowledge in the rural techniques have been lost and is in urgent need of safeguarding.

Basket maker Hege Iren Aasdal gained interest for this rural tradition and applied for a fellowship in traditional crafts with the Norwegian Crafts Institute to explore the rich diversity of traditions and identify living bearers. Working together with bearers and practitioners also provided Hege Aasdal with a broader perspective on the living tradition related to basketry. Lasting three years, the fellowship lends a unique opportunity to already skilled craftspersons so that they may expand their knowledge and develop their skills to a higher level. Through a practical approach, the fellows immerse in processes, topics and practices central to their craft (Ekeberg in Falk and Stamnes 2023:39). Aasdal's project serves as an excellent example on how to use the fellowship-position to create awareness and interest around crafts techniques in need of safeguarding. From a situation with little to non attention, the project was concluded with a seminar with almost 70 participants and the opening of a museum exhibition which will tour the country for the coming years. Hege Aasdals work shows

the rich diversity of traditional basketry, and hopefully will attract a new generation into the world of basketry and traditional crafts.

In the article we would like to present both the process of Hege Aasdal's fellowship project, the categorisation of basket types that she presented from the project and the further plans for safeguarding of rural basket traditions in Norway. In addition we will also present the fellowship scheme as a safeguarding method. Lastly we would like to examine how this project in particular and the fellowship scheme is in line with the 2003 convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, especially article 14 "Education, awareness-raising and capacity-building" and article 15 "Participation of communities, groups and individuals".

Introduction

Basket maker Hege Aasdal applied for a fellowship at the Norwegian Crafts Institute aiming to do a three-year deep dive into traditional basketry, as she saw that basketmaking in Norway needed safeguarding. Could she really make a difference?

Baskets in many forms and shapes have been a part of both rural and urban cultures for centuries, and in Norway, the basketry traditions contain a rich diversity of materials, functions, and techniques. The urban tradition, on the other hand, has evolved around imported materials and decorative baskets. The rural tradition has conversely been based on local materials and adapted to practical needs, often as a container for food, for harvesting, or storage.

Hege splitting willow for basket weaving © Arne Fykse



In modern education for basket makers in Norway, the rural tradition has been completely excluded. As a result, the modern basketry craft that is taught in the formal educational system is very much in line with the urban tradition. As the farming methods and ways of living has changed fundamentally in the same period, the knowledge of harvesting materials, the quality of the materials and basket weaving techniques have urgently needed safeguarding. Through this article, we would like to show how a fellowship project in traditional basketry reflects the spirit of Articles 14 and 15 of the UNESCO 2003 Convention.

Identifying Bearers and Baskets

Basket maker Hege Aasdal became interested in this rural tradition and applied for a fellowship in traditional crafts with the Norwegian Crafts Institute to explore the rich diversity of traditions and identify living bearers. The Norwegian Crafts Institute hires two craft fellows each year, for three years. The overall aim of the fellowship is to expand the knowledge and develop the skills of the craftspeople to a higher level. Many former fellows have become beacons of light in their respective fields and crafts. Through a practical approach, the fellows immerse themselves in processes, topics, and practices central to their craft (Ekeberg in Falk and Stamnes 2023:39). In our opinion, the fellowship programme for craftspeople reflects the intention in Article 18 of the 2003 Convention in a wonderful way and could well have been inscribed as a good safeguarding practice.¹

Aasdal's project was mostly carried out on two different fronts. The priority was to identify and establish contact with tradition bearers and people with knowledge of traditional baskets. Traditional basketry as a living craft is vulnerable in Norway, as there are not many practitioners left. When these bearers are not among us anymore, we lose a lot of knowledge. Therefore, this is always a priority for the Norwegian Crafts Institute, in our projects and for our fellowships. We often use the expression "An old craftsman is like a burning library" to describe this crucial point. The second priority for Hege Aasdal was museums and other collections where she could study examples of traditional baskets. One of the main challenges Hege Aasdal faced when visiting the museums was that the baskets were poorly documented. The information about the materials was sometimes even incorrect. Mostly, the baskets were registered with none or very little information about geographical origin, previous owners, area of use, local names, and technique. Since traditional basketry was left out of the formal education, the literature on the topic is also scarce. This further implies that most basket types do not have official names and descriptions. The same basket for the same purpose may have many different names, varying by the geographical area and dialect. A basket commonly known as *vombakorg* can also be found with the

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Article 18 provides that the 'Committee shall periodically select and promote national, sub-regional and regional programmes, projects and activities for the safeguarding of the heritage which it considers best reflect the principles and objectives of this Convention.'

names *rassbaillkorg*, *gjestebodskorg*, *sendingskorg*, or *lokakorg*. The traditional names of the baskets most often reflect either the shape or area of use.

Meeting people and researching baskets were never two separate activities throughout the project. People with knowledge also often have access to old baskets. Several useful informants were found while Aasdal conducted training and courses, since this is a good opportunity to discuss the subject over a certain period.

"My project has consisted of examining old baskets and traveling to find bearers of traditions and other people with relevant skills. I have made a habit of asking everybody I meet if they know of any old baskets or if they maybe own some themselves. In some cases, I have made very interesting discoveries this way. One example is from a training in the small town, Alvdal, where several of the participants brought chipwood baskets from different farms from the area. They were all made with the same technique, but the material was split in a very different way from all baskets I have seen before." (Aasdal 2023- our translation)

Old basket made with split pine
© Hege Aasdal

Aasdal's research showed that there is a rich diversity of basket types made from many different techniques around the country. She found that the basket types and their usage were very local, while the weaving and binding techniques are global.

Similar baskets can be found all over the world. What sets them apart is that they are connected to their local community through the materials, their usage, and the knowledge about material harvesting and production.

After studying numerous baskets and gathering information, Aasdal decided that further studies of baskets required a categorisation. She divided the traditional baskets into four main groups based on their design and technique. Most baskets, except for hunting and fishing gear, fit into these groups. Aasdal's final report contained both a categorization and a name and description for each of the most common baskets. Building on work from a few other basket makers, this creates a kind of nomenclature for rural Norwegian basket types and names. This will be easy to build further research on for future basket enthusiasts who want to explore the rural basketry tradition.



Identifying the Community

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage states in the definition of intangible cultural heritage in Article 2. that:

This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO 2003).

As traditional basketry has lost its original purpose and prevalence, much of the community has been lost. Gathering the remnants of the original community through living practitioners, owners of old baskets, and people with knowledge of the old craft, was a necessary starting point for Aasdal. Many of the informants were recruited through local branches of The Norwegian Folk Art and Crafts Association. In her final report, Aasdal writes:

"It is not always easy for those who have the knowledge to know what details are essential to bring forward. It is not always easy to find the words to describe what you do, those motions and choices that comes naturally. It is not always easy for those who seek the knowledge to ask the right questions. You need experience to find the relevant questions. That is why it is important to do and to make, to work together. And you must work enough to get to the stage where the relevant questions comes naturally and where you are capable to copy motions." (Aasdal 2023 our translation)

That practical knowledge truly is tacit and stored in the body as well as the mind was demonstrated very clearly to her when visiting an old practitioner in the eastern part of Norway. The first time she visited him; he was in sound health and explained the process of making "kolvfat" very clearly. By the second visit, his health had declined, and dementia had taken away his ability to communicate verbally. But his fingers still knew how to weave, so they could sit together as equal partners in



Newly made copy of a basket called "skrinde" traditionally used for carrying hay to the animals. The basket is made with split hazel © Samson Østebø

weaving "kolvfat" from Østerdalen, as if the basketry craft were a language of its own.

Apart from the tacit knowledge, the example from Østerdalen also shows how urgent it is to gather both the community and the knowledge. Many of those who know and who have been taught by older relatives are now very old. Gathering them and finding them is not enough; the knowledge needs to reach new generations.

Recreating the Community and Reaching New Generations

There are still many people with knowledge of traditional basketry, but the original context of knowledge transmission has changed. Where knowledge used to be passed on from father to son or

grandmother to granddaughter as part of the daily work in the household, training, and courses have now taken over. This implies that the basketry community has become a bit more detached from its original context, since people who participate in training do not necessarily belong to the geographical area where the basket in question has its origin or have natural access to the places where you find the best material. Even though the community has weakened, it doesn't mean it can't be strengthened. Aasdal's project contributed to this by holding an open seminar the day after her final presentation. Given the number of informants and key people in her project, we would have been happy with 20 participants, but more than 70 showed up. Young craftspeople were given a travel allowance, as a measure to recruit potential new basket makers. One of these young participants reported that she had been considering becoming an apprentice in basketry. The seminar inspired the young participant, who then made up her mind and became an apprentice in basketry. In Norway, there is only a handful of basket makers who make a living from it, so every new young apprentice is a great achievement. A brand-new basketry association was also established that same day.

Aasdal's final presentation included an exhibition that showcased the diversity of rural basketry in Norway, the quality of different materials, and the process of making baskets. The exhibition was displayed at Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer and became quite popular. After completing the fellowship, the exhibition was handed over to the new basketry association, which applied for and received funding to take the exhibition on tour. It has since been displayed in various museums. The museums



Course participants with finished baskets woven with split hazel © Hege Iren Aasdal

have been offered a package that includes both the exhibition and the possibility to hold training for both adults and children. In this way the exhibition helps reach new groups of potential basket makers.

Can traditional Basketry Help us Save the World?

Sustainable development for humanity and the challenges regarding climate change are currently highly prioritised on the UN's agenda. Can traditional crafts exemplified by basketry help us toward a more sustainable future? Hege Iren Aasdal's favourite material is hazel. She doesn't have to walk far, just down the road, to find the perfect material for her baskets. She uses traditional hand tools for collecting the hazel and for splitting the material. The making of the basket is done by hand, as it has been for generations. Hege's baskets are beautiful and will last for centuries. When necessary, they can also be easily repaired. To sum up, the production of Hege's baskets requires no gasoline for transporting materials, no use of environmentally unfriendly materials, no electricity for production, the materials are renewable, and finally, when the basket is broken beyond repair, it can return to nature and eventually become new trees. So, when asking whether traditional crafts can help us save the world, Hege's basketry could be one of several examples. Traditional knowledge, created over generations, is a form of knowledge that provides optimal integration of humans with their

environment. Natural resources are used to the maximum, with little waste and great efficiency. And we don't have to go far. We will probably find some of the answers to a more sustainable future in Hege's hazel baskets.

Conclusion: The Fellowship as a Safeguarding Practice

Through a practical approach, the fellows immerse in processes, topics, and practices central to their craft. Aasdal's project serves as an excellent example of how to use the fellowship position to create awareness and interest around craft techniques in need of safeguarding. From a situation with little to no attention, the project concluded with a seminar with almost 70 participants and the opening of a museum exhibition that will tour the country in the coming years. Hege Aasdal's work shows the rich diversity of traditional basketry and, hopefully, will attract a new generation to the world of basketry and traditional crafts. We believe it is safe to say that this fellowship project has indeed been an effective safeguarding strategy for traditional basketry. We would especially like to underline the project's ability to fulfil Article 14 "Education, awareness-raising and capacity-building" and Article 15 "Participation of communities, groups and individuals". Undoubtedly, there is currently a fresh wind of enthusiasm about the rural basketry tradition in Norway, as a concrete result of Hege Aasdal's fellowship. The bearers of tradition have now been gathered in an association for basket makers and there has been great activity to raise awareness and reach out to new groups. Hopefully, this is just the beginning, and many more activities will follow. But it all started with a fellowship project with just one craftswoman given the opportunity to dive into the tradition. Sometimes, that is all it takes.

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Résumé

Depuis des siècles, les paniers, sous de nombreuses formes et tailles, font partie intégrante des cultures rurales et urbaines. Ces traditions se sont développées selon des fonctions et des techniques différentes. En milieu urbain, la vannerie a évolué autour de matériaux importés et de paniers décoratifs. En revanche, la tradition rurale repose sur des matériaux locaux, adaptés à des besoins pratiques tels que l'alimentation animale, la récolte ou le stockage.

Dans la formation contemporaine des vanniers en Norvège, la tradition rurale a été totalement écartée. Par conséquent, l'artisanat moderne de la vannerie s'aligne largement sur la tradition urbaine, tandis que les connaissances traditionnelles rurales ont été perdues et nécessitent une sauvegarde urgente.

La vannière Hege Aasdal s'est intéressée à cette tradition rurale et a sollicité une bourse pour les métiers d'art traditionnels auprès de l'Institut norvégien de l'artisanat afin d'explorer la richesse des traditions et d'identifier les porteurs vivants. Travailler avec ces porteurs et praticiens a permis à Hege Aasdal d'élargir sa perspective sur la tradition vivante liée à la vannerie. D'une durée de trois ans, cette bourse offre une opportunité unique aux artisans expérimentés d'approfondir leurs connaissances et de développer leurs compétences. Par une approche pratique, les bénéficiaires s'immergent dans les processus, les thématiques et les pratiques centrales à leur métier (Ekeberg in Falk and Stamnes 2023:39).

Le projet de Hege Aasdal constitue un excellent exemple de l'usage de cette bourse comme levier de sensibilisation et de valorisation des techniques artisanales en danger. Partant d'une situation de quasi-invisibilité, le projet s'est conclu par un séminaire réunissant près de 70 participants, ainsi que par l'inauguration d'une exposition muséale qui voyagera à travers le pays dans les années à venir. Le travail de Hege Aasdal met en lumière la grande diversité de la vannerie traditionnelle et ouvre l'espoir d'attirer une nouvelle génération vers l'univers de la vannerie et des savoir-faire traditionnels.

Dans cet article, nous souhaitons présenter à la fois le déroulement du projet de bourse de Hege Aasdal, la catégorisation des types de paniers qu'elle a établie, et les projets futurs pour la sauvegarde des traditions rurales de vannerie en Norvège. Nous présenterons également le programme de bourse comme méthode de sauvegarde. Enfin, nous analyserons comment ce projet, et plus largement le programme de bourse, s'inscrit dans le cadre de la Convention de 2003 pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel, notamment l'article 14 sur « l'éducation, la sensibilisation et le renforcement des capacités » et l'article 15 sur « la participation des communautés, des groupes et des individus ».

Hege Iren Aasdal is a basket maker and founder of Norwegian Basket Association. Hege has been studying traditional basketry through a 3-year fellowship at the Norwegian Craft Institute and is now working full-time to spread the knowledge about traditional basketry and raise awareness of Norway's rich traditions. She is running courses and educating people in Norway, Germany, Sweden, USA, UK and more. She is deeply committed to bringing the knowledge about the baskets and the materials forward to the next generations.

Hilde Ekeberg is an advisor with the Norwegian Crafts Institute. The Institute is a non-governmental organisation which aims to document, preserve and promote skills in traditional crafts as knowledge, culture and trade in line with UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. With an educational background in cultural history, she works especially with the craft fellowship, aiming to preserve knowledge in traditional crafts and develop the individual craft skills of the fellows to a higher level.

The Rise, Fall and Quest for Safeguarding Basketry in Massa

Leila Sahli
El Hassil Cooperative



06

06. The Rise, Fall and Quest for Safeguarding Basketry in Massa

Leila Sahli

El Hassil Cooperative

Abstract

Basketry has been a key element of Morocco's cultural fabric from prehistory to the present. In Massa's valley, basket-woven rugs have furnished every mosque in the country and have been a crucial cultural practice passed through generations. Jamaa and Ahmed, two dedicated artisans from Massa, are central to this craft's history. This article, developed in collaboration with Jamaa, founder of Cooperative El Hassil Massa, and Ahmed, examines the unique skills, techniques, and materials in Massa that developed basketry from a local activity to national religious significance, and its decline amid climate change and industrialization. The primary objective is to analyze the transformation of basketry in Massa over the past 40 years, especially against the backdrop of modern technological and environmental challenges. The study highlights the community's resilience, focusing on how the cooperative has worked to renew interest in traditional basket woven rugs among new demographics, beyond just religious institutions. The narrative discusses the endangerment of this intangible cultural heritage when local communities lack sufficient NGO support for safeguarding and adapting to contemporary needs, particularly highlighting Massa's scenario where the craft ceased activity prior to COVID-19. The focus is on the commune of Massa, including villages like Idawmahya, Tigmi n Ljdid, and Tlat Oungalf, known for their basketry heritage. The analysis focuses on the production of basket woven rugs, fundamental to the cultural identity and economic sustainability of Massa artisans. It also covers community initiatives aimed at reversing the craft's decline, including diversification of markets and changing transmission forms as the craft decreased. The methodology involves a field study with in-depth interviews I conduct with local communities, providing insights into the recent deterioration of the craft, the community's safeguarding efforts in the absence of NGOs, and ongoing

challenges. This article aims to impact the local community by increasing visibility for a situation needing NGO support and giving a voice to no longer active craftsmen. It also offers global insights into the threats and errors that led to the craft's decline. As a local engaged with Massa's halted basketry practice, this study emphasizes our pursuit of international support for a safeguarding plan and registering the craft as endangered, aiming to revive and sustain it despite industrialization and environmental challenges.

Introduction

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in collaboration with the cooperative El Hassil in Massa Valley and some of its old members. Abdesamad Azadine, my relative and a local partially based in Massa, played a crucial role in connecting me with the craftsmen since the cooperative is no longer active today. Although the cooperative is not operational anymore, it played a significant role in facilitating the research with its old members by providing the space to gather the interviewees. The cooperative was once the legal structure under which craftsmen operated before the decline of basketry in Massa Valley, as we explain further in this article.

Basketry, in a Moroccan context, traces back to prehistoric times, when the first signs of it were found in archaeological necropoles (Lacombe, 2024). As a know-how, basketry can reflect many aspects of its practitioner's life: their culture and identity through their methods, their socio-economic structures through trading and division of labour, and their ecology through their sustainable methods and relationship with the environment (Novellino and Ertuğ, 2019). This article explores the socio-economical, environmental, and cultural dynamics of basket-woven rugs to understand the causes of their decline, particularly in the Massa Valley in the central west of Morocco.

Massa, or Masst as named by locals, is a large river that flows in the Atlantic Ocean, and multiple villages surround it. Al Bakri describes it as a retreat for those who want to dedicate themselves to devotion (El Bekri, 1859). "The Aït Masset (locals of Massa) form an extremely stable and exclusively agricultural population [...] The number of artisans is small, and their work is mediocre, except for ironwork" (Montagne, 1924). Despite basketry being an old craft in Morocco, historical and anthropological sources have never cited the craft of basket-woven rugs in Massa. The interviewees in this article think otherwise; Jamaa Azirar, Ahmed El Hilla, Ahmed Fraijij, El Hilla El Houssain, El Hilla Lahcen, and Agourram Ahmed are local craftsmen, whom I connected with through my relative Abdessamad Azadine. They discovered the basket-woven rugs as they took their first steps into their households in Massa. "Everywhere in our villages, people were basket-weaving rugs. We inherited this know-how from our ancestors," says Agourram Ahmed. Along with the craftsmen, this article also voices a local artist and entrepreneur currently based in the USA,

Abdelhamid Azadine, another relative of mine who took a different, innovative approach through object design to develop the practice. His experience validates some of the challenges that led to the decline of basketry, which he similarly faced as a craftsman working under the cooperative. Despite taking a more entrepreneurial approach, his collaboration in this article provides insights into potential threats that could face the revitalisation of basketry in Massa.

The Evolution and Cultural Significance of Basketry in Massa

Artisans speak with a noticeable inflection about the time when they used to furnish every mosque of the country before the decline of basket-woven rugs in Massa. The interviewees are all men¹ over 50 years old from the valley and are all—apart from Abdelhamid Azadine—members of cooperative El Hassil. They still remember how the transmission of the know-how happened spontaneously as they were growing up in Massa. Ahmed Fraijij states that craftsmen were everywhere in the valley, working at almost every doorstep and public space. Aggouram Ahmed states that every basket-woven rug, named *Aguertil* in Tamazight, is giant and requires two people to work on it; craftsmen used to be always needed. As this was the craft of our fathers, said El Hilla Lahcen, we joined them and started learning from day one using the same materials; at first, they gave us small rugs to practise, and not long after, we started helping with the big ones. "The know-how was not limited to one village," specified Ahmed El Hilla. "It is in Ida Oumahya, Tigmi N'Ijdid, Tlat Ou'ngalf,

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Basketry by local women is an extinct craft that I have never encountered despite being from Massa and growing up with Massi women. Basketry by local women was different from the craft by local men. Local women used a different material named Alesway which is a thinner and smaller *Juncus Acutus* Azzmay, they crafted functional and smaller objects rather than rugs or furniture items like men. Local women used basketry to assemble objects such as trivets, and baskets to keep cooking ingredients. Craftswomen from the Sahara who also practiced basketry used to acquire Alesway material for their craft from the valley of Massa. They have however, used a new approach to face industrialisation as we discuss later in this article. Due to the limited timeframe of this research and the current state of the craft, further investigation into this area was not feasible.



Left **Rug Aguertil** up close showing the combination of weaving and basketry technique
Right **An old rug Aguertil** we sat on during our exchange with craftsmen in the cooperation that hasn't been used since 2012, 2024 © Leila Sahli

and others." The practice was a part of the cultural landscape in the valley of Massa and had religious significance as the valley was the only supplier to all the mosques in Morocco. Abdelhamid Azadine explained that every big mosque uses a basket-woven rug, *Aguertil*, under the carpets for comfort and support. In small mosques with small budgets, people pray directly on the basket-woven rugs. The article translates *Iguertal* (plural form of *Aguertil*) from Massa as basket-woven rugs to differentiate them from the ones made elsewhere in Morocco that use either basketry or weaving technique but not both. *Iguertal*'s uniqueness lies in Massa's craft know-how that combines basketry materials and techniques with weaving methods, using a unique

material: *Juncus Acutus*, or *Azzmay* in Tamazight. As Massa is a valley, *Azzmay* grew abundantly along the river. Eventually, locals also began planting it to sell it to craftsmen who were supplying the massive market of mosques at the time. *Azzmay* material in Massa and its abundance allows it to grow up to 2 meters long. Jamaa Aziraz remembers that at some point, Massa produced 140 000m of rugs yearly, which required constant planting of *Azzmay*. The length of *Juncus Acutus* plays a crucial role in the uniqueness of Massa's rugs *Iguertal*. One piece of *Azzmay* would hold the entire rug's width, contrary to other regions, such as Marrakech or Essaouira, where they use wicker. Using wicker to make rugs, due to its short length, requires craftsmen to work on the two parts of the rug separately, then connect them in the middle to create one giant piece, or they simply make small mats. El Hilla El Houssain explains that the technique



A rug *Aguertil* up close showing the weaving technique of *Juncus Acutus*
Azzemay, 2024
© Leila Sahli

in Marrakech and Essaouira of connecting two parts of the rug in the middle makes the rug uncomfortable to use in prayer. Consequently, the basket-woven rugs, *Iguertal*, made in Massa stood out as the length of *Azzmay* held the entire piece in one, making it more adequate to use in mosques.

Evolution, Challenges, and Entrepreneurship

According to Lahcen El Hilla, the local authorities gathered all the craftsmen in the Massa Valley. They asked us to launch a cooperative to regulate our activities and become more established and organised. Of all the artisans in the village, 32 agreed to form a cooperative in 1981, but when it started, only 18 people joined.

One year after the launch of the El Hassil Cooperative, craftsmen did not make any profit. Lahcen El Hilla explains that the first year was a loss due to the

organization of the prices in the market. Between the time we took new orders and the time that we delivered the product, the cooperative did not consider the shifting prices in the market. Hence, we ended up with a loss. El Houssaine El Hilla adds that they could have avoided this loss if the cooperative had started with a solid capital. Consequently, of the 18 cooperative members, around 6 to 7 people left to continue working outside the cooperative.

Abdelhamid Azadine is a local entrepreneur who grew up in Massa and left the valley for studies. He shares his experience with a new concept he launched at the end of the 1990s:



A big order of
rugs Iguertal,
that a Canadian
client left behind
period to the
ceasing of
the basketry
practice, 2024
© Leila Sahli

*I quickly picked the basketry know-how in Massa, learning it is not complicated. I started making *Iguertal*, and then I started to rethink new functions besides rugs, such as decorations of beams or ceilings. Then, I decided to experiment with Object Design; that is where the challenge began. I got a workshop at La medina d'Agadir (the neighboring city of Massa) and hired a craftsman from Essaouira, a city where artisans know how to create basketry objects. I challenged myself to design objects that adapt to Azzmay's properties since it is not very flexible to use as a material. For instance, using colors, I designed square poufs, mattresses, and decorative patterns. The execution of the designs and the colorful patterns was very complex and required multiple experiments by the artisan and myself.*

I used Kaolinite stones that I purchased 20km away from Essaouira to color Azzmay; by boiling the stones in water, I extracted the pigment and dampened Azzmay in water to absorb the color. We had to start basketing quickly after dumping Azzmay before it dries out and breaks. I managed to market my products to tourists, expats, hotels, and hostel owners. I ended up dropping this project for a different one as it required tremendous effort and a lot of expenses; the project could have the potential to succeed with more substantial capital.

*My next project was in the tourism sector. I organised excursions for tourists in Massa Valley. I approached basketry differently this time, as I would organise visits for tourists to basketry woven workshops in Massa or even include learning basketry in the trip's program, giving the tourists the exclusive opportunity to discover this cultural landscape of Massa Valley and learn the know-how of *Iguertal* making firsthand.*

Decline of Basketry in Massa

Iguertal-making has shut down in the last 10 to 14 years. Ahmed Frajj and other craftsmen stated that since 2012, they have never set foot in the cooperative until our meeting for the interview. The decline is due to environmental, industrial, and economic factors. Jamaa Azirar expressed how two aspects impacted basket-woven rugs: the industrialization of plastic woven rugs and the drought. Ahmed El Hilla remembers that the last two times it properly rained in Massa were in 1982 and 1996. Afterward, the valley experienced both drought and inundation in 2010 and 2015. Jamaa Azirar explains how drought has affected the material used in basket

weaving, stating that Azzmay is becoming less and less available in the valley, which affects its price. The other craftsmen do recognise the absence of Azzmay but do not consider drought to be the main reason behind it. Instead, it is a consequence of the slow decline of the practice over the past 20 years; locals do not see the purpose in planting Azzmay if the craft is not active. Ahmed Aggouram believes the primary reason behind the decline today is the plastic rug industry, which started at the end of the 1990s. Factories started launching in Morocco, offering prices that overtook their one and only supplier, as they were not producing to the market back then but to mosques through the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. As work is decreasing, Azzmay price is rising, and plastic rugs are starting to replace the handmade *Iguertal*, making it hard for the craftsmen to raise their prices, buy Azzmay and make a decent living out of their craft like they used to in the last decade. As an alternative, craftsmen at the El Hassil cooperative found a Canadian buyer to whom they started supplying *Iguertal* until he disappeared, leaving behind a large order of *Iguertal* locked in one of the cooperative rooms. This marked the cooperative's closure and the craft's decline in 2012. The craftsmen interviewed affirmed that their peers who worked outside the cooperative had all faced the same struggles and that whether craftsmen worked with or without the cooperative, the challenges were the same, and the practice declined throughout the entire valley.

Current Challenges and the Revitalization of the Craft

The first challenge facing the revitalisation of the basketry-woven rugs is the shortage of skilled craftsmen. The interviewees expressed how old and tired they had become and how that age would disable them from returning to their craft even if it is revitalised. There are around 7 to 10 people left who know how to make *Iguertal* in Massa, and most of them are of advanced age. Another challenge would be the lack of transmission; Ahmed Aggouram explains how the transmission process ceased to happen spontaneously as the craft was declining. Lahcen El Hilla Says that today 12 years old in Massa know nothing about basket woven rugs, as they did not find any trace of it left in the valley. Elders might still know about *Iguertal* or the know-how, but they have all left the valley for work or a better future.

The migration of the youth from the valley started at the beginning of the last century in Massa. Due to poverty, a lot of families had to pledge their lands to strangers in the early 1900s, which pushed the youth to migrate to France. Every village recorded around 30% of migrants. However, most of them return to their land to purchase it back, a phenomenon that Robert Montagne finds remarkable, how the Massi person stays attached to his land (Montagne, 1924). The craft not being a part of the valley's landscape anymore has affected the generational transmission and perhaps a whole part of the identity of the youth in Massa. Or maybe even



Few pieces of *Juncus Acutus* Azzemay left at the cooperative prior to the ceasing of the basketry practice, 2024
© Leila Sahli

their attachment to their ecosystem, since basketry practice itself reflects people's dependency on their environment (Novellino and Ertuğ, 2019).

The decline of the craft has also created a gap that will require financial viability for future craftsmen from young generations to learn the know-how. Producing *Iguertal* nowadays requires a high cost, considering the Azzmay's price multiplied into three or four. Decreasing the price of Azzmay requires planting by the local population and watering every eight days, despite the drought crisis that Morocco is undergoing. If it is replanted, it should take up to two years for the Azzmay to return to where its previous abundance. Another high cost to bring back the practice is the braids that hold the rugs around which Azzmay is weaved. These braids used to be made locally in Massa using Azzmay, but during the times when the craft was flourishing, the craftsman started to purchase wicker braids from Marrakech; nowadays, for a new practitioner with a limited capital, purchasing the braids could be a significant expense.

Craftsmen disagreed with using other materials in their practice, unlike in the Sahara region, where female artisans have introduced recycled plastic to their craft to sustain their practice and adapt to contemporary influences² (Benfoughal, 2012). Even if the craftsmen in Massa introduced new and different materials like plastic to their craft, they would still face the same strong competitors—factories—with their mass production and low prices.

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Some female artisans from the Sahara region used to acquire the material for their basketry product from Massa Valley. However, unlike local female artisans in Massa, they sustained their practice by replacing plant-based material with plastic. This could serve as a preliminary hypothesis for the extinction of the female basketry craft in Massa, to be tested and confirmed through further research.

Conclusion: Potential for Revitalisation

"Hope should always exist; it is always here; it's just that the difficulties can sometimes overcome hope", said El Hilla El Houssain when asked about the hope of revitalising the craft. Lahcen El Hilla affirms that the craft can only be revitalised if solid governmental support backs the practice. The craftsmen express that they are too tired at this age to find solutions by themselves. They assure that they will be available to teach new generations the know-how, if supported. Basket-weaving rugs using Azzmay are simple to learn. The craftsmen believe that the proper solutions will be implemented if the government and NGOs provide the resources to train the new generations and supply solid capital to bridge the gap left by the practice's decline in recent years.

Basket-woven rugs can still be marketed as they have many benefits that attract specific audiences interested in handmade ecological products. *Iguertal* are unique rugs that retain warmth during winter and remain cool during summer; in addition, the material used, Azzmay, or Juncus Acutus, can maintain cleanliness and resist germs due to its self-cleaning ability (Medas et al., 2023). As a local from Massa and having the opportunity to amplify the voice of the local craftsmen through this article, I add my voice to their call for international support to revive the practice.

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Résumé

La vannerie constitue un élément clé du tissu culturel marocain depuis la préhistoire jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Dans la vallée de Massa, les tapis tissés en vannerie ont orné chaque mosquée du pays et représentent une pratique culturelle essentielle transmise de génération en génération. Jamaa et Ahmed, deux artisans dévoués originaires de Massa, occupent une place centrale dans l'histoire de cet artisanat. Cet article, développé en collaboration avec Jamaa, fondateur de la Coopérative El Hassil Massa, et Ahmed, examine les compétences, techniques et matériaux uniques de Massa qui ont permis à la vannerie de passer d'une activité locale à une pratique de portée religieuse nationale, ainsi que son déclin face aux changements climatiques et à l'industrialisation.

L'objectif principal est d'analyser la transformation de la vannerie à Massa au cours des 40 dernières années, notamment dans le contexte des défis technologiques et environnementaux contemporains. L'étude met en lumière la résilience de la communauté, en se concentrant sur les efforts de la coopérative pour raviver l'intérêt pour les tapis en vannerie traditionnels auprès de nouveaux publics, au-delà des institutions religieuses. Le récit souligne la mise en danger de ce patrimoine culturel immatériel lorsque les communautés locales ne bénéficient pas d'un soutien suffisant des ONG pour assurer sa sauvegarde et son adaptation aux besoins contemporains, en mettant particulièrement l'accent sur le cas de Massa, où l'activité artisanale a cessé avant la pandémie de COVID-19.

L'analyse porte sur la commune de Massa, notamment les villages d'Idawmahya, Tigmi n Ljdid et Tlat Oungalf, reconnus pour leur patrimoine en vannerie. Elle se concentre sur la production de tapis tissés en vannerie, fondamentaux pour l'identité culturelle et la durabilité économique des artisans de Massa. Elle couvre également les initiatives communautaires visant à inverser le déclin de cet artisanat, telles que la diversification des marchés et l'évolution des modes de transmission, alors que la

pratique s'est amoindrie.

La méthodologie repose sur une étude de terrain comprenant des entretiens approfondis menés auprès des communautés locales, offrant un aperçu de la dégradation récente de la vannerie, des efforts de sauvegarde entrepris sans appui institutionnel, ainsi que des défis persistants. Cet article vise à sensibiliser la communauté locale en augmentant la visibilité d'une situation nécessitant un soutien des ONG, et à donner une voix aux artisans désormais inactifs. Il apporte également un éclairage global sur les menaces et erreurs ayant conduit au déclin de cet artisanat. En tant qu'acteur local impliqué dans la pratique aujourd'hui interrompue de la vannerie à Massa, cette étude met en avant notre quête de soutien international pour l'élaboration d'un plan de sauvegarde et l'inscription de cet artisanat comme patrimoine en danger, dans l'objectif de le faire revivre et de le pérenniser malgré les défis liés à l'industrialisation et aux bouleversements environnementaux.

Leila Sahli is a cultural professional based in Morocco, currently working as residency and programming coordinator at LE 18, a multidisciplinary cultural space in Marrakech. With a background in cultural anthropology from the National Institute of Archeology and Cultural Heritage in Rabat, and arts and cultural management from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Leila's work focuses on collective memory, social justice, participatory approaches, and community-based projects.

Basketry in Indigenous Everyday Lives

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07

07. Basketry in Indigenous Everyday Lives

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Abstract

Basketry is intimately linked to the subsistence livelihoods of Indigenous peoples in Guyana. It is used in fishing and hunting, and for gathering, transporting and preparing farm produce. The root tuber and staple crop, cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), is central to Indigenous life and culture, and the 'bitter' varieties require laborious processing to be made edible, involving basketry such as the cassava squeezer. Processed cassava is then made into several products including farine, bread, and fermented drinks, all requiring baskets such as sifters and fans.

In this paper, we present findings from an 18-month project funded by the National Geographic Society, focusing on Indigenous crafting in Guyana. Working with over 100 basket makers in villages and through peer exchanges, we documented basket making knowledge, but also reflected on and discussed the sustainable management of the craft's raw materials. Our conversations also looked at the potential for craft-based enterprises that take social, economic and environmental factors into account.

We discovered that only a small population of highly skilled elders possess the knowledge to produce essential baskets for cassava processing. Many baskets have oral traditions that accompany their making and / or use; once the knowledge of the basket disappears, the stories are no longer being told or remembered. Along with knowledge loss, basket makers also face the threat of climate change. Increased frequency of droughts, floods, and uncontrollable fires are all impacting plant resources critical for basketry.

Nevertheless, crafters recognise the bridging role their craft can play in community development and conservation, linking environment, cultural, health and identity. For example, basketry used to make cassava products, gather vegetables, catch fish or meat are all linked to sustainable Indigenous livelihoods that promote nutritious Indigenous diets, rather than industrially produced, imported foods. Making baskets also promotes a virtuous cycle in that it fosters greater self-esteem and reinforces Indigenous identity. Additionally, the growing ecotourism industry in Guyana presents opportunities for crafters to market basketry that both provides potential customers with pieces that evoke the place and its peoples, as well as supply local tourism enterprises with functional and decorative wares in their premises.

Our paper highlights how the peer exchanges, during which basketry experts and young makers from different parts of Guyana came together, provided an important space to exchange ideas, demonstrate and teach making skills, identify plant resources in the landscape, develop solutions for safeguarding basketry and propose basketry innovations for a changing future.

Introduction

Throughout the world, there is increasing recognition that Indigenous knowledge and the practices it supports, such as traditional farming, fishing, and hunting, are critical for sustaining local livelihoods, biodiversity as well as for mitigating and adapting to climate change (e.g., IPBES, 2019). Traditional craft practices are intimately linked to these everyday practices, whether it is the making of bows, arrows and spears for fishing and hunting, the weaving of baskets to collect, store and process crops, or the coiling of clay pots for cooking. Traditional craft mediates the relationship between Indigenous communities and their environments, providing the raw materials for

craft making, and then once produced, enabling communities to survive within their environment (Mellegård and Boonstra, 2020). Craft is therefore a critical link that connects people and nature within Indigenous territories.

In Guyana, the root tuber and staple crop cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), native to Amazonia, is central to Indigenous life and culture. On a spectrum from sweet to bitter based on toxicity,

Paulette Allicock from Suruma village, Region 9 walking to her farm carrying a warishi for fetching cassava roots, 2014
© Claudia Nuzzo





Left Paulette Allicock from Surama village, Region 9 squeezing the cassava meal using a matapee
Right Benita Roberts from Rupertee village, Region 9 using a sifter to sift the cassava meal for cassava bread baking, 2014
© Claudia Nuzzo

'bitter' cassava requires laborious processing to remove cyanides to be made edible. Cassava is used to produce farine and cassava bread (made from the squeezed, grated cassava meal); cassareep (a dark viscous liquid reduction of the cassava juice); starch and tapioca (made from settling the cassava juice); and various alcoholic drinks, such as parakari and kasiri (made from fermented cassava) (Jafferally, 2017). These cassava foods all have specific basketry crafts associated with their production.

For example, baskets made from the processed strips of mukuru (*Ischnosiphon* spp.) and nibbi (*Heteropsis flexuosa*) are essential for fetching and storing food within an Indigenous home. These include the warishi and quake which are used to carry firewood and farm produce such as cassava. The matapee, or cassava squeezer, is particularly essential in all households, used for extracting the poisonous cassava juice. Sifters are used to sift the cassava meal for cassava bread baking or farine parching. The awara (*Astrocaryum vulgare*), kuru (*Astrocaryum aculeatum*) or arowa (*Attalea* spp.) palms are used for making fans which are used for maintaining the cooking fire or for turning and extracting hot products like cassava bread. Cassava products are stored in trays just after cooking or in baskets for the longer term.

Yet, as elsewhere, Indigenous basketry in Guyana is waning (Mistry et al., 2021). This is not just about the loss of knowledge of object making, but also knowledge of how to sustainably manage the raw plant materials. The crucial importance of Indigenous crafting became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when communities had to, once again, turn to their local environment for sustenance (Mistry et al., 2022). Thus, it is in this context of craft decline that we implemented an 18-month project, from October 2022 to April 2024, funded by the National Geographic Society on Indigenous crafting in Guyana. The Cobra Collective is a UK- and Guyana-based organisation with a mission to support communities worldwide to achieve positive change through capacity-building, strengthening resilience, and developing long-term partnerships and collaboration. The aim of the project was to promote the role of crafting in maintaining Indigenous culture, identity, sustainable resource management practices, and economic livelihoods.

Carlos Joseph,
a craft teacher
at the Bina
Hill Institute
Youth Learning
Centre in Region
9, plaiting
an ité basket
at a project
workshop, 2023
© Jayalaxshmi
Mistry



Engaging Basket Makers

Our approach to the project was based on decades of experience working with Indigenous communities on research and development projects. We (the authors) are a group of Indigenous, non-Indigenous, Guyanese, non-Guyanese, crafters and non-crafter cis-women, who all share a vision for Indigenous self-determination. Following a process of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), our main methods were knowledge exchange workshops and in-depth village visits through which

we engaged with over 100 basket makers. We facilitated three workshops bringing together crafters from different parts of Guyana: the first focused on the state of crafting knowledge; the second on craft objects and the resources needed to make those items; and the third on craft resource management and guidelines for community-based craft businesses. In all these one-week workshops, there was time between discussions to demonstrate and teach crafting techniques, enjoy food and be in the forest, and showcase individual talents in a final exhibition.

For the in-depth work, we focused on the communities of Santa Rosa and its satellites: Koko, Parakeese, and Kamwattta (Region 1); Santa Aratack (Region 3); Rupertee and Wowetta in Annai Village (Region 9); Toka (Region 9); and Yupukari (Region 9). In each of the villages, we used questionnaires to gain a basic understanding of crafting activities in the community, followed by one-on-one interviews and focus groups to identify

¹
All the project outputs including the videos can be found at: <https://cobracollective.org/projects/conserving-nature-and-culture-through-indigenous-crafting-in-guyana.php>

and document craft items and for mapping craft resources. We also used video to work closely with several master crafters and as a tool for the final evaluation of the project¹.

State of Basketry

Using the definitions of craft status adapted from the UK-based crafts organisation Heritage Crafts (2024), we found that among the Makushi and Wapishana in Region 9, many of the basketry crafts associated with food production were classified as 'endangered' or 'critically endangered'. This included the warishi, matapee, sifters,

and quick plait ité baskets. In general, there were a limited number of males, mostly over 40 years of age, still making these items, and the transmission of knowledge was being built through short-term funding-driven programmes by NGOs, rather than built into the everyday activities of the villages. Nevertheless, there were plans for more consistent craft training through village wildlife clubs (aimed at 5-16-year-olds), via the craft enterprise Wabbani based in Yupukari village, and at the Bina Hill Institute Youth Learning Centre, a vocational institute based in Annai for 18-25-year-olds.



In Regions 1 and 3, tibisiri basketry made from the ité palm is considered 'currently viable,' with many persons, both young and old, engaged in making craft items. Other forms of basketry, on the other hand, are either 'critically endangered' in the case of Santa Rosa or 'extinct' in the village of Santa Aratack. In Santa Aratack, there is only one elder with the knowledge of the mukuru craft, but he is now immobile. There are still crafters in Santa Rosa with mukuru craft knowledge, but the knowledge is fading as people find substitutes to fulfil the functions of traditional craft.

When it comes to craft materials, we found there is very limited knowledge among many crafters. Many relied on buying raw materials or asking others to harvest them. Many craft items require several different materials; for example, a sifter is made

**Donley Wilson
from Santa
Rosa, Region
1, completing a
basket, 2024**
© Claudia Nuzzo

Expert crafter and elder Daniel Allicock from Surama village, Region 9 demonstrating how to collect and strip mukuru sustainably, 2023
© Jayalaxshmi Mistry



from mukuru, yari yari (*Duguetia* spp.), krawa (*Bromelia* spp.), and karamani (*Sympomia globulifera*); therefore, a crafter needs to know where to find each of these plants and how to extract and process them (although some could be bought or bartered). Interviews with crafters indicate that the main challenges for craft resources are indiscriminate fires, climate change (specifically the extreme heat), overharvesting of resources, clear-cutting land for farms and a general lack of knowledge about when to harvest materials (time/age). For example, swamps are an important habitat for several craft

resources including mukuru and ité. Mukuru can withstand and even benefit from fire in stimulating new regrowth if burnt at the right time when the soil is still moist thus not affecting its roots. However, if burnt when the soil is dry, the fire can penetrate the root system and kill the plants. Ité swamps are also highly susceptible to fire, and burning at the wrong time of the year or during drought periods can destroy these important trees. Climate change, particularly extreme heat events, is also exacerbating the situation, drying out swampy areas and making them more vulnerable to fire.

Left Drawing of craft material mukuru (*Ischnosiphon* spp.) by Dave Scipio, Rupertee village, Region 9
Middle Drawing of craft material nibbi (*Heteropsis flexuosa*) by Leania Domingo, Wowetta village, Region 9
Right Drawing of craft material kuru (*Astrocaryum aculeatum*) by Leania Domingo, Wowetta village, Region 9, 2023 © Leania Domingo



Craft Economies

We found that most crafters are selling their products in some way, whether it be the individual 'hustle' or through an organised/formal group, association, or business. However, in most cases, craft only contributes part of an income, and the profit margins, even for the more established craft businesses, are very slim or non-existent. Whether they work alone or in a group, most crafters share aspirations for not only improving their own financial circumstances, but also to contribute to community development, benefit marginalised groups such as women and youth and retain and promote cultural identity. Yet they also faced critical challenges in the form of the allocation of productive opportunities when market demand is low, or when market demand is high but natural resources are scarce. For the latter, respecting the collective interests of the community and not overharvesting resources and/or sustainably managing craft resources through community rules is a key factor.



Baskets produced from tibisiri, a product of the ité palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*), on display at the Kamuni Women's Craft Centre, Santa Aratack, Region 3, 2024
© Claudia Nuzzo

Most retailers we spoke to are geared towards the tourist market, looking for portable items with souvenir value. Ecolodges, resorts, and tourism agencies want a greater diversity of Indigenous craft items to sell, use in their premises, and showcase at exhibitions and expos. However, in all these cases items are sourced from limited known producers, and /or bought when items are brought to town by the producer. Of the limited support for craft by successive governments, a large part is focused on training rather than business development, which has been highlighted as the main reason for the failure of craft businesses.

Knowledge Exchange on Basketry

Transmission of crafting knowledge and skills between older and younger crafters at workshops, 2023
© Jayalaxshmi Mistry



The knowledge exchange workshops were unique and safe spaces for crafters to interact and create connections. They allowed crafters to reflect on their practices, express concerns, and externalise their problems with craft resource management and knowledge loss and together develop a shared critical awareness of Indigenous crafting and what needs to change. This, in turn, allowed them to explore new, imaginative ways to move crafting forward.

At the end of the project, we returned to the five villages we worked with to carry out a project impact evaluation using video and found that

the project had contributed to the development of basket makers, both young and old, in the following ways:

Learning how to make craft: Many of the younger crafters did not know how to make certain basketry items, such as the sifters and fans, while at the same time, crafters from different regions did not have the full knowledge of making items like the matapee. The project was therefore important in building these skills and knowledge:

"It was very interesting for me to learn how to plait warishi, different types of matapees and hear the stories behind craft. About matapee, they say it's a big snake, they say you cannot watch into the matapee hole, otherwise the big snake will swallow you" (Lenilda George, Bina Hill Institute Youth Learning Centre).

Conserving craft resources: Some crafters do not source their own raw materials, and for younger crafters, knowledge of harvesting and managing craft resources is lacking. The project helped to build this knowledge:

"I have learnt many things from the workshops, especially to harvest mukuru in a right time and how to maintain the mukuru" (Hilaroy Lawrence, Bina Hill Institute for Youth Learning, Annai).

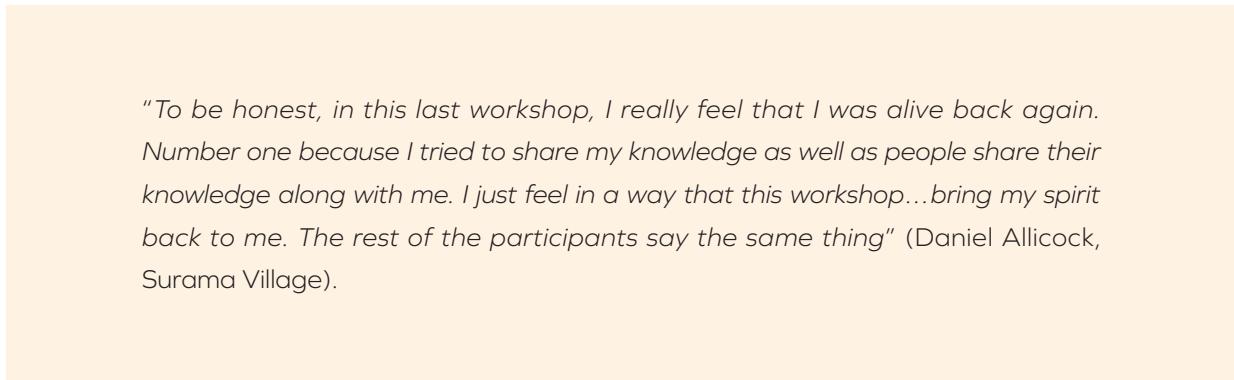


Students at the Bina Hill Institute Youth Learning Centre in Region 9, Lenilda George, Marterson George, Hilary Lawrence and Catchia Merriman (from left to right), displaying their cassava fans and sifter, 2024
© Claudia Nuzzo

Exchanging ideas and designs with other crafters from around Guyana: Many crafters live in isolated and remote parts of Guyana and there are few opportunities for them to interact due to distance, to find out how people are making craft, innovating their designs, and products. The workshops helped to provide these opportunities:

"What we don't know in our community, somebody else have that knowledge and we share it with one another. All of us, you know, we don't meet out different communities because we cannot afford to go to other regions to see what the other tribes are doing. So, it was something nice that I remember, bringing all our different Indigenous people together so that they can share what they know" (Orla Cabral, Surama Village).

Opportunities to share knowledge between generations: There has been a general loss of traditional knowledge amongst Indigenous communities and the spaces where intergenerational knowledge transfer took place (such as the farm) are less frequently visited by younger people. At the same time, elder crafters are dying. As such, our project was important in bringing together crafters of different ages, and for elders to feel their worth as master crafters handing on the baton:



Expert crafter and elder Joel Samuels from Yupukari village, Region 9, who sadly passed away in 2024, showing his mukuru craft, 2024 © Claudia Nuzzo

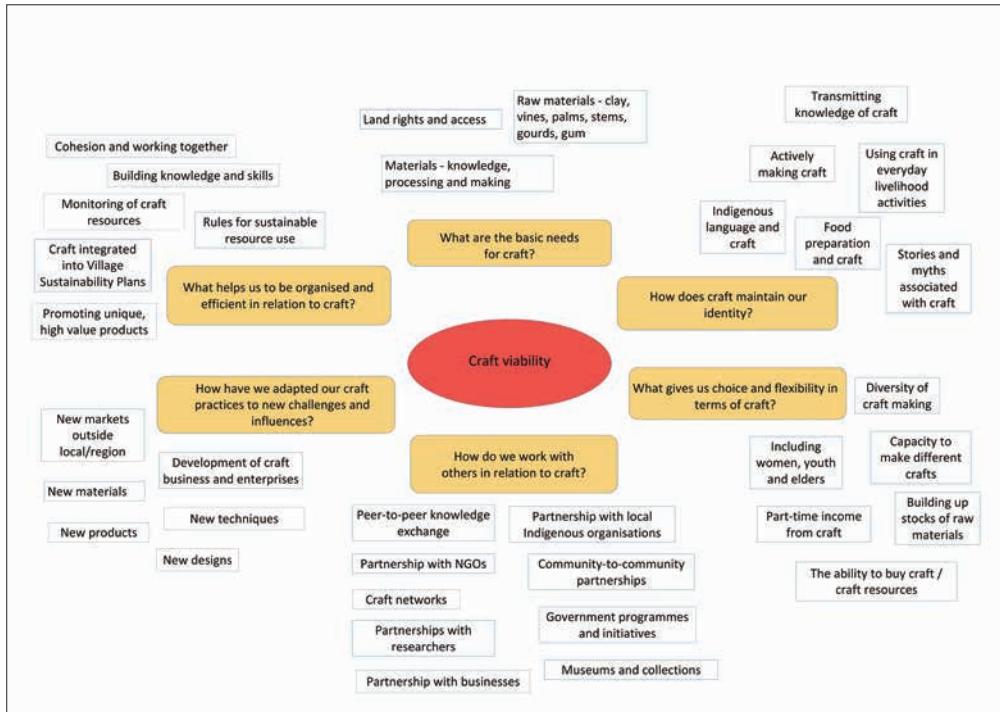
"interests me" (Marcilene Edwards, Yupukari Village).

"We have a little shop in Georgetown [the capital] where we sell our products and we never know about marketing, how to manage these products. There's so much we gathered [from the workshops] that we can apply now" (Leonard Patterson, Santa Aratack).

Financial and business knowledge:

There is limited know-how about how to start and run a craft business and most crafters admitted to 'hustling' their craft on an individual basis. Through the project, we provided training in basic business principles including pricing craft, marketing and day-to-day running of a business:

"I was more interested in management and accountability, we learnt about the cost of every item, or everything about how to sell your product. This is what



Factors contributing to the viability of Indigenous basketry in Guyana today, 2024
 © Jayalaxshmi Mistry

Conclusion

"Craft is important to me because it reminds me to carry on the traditional and cultural way of life. It brings income to my family, keeps our family and children home [and] active [rather] than straying out" (crafter from Surama village, Region 9).

Our study shows that, despite the severe impacts of colonisation on Indigenous crafting traditions, there is still strong recognition of Indigenous peoples about the critical importance of basketry to their cultures and livelihoods, particularly for food and farming. The enthusiasm, passion, and thirst for knowledge and skills both from older, skilled crafters and younger learners was paramount at the week-long workshops we organised and apparent during visits to meet crafters in their villages. At the same time, there was considerable concern for the continuing loss of knowledge and how climate change, inadequate resource management, and indiscriminate burning affects craft resources in the forests, savannas, and wetlands.

We have found that the viability of Indigenous basketry in Guyana today is dependent on a myriad of factors, summarised in the diagram below. This provides a template for future conversations about craft, livelihoods, culture and heritage, and a basis for actions to revive, strengthen, and celebrate Indigenous crafting in Guyana.

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Résumé

La vannerie joue un rôle essentiel dans les moyens de subsistance et l'identité culturelle des communautés autochtones du Guyana. Elle est profondément ancrée dans les activités quotidiennes telles que la pêche, la chasse, l'agriculture et la préparation des aliments. Au cœur de ces pratiques se trouve la transformation du manioc (*Manihot esculenta*), une culture de base pour les peuples autochtones. Les variétés dites « amères » nécessitent une transformation complexe pour être rendues comestibles, faisant appel à divers paniers, notamment les presse-maniocs, les tamis et les éventails. Le manioc transformé est ensuite utilisé pour produire des aliments traditionnels comme la farine, le pain de manioc et des boissons fermentées, renforçant ainsi l'importance de la vannerie dans les systèmes alimentaires autochtones.

Cet article présente les résultats d'un projet de recherche de 18 mois financé par la National Geographic Society, visant à documenter et revitaliser les savoirs traditionnels liés à la vannerie au Guyane. En collaboration avec plus de 100 vanniers répartis dans plusieurs villages, le projet a permis l'organisation d'échanges entre pairs et d'ateliers communautaires pour enregistrer les savoir-faire traditionnels et encourager la réflexion sur la gestion durable des ressources naturelles

utilisées dans la vannerie. Une attention particulière a été portée aux dimensions environnementales, sociales et économiques de cet artisanat.

Notre étude a révélé que ce savoir-faire essentiel est aujourd’hui détenu par un petit nombre d'aînés hautement qualifiés. De nombreux paniers sont porteurs de récits et de traditions orales qui risquent de disparaître avec la perte de ces connaissances. Par ailleurs, le changement climatique — à travers la sécheresse, les inondations et les incendies incontrôlables — menace la disponibilité des plantes indispensables à la fabrication des paniers.

Malgré ces défis, les artisans autochtones considèrent la vannerie comme un vecteur de développement communautaire, de préservation culturelle et de protection de l'environnement. Elle soutient des pratiques alimentaires durables, renforce l'identité autochtone et favorise l'estime de soi. De plus, la croissance du secteur écotouristique en Guyane offre des perspectives prometteuses pour valoriser la vannerie comme expression culturelle et objet utilitaire.

L'article met en lumière l'importance des échanges entre pairs, qui ont constitué une plateforme dynamique de transmission intergénérationnelle des savoirs, d'identification des ressources végétales et de co-construction de solutions pour préserver et faire évoluer la vannerie dans un monde en mutation.

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La vannerie native en Bretagne, un héritage rendu visible

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08

08. La vannerie native en Bretagne, un héritage rendu visible

Roger Hérisset
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Abstract

La Bretagne a été parcourue en profondeur par les ethnologues. Ses particularités culturelles — chants, danses, langues, jeux, contes, musiques... — sont bien décrites et soutenues par différentes institutions. Pourtant, la vannerie en Bretagne ne comportait aucune étude d'ensemble ni d'action de conservation. Des savoir-faire détenus par des vanniers très âgés (80 à 100 ans) allaient disparaître dans l'indifférence d'un milieu culturel par ailleurs dynamique et mobilisé.

Fils de vanniers, j'ai souhaité suivre une formation à l'École Nationale d'Osiériculture et de Vannerie. J'ai alors pris conscience que les savoir-faire bretons n'appartenaient pas aux mêmes groupes techniques que ceux enseignés : la connaissance des uns ne permettant pas la pratique des autres. De retour, j'ai commencé à reproduire des paniers traditionnels. J'ai découvert alors la diversité des savoir-faire locaux, des outils et dispositifs techniques, des matériaux, des modèles et des usages. Je me suis ouvert de cette richesse auprès d'un ethnologue auquel j'ai aussi montré des photos d'ateliers. Il s'est étonné de n'avoir jamais entendu parler de ce patrimoine technique. Après une recherche bibliographique, il est revenu vers moi : « si on se fiait aux écrits, on pourrait considérer que la vannerie en Bretagne n'a jamais existé. La vannerie en plus c'est compliqué à décrire. Je ne vois donc qu'une seule solution ! »

Cette « solution » était que je me lance dans un travail de description et de mise en lumière de ces techniques. Ce fut le départ d'une aventure humaine et technique, à la rencontre des derniers vanniers traditionnels bretons, qui travaillaient pour diverses industries telles que la pêche, la conserverie de sardines, la production de cidre, le maraîchage... Cette enquête a débouché sur une thèse, un livre, des conférences, des articles, une reconnaissance par le ministère de la Culture des vanneries de Bretagne

au titre du patrimoine immatériel français et aussi une action de consécration de «trésors vivants» de personnalités au savoir rare...

Un travail avec un archéologue a montré que les aires techniques actuelles correspondent à celles des groupes culturels préhistoriques armoricains, renforçant l'hypothèse que ces vanneries soient natives.

Cet ensemble d'actions a créé une émulation autour de ces vanneries natives qui se traduit par leur mise en œuvre par une nouvelle génération de vanniers, la création d'un collectif (en cours de constitution) ou encore la prise en compte dorénavant des vanneries dans les actions patrimoniales, par exemple en juillet 2024 à l'occasion des très emblématiques fêtes maritimes de Douarnenez.

Introduction

En Bretagne (France), les vanniers détenteurs des savoirs régionaux sont âgés et peu nombreux. La mise en valeur de ce patrimoine se heurte à des difficultés comme l'absence d'une institution représentative, un temps d'apprentissage long, un marché étroit, des rémunérations faibles au regard de la compétence acquise et la disponibilité limitée de formateurs. C'est dans ce cadre contraignant que j'ai tenté depuis 20 ans de donner un avenir aux savoirs traditionnels vanniers, dans une région qui s'étend sur 260 km par 190 km.

Le fils du vannier

Je suis né en 1970 dans une famille de vanniers de l'est de la Bretagne. Chaque jour, mes sens étaient stimulés par l'odeur de l'osier frais, le bruit régulier du tressage, le feu

Left Roger Hérisset (père) au milieu de vanneries bâties sur arceaux et Roger Hérisset (fils) à côté de corbeille du pays vannetais, 1952
© Auteur inconnu, Archive Roger Hérisset,
Right 2026
© Véronique Hérisset



qui crépite dans lequel on jette les déchets de petit bois. À cause des commandes, les repas pouvaient être tardifs. Le lundi, on préparait le marché du lendemain à la Guerche-de-Bretagne. De mercredi à vendredi, le tressage battait son plein. Samedi, mon père préparait l'osier et le châtaignier, partait en livraison, m'emmenant parfois. Le dimanche était jour de repos. Il n'y avait ni vacances ni jour férié. Il fallait donner un coup de main de temps en temps, mais j'étais encouragé à être bon à l'école, car les vanniers avaient fait le deuil de l'avenir de leur activité.

« Revivalisme » vannier

À partir des années 80, de nouveaux fabricants se sont installés. Rarement enfants de vanniers, ils se sont formés auprès de l'École Nationale d'Osiériculture et de Vannerie (ENOV, Haute-Marne) et connaissent peu les savoirs régionaux. Pour eux, ce métier répond à un besoin de ressourcement. Aujourd'hui, ils sont au nombre d'une trentaine en Bretagne. Ils façonnent des pièces uniques, vendues à l'unité aux particuliers alors que les anciens vanniers fabriquaient des pièces en série. Ces derniers avaient été associés dès leur enfance à l'activité familiale. Ceci laissait peu de place à l'innovation, aussi les fondements techniques de cette activité en Bretagne ont-ils probablement peu évolué depuis 40 000 ans (Hérisset, 2014).

L'élément déclencheur

Alors que mon frère Jean-Claude reprenait l'atelier, j'ai poursuivi des études d'ingénieur. En 1997, j'ai participé à une mission dans le Somerset (Angleterre). À cette occasion, nos hôtes nous ont fait découvrir une coopérative de vannerie. L'ambiance de l'atelier, l'odeur de l'osier ; je me suis senti en terrain familier. On nous montra un croquis représentant un vieux vannier. Il était réputé pour son beau langage, le *old english*. Il me rappelait mon père, locuteur d'un langage roman régional. Cette visite a eu l'effet d'un déclencheur sur un terrain émotionnel bien préparé. L'année suivante, je me suis inscrit à l'école de vannerie.

Trois idées « simples »

Cette école se situait à l'autre bout de la France. J'y ai appris à réaliser divers types de vanneries. Celui pratiqué dans ma famille, la vannerie bâtie sur arceaux, n'y était pas enseigné. M'ouvrant de cette question auprès de Robert Bally, un formateur, il me répondit : « le menuisier et le tonnelier travaillent le bois et pourtant ils ne se voient pas comme pratiquant le même métier ». Première idée simple : il y a donc « des » patrimoines vanniers. Il a poursuivi : « j'ai déjà vu certains paniers bretons. Ils ont une



Julia Le Gallo fabrique un *skissen*, un panier en bourdaine et châtaignier, 2006 © Roger Hérisset

réaliser le travail le plus expert : la confection des montures des paniers. De nos jours, tout un chacun souhaite faire un panier du début à la fin. Les longues périodes d'apprentissage sont culturellement plus difficilement acceptées. Si autrefois, il fallait être «courageux» et «avantageux» pour faire un bon vannier, aujourd'hui il faut être «doué» et «passionné».

La troisième idée découle de la précédente et interroge la transmission : avec la disparition des vanniers au savoir régional, ce patrimoine est d'autant plus en danger, à une époque où l'acceptation du temps long disparaît.

De l'invisibilité de la vannerie

Je me suis installé en tant qu'artisan en 2000. J'ai voulu reproduire des paniers régionaux, échouant souvent sur les modèles dont je ne connaissais pas le procédé de fabrication. Avec des fabricants âgés, j'ai découvert la variété des dispositifs techniques, des matériaux, des modèles. Je me suis ouvert de cette richesse auprès de François de Beaulieu, écrivain-ethnologue. Étonné de n'en avoir jamais entendu parler, il fit une recherche bibliographique auprès du Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique de Brest : «si on ne se fie qu'aux sources écrites, la vannerie en Bretagne n'a jamais existé. La vannerie c'est compliqué à décrire. Je ne vois donc qu'une seule solution!» Cette «solution» consistait dans le fait que je me lance dans une recherche ethnographique.

La Bretagne a pourtant été parcourue en profondeur par les ethnologues. Ses particularités culturelles — chants, danses, langues, jeux, contes, musiques... — sont bien décrites et soutenues par différentes institutions. Pourtant, il y a 20 ans, la vannerie bretonne ne comportait aucune étude d'ensemble ni d'action

façon de faire là-bas, mais les gens d'ici n'arrivent pas à les refaire. Ils ont leurs propres techniques.» Deuxième idée : une technique particulière de vannerie s'apprend auprès d'un vannier.

Chez moi, l'entrée dans le métier se faisait jeune. On vous demandait d'abord de préparer les matériaux. Plus tard, on vous confiait le toilettage des paniers : couper les brins qui dépassent. Venait ensuite le tressage. Si au bout de quelques années on vous en considérait comme digne, vous pouviez

de sauvegarde. Des savoir-faire, détenus par des vanniers âgés de 70 à 90 ans, risquaient de disparaître dans l'indifférence d'un milieu culturel par ailleurs dynamique et mobilisé.

En 1906, deux Français actifs sur 1000 pratiquaient la vannerie de manière professionnelle. C'est par exemple la proportion de pharmaciens actuellement en France. Dans ce décompte n'est pas compris le tressage occasionnel, fréquent au sein des familles d'agriculteurs ou de pêcheurs. De nos jours, la population vannière professionnelle est à peu près 100 fois inférieure. Elle a particulièrement décliné dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, d'une part à cause du développement des contenants produits de manière automatisés à partir de bois déroulé, de carton ou de plastique, et d'autre part à cause des importations de vanneries d'Europe orientale et d'Asie.

Les ateliers professionnels se situaient souvent en périphérie des forêts, où étaient prélevées les essences tressées, à l'écart des centres urbains et villageois. Une invisibilité renforcée par le fait d'une vie sociale limitée par un travail très prenant. Il n'y a pas non plus d'inscription dans le paysage de cette activité : pas de revenu important pouvant se traduire dans des demeures remarquables, pas non plus d'infrastructures particulières, telles que les moulins des meuniers. La vannerie ne nécessite que peu d'outils et un espace de travail réduit. Quand l'activité s'arrête, il ne reste parfois qu'un patronyme : Pannetier, Vannier, Mannier...

Au XXe siècle, seules deux thèses en France métropolitaine sont dédiées à la vannerie : l'une dans le Limousin (Robert, 1967), l'autre en Provence (Galtier, 1968). D'ailleurs, l'ethnologue Marcel Mauss (1948, p. 71-78) regrettait le désintérêt manifesté en France pour les activités techniques. André Leroi-Gourhan (1943, p. 313) considérait que l'absence d'étude technique se comprenait en raison de la difficulté pour les ethnologues de décrire une activité artisanale et de leur manque de formation à ces techniques. Concilier connaissance technique et méthode ethnologique, voilà donc ce que j'allais faire.



À l'occasion de la soutenance de la thèse de Roger Hérisset, les vanniers de tradition et la nouvelle génération se sont rencontrés. Au premier plan des paniers emblématiques des différents types techniques présents en Bretagne, 2012
© Véronique Hérisset

Au-delà des clichés

En 2003, je démarrai un master suivi d'une thèse, soutenue en 2012, sous la direction de Jean-François Simon, professeur à l'Université de Bretagne occidentale (Brest). Je partis toutes ces années à la rencontre des derniers vanniers traditionnels bretons. Ceux-ci avaient parfois fait l'objet d'articles dans la presse. Ils y étaient présentés comme des figures pittoresques. Ces textes, contenant des inexactitudes et dépourvus de volet technique, s'en tenaient à la personnalité du fabricant. Étant fils de vannier, mes informateurs s'attendaient à plus de respect de ma part et c'est ce qu'ils m'inspiraient réellement.

Il y avait un enjeu à casser l'image d'Épinal selon laquelle les paniers étaient fabriqués par des agriculteurs à l'occasion de veillées. La population rurale est bien sûr porteuse d'une partie du patrimoine vannier. La population agricole, nombreuse, ne manque pas d'auteurs décrivant de l'intérieur son activité. À l'inverse, les auteurs issus des populations vannières sont rares. J'ai donc choisi de faire porter mon mémoire de master sur les vanniers qui livraient dans les ports du Sud Finistère, fournisseurs en gros auprès des conserveries de poissons, des entreprises de mareyage et des coopératives de pêcheurs ; montant ainsi clairement que cette activité n'est pas un épiphénomène de la civilisation rurale (Hérisset, 2005).

Un atelier de transmission des techniques de la vannerie vannetaise, à Kernascléden dans le Morbihan, 2016
© Roger Hérisset



La méthode classificatoire

Les systèmes classificatoires des vanneries en usage en France reposent sur les entrecroisements propres au tissage et à l'organisation des montants (Jaoul, Goldstein, 1990). Ils ne permettent pas de montrer la singularité de la vannerie en Bretagne. Cette classification est fondée sur l'observation des collections, ce qui effaçait l'impact des modes de montage. En Bretagne, les procédés de fabrication impliquent que les montants soient courbés et tenus par un dispositif technique qui annule l'effet ressort de la matière. Le rapprochement évoqué par Robert Bally, mon formateur, prend alors tout son sens : les vanniers bretons seraient des «tonneliers» du tressage alors que la classification les rangeait du côté des «menuisiers». J'ai donc proposé un système classificatoire intégrant la nature des forces appliquées sur les matériaux, ceux-ci étant eux-mêmes classés en fonction de leur elasticité. Cette méthode permet par ailleurs une meilleure compréhension de ce qui distingue la vannerie du tissage (Hérisset, 2012).

Un changement de regard

La thèse a permis d'engager une ethnologie d'urgence décrivant les populations, leur savoir-faire, les systèmes linguistiques, techniques et ethnobotaniques. La maison de l'Ethnologie du ministère de la Culture m'a accordé une bourse pour cette étude. Des institutions muséographiques ont apporté leur soutien ou accepté l'expertise de leur fonds : les musées de Rennes, de la Bintinais, de Douarnenez, de Groix, le Museum national d'Histoire Naturelle, les Réserves historiques du Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires... Les vanniers ont souhaité assister à la soutenance de la thèse dont ils comprenaient les enjeux de reconnaissance. Alors que le jury se retirait pour délibérer, nous nous sommes retrouvés sur l'estrade pour la première photo qui regroupait les acteurs des différents types de vannerie en Bretagne.

En marge de l'étude, la revue d'ethnographie bretonne ArMen a publié plusieurs articles portant sur les terrains techniques étudiés. Il s'agit d'un média bien distribué, y compris dans les points presse de petites villes. Les vanniers étaient enfin présentés comme des porteurs de patrimoine respectables au même titre, par exemple, que des chanteurs ou des musiciens, fonctions très valorisées dans la société bretonne. Par exemple, Robert Loussouarn, vannier à Pont-l'Abbé, est le dernier fabricant d'un panier de pêcheurs, objet très présent sur des cartes postales anciennes. Ce panier présente des singularités, notamment une anse difficile à confectionner. J'ai mentionné dans un article d'ArMen le nom en breton que Robert lui donne : le *baskodenn*. Dans les ateliers, un vocabulaire technique peut se maintenir même lorsque ces termes ont quitté l'usage public. Comme gage d'usage ancien, ce nom rappelle le mot gaulois *Baskauda*, désignant justement le panier. Grâce à cet article,

Robert est devenu « Monsieur Baskodenn », un expert. Le mot *baskodenn* retrouve un usage public et repris dans les dictionnaires de langue bretonne. À Combrif-Sainte-Marine (Finistère), l'association Mein ha Dour a proposé à Robert d'animer un atelier de vannerie qui réunit une vingtaine de stagiaires. En juillet 2024, avec Robert et quelques-uns de ses « élèves », nous avons investi les fêtes maritimes de Douarnenez, dans un espace dédié au patrimoine vannier lié aux métiers de la mer. Avec 60 000 visiteurs, ces fêtes ont un grand retentissement dans le milieu des amateurs de la voile traditionnelle. L'objectif était d'ancrer l'idée que la vannerie fait aussi partie du patrimoine maritime à sauvegarder.

Patrimoine culturel immatériel

En 2003, l'UNESCO a adopté la Convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel. Grâce à ce contexte, j'ai pu participer à la rédaction de fiches sur le patrimoine vannier pour la Région Bretagne. L'association Bretagne Culture et Diversité, qui porte cette dimension dans la région, m'a associé à des conférences, des débats, une exposition et des pages Internet. Le ministère de la Culture m'a confié la rédaction de fiches sur « les vanneries de Bretagne », afin de les inscrire dans le répertoire du patrimoine immatériel français et a aussi pris en charge une série de conférences. Elles ont été réalisées à l'occasion d'évènements culturels et auprès d'associations de fabricants amateurs. De ces actions ont découlé des articles dans

Roger Le Gall, Robert Loussouarn et Roger Hérisset (père) sont honorés « Trésors vivants » à l'occasion du festival de la vannerie de Mayun, 2016
© Roger Hérisset



la presse régionale. La sortie du recueil *La vannerie en Bretagne* (Hérisset, 2014) va participer à la connaissance de cette matière par un public plus large. Diffusé à plus de 1 000 exemplaires, il est devenu un ouvrage de référence. Cette mise en valeur des vanneries locales avait pour objectif de sensibiliser, de favoriser le commerce et, bien sûr, de créer des vocations.

« Trésors vivants »

Toujours en 2003, la commune de La-Chapelle-des-Marais (Loire-Atlantique) a organisé un premier festival de la vannerie. Sur l'île de Mayun, située dans les marais de Brière, s'était développée une vannerie singulière, faite de bourdaine et de châtaignier. Le festival prend la forme d'un marché qui, fin juillet, rassemble les « fesous de paniers » du coin et des vanniers professionnels venant de toute la Bretagne et de régions françaises. En 20 ans, ce festival a favorisé le maintien de l'activité de vannerie traditionnelle. Les vanniers « historiques » se faisaient accompagner par des amis ou leurs enfants, qu'ils formaient. Depuis 2015, j'y présente chaque année une conférence qui démontre l'intérêt patrimonial de ces savoirs. En 2016, avec les vanniers professionnels bretons et la municipalité, nous avons décidé d'honorer sous forme de « Trésors vivants » cinq vanniers porteurs des différents types techniques régionaux. Grâce aux démonstrations des Trésors, réalisées côte à côte, les milliers de visiteurs ont pu mesurer la diversité des savoir-faire : positions de travail (assis, debout ou à genoux), outils, matériaux (osier, rotin, bourdaine). La presse régionale s'en est fait l'écho en publiant des portraits des lauréats. Les échanges des vanniers pro et amateurs actuels avec l'ancienne génération ont favorisé le transfert technique.

Aujourd'hui et demain

La vannerie en Bretagne est dorénavant reconnue et ses particularités identifiées. Les vieux vanniers sont devenus des maîtres. Certains vanniers professionnels ont complété leur gamme avec des ouvrages locaux. Les publications et les manifestations portant sur le patrimoine culturel immatériel breton intègrent régulièrement la vannerie. Pourtant ces savoirs sont d'autant plus fragiles que les derniers fabricants traditionnels s'en vont, sans avoir transféré tout ou partie de leurs connaissances. Certaines associations qui au départ avaient pour vocation la transmission des savoirs vanniers locaux, petit à petit, sont entrées dans une démarche de formation des membres à la vannerie en général. Ainsi des techniques importées viennent concurrencer sur son territoire le savoir local et gênent sa transmission. La vannerie locale inspire aussi des créateurs. Ainsi Carine Losay, vannière à Lantic, crée des œuvres tressées en s'inspirant des techniques de la vannerie du Morbihan.

En Conclusion

La sauvegarde ne peut pas se faire sans les vanniers et les vannières. D'ailleurs, ces dernières, auparavant rares dans le métier, sont aujourd'hui majoritaires. En novembre 2023, j'ai animé une rencontre entre les vanniers bretons et Jean-Louis Mouton, responsable régional de l'Institut national de la propriété industrielle. La finalité était de réfléchir à l'intérêt de labelliser la vannerie bretonne. Le projet n'a pas abouti sous cette forme, cependant les vanniers et vannières de Bretagne ont donné

suite à cette première rencontre des professionnels du tressage en créant, le 13 novembre 2024, un collectif appelé « Vannerie et osier en Bretagne ». En mai 2025, ce collectif va porter, avec le soutien financier de la Région Bretagne, un « festival de la vannerie en Bretagne ». Dans ce projet, ils souhaitent mettre en avant la créativité, par exemple par la fabrication de structure monumentale, ainsi que la valorisation du patrimoine,



À l'occasion
des Fêtes de
Douarnenez,
la présentation
du patrimoine
vannier maritime
du sud du
Finistère, 2024
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particulièrement au travers d'une exposition dont je serai le curateur. La transmission y est envisagée sous la forme de démonstrations et de stages. Leur choix de faire figurer aussi « osier » dans le nom de ce collectif exprime la durabilité de leur métier, qui pour produire n'utilise pas d'énergie fossile et emploi des matériaux locaux renouvelables.

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Summary

Brittany has been thoroughly explored by ethnologists. Its cultural particularities — songs, dances, languages, games, tales, music... — are well described and supported by various institutions. Yet, basketry in Brittany had never been the subject of a comprehensive study or any conservation efforts. The skills held by very elderly basket makers (aged 80 to 100) were about to disappear unnoticed in a cultural environment that was otherwise dynamic and engaged.

As the son of basket makers, I wanted to pursue training at the National School of Osier Culture and Basketry. It was then that I realized that Breton skills did not belong to the same technical groups as those taught: the knowledge of one did not allow the practice of the others. Upon returning, I began to reproduce traditional baskets. I then discovered the diversity of local know-how, tools and technical devices, materials, models, and uses. I shared this richness with an ethnologist to whom I also showed photos of workshops. He was surprised never to have heard of this technical heritage. After a bibliographic search, he came back to me: "If we relied on the writings, we could consider that basketry in Brittany never existed. Basketry is also complicated to describe. So, I see only one solution!"

This "solution" was for me to embark on a project to describe and highlight these techniques. This was the beginning of a human and technical adventure, meeting the last traditional Breton basket makers, who worked for various industries such as fishing, sardine canning, cider production, and market gardening... This investigation led to a thesis, a book, lectures, articles, recognition by the Ministry of Culture of Breton basketry as part of French intangible heritage, and also an effort to honor "living treasures", personalities with rare knowledge...

Work with an archaeologist showed that current technical areas correspond to those of prehistoric Armorican cultural groups, strengthening the hypothesis that these basketries are native.

This set of actions has created enthusiasm around these native basketries, which is reflected in their revival by a new generation of basket makers, the creation of a collective (currently being formed), and the inclusion of basketry in heritage actions, for example during the very emblematic maritime festivals of Douarnenez in July 2024.

Roger Hérisset docteur en ethnologie, chercheur associé au Centre de Recherche Bretonne et celtique (CRBC, Brest, France), est le descendant d'une lignée de vanniers traditionnels de la forêt de la Guerche-de-Bretagne. En 2012, il soutient à l'Université de Bretagne Occidentale (UBO, Brest) une thèse décrivant la vannerie en Bretagne. Ce travail a été le support de l'inscription des savoir-faire vanniers bretons au répertoire national du patrimoine culturel et immatériel par le ministère de la Culture et de la Communication. En 2014, il publie aux Presses Universitaires de Rennes l'ouvrage «La Vannerie en Bretagne». Il participe depuis à des actions de reconnaissance du patrimoine vannier avec plusieurs institutions dont Bretagne Culture et Diversité (BCD, Lorient, France).

Empowering Rural Communities through Bamboo Basketry

Sneha Bhattacharyya

Contact Base



09

09. Empowering Rural Communities through Bamboo Basketry

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Abstract

Bamboo holds a pivotal role in the daily lives of indigenous communities residing in eastern India. Traditionally, these communities craft a myriad of baskets and utilitarian items such as winnows, fishing tools, and even headgear by weaving bamboo slips. However, the prevalence of plastic and machine-made alternatives in local markets has posed a significant challenge to the traditional bamboo products.

The paper presents the work of Contact Base with indigenous communities like the Rajbanshis and Santhals in West Bengal. Recognizing the need for intervention, men and women who were adept at this household craft were supported to explore new market avenues and opportunities for their traditional basketry. Tradition bearers were mostly women. They collaborated with contemporary designers to co-create diverse weaving patterns and explore different ways of slicing the bamboo into fine slips. Through experimentation bamboo basketry evolved into innovative products which found wide appreciation in urban households. The artisans now make a wide range of floor lamps and lamp shades, vases, boxes, trays and containers. They make decorative items, wall hanging and even fine jewellery utilizing the fundamental basketry techniques

Skill development initiatives were implemented to educate the artisans on various bamboo varieties and their suitability for different end uses. Master artists and designers delved into material experimentation, resulting in the integration of bamboo work into terracotta pottery and kitchenware. Additionally, safe dyeing

techniques were explored to enhance the aesthetic appeal of bamboo products. This process of innovation not only empowered the makers with access to new markets, it also broadened their perspectives, transforming what they once considered ordinary utility items into objects of creative expressions. As the basketry weavers began participating in exhibitions in major Indian cities, the appreciation they received bolstered their confidence and pride. Presently, over 2000 individuals in West Bengal are engaged professionally in bamboo basketry, with governmental support extending to bamboo cultivation and the establishment of common facility centers to streamline production.

The article provides valuable insights on the technical intricacies of bamboo basketry as well as enabling policies supporting sustainable production and consumption practices for a green economy. It highlights the importance of the bamboo revival movement not only to preserve the tradition but also create economic opportunities for indigenous communities while promoting environmentally conscious practices.

Introduction

Bamboo holds a pivotal role in the daily lives of rural communities in India. Traditionally, rural and indigenous people craft myriad baskets and utilitarian items such as winnows, fishing tools, and even headgear by weaving bamboo slips. However, the

Basketry in
Baltica, 2017
© Contact Base



prevalence of plastic and machine-made alternatives in local markets has posed a significant challenge to the traditional bamboo products.

Our organisation, Contact Base, is a two-decade-old non-profit organisation working for inclusive and sustainable development, using culture as a vehicle. Our flagship initiative, 'Art For Life' (AFL) (<https://youtu.be/1IITxKB-I2Y>), is a culture-based development model focusing on poverty alleviation, social and cultural inclusion, and community empowerment for equitable growth through professionalization of traditional cultural skills, and holistic development of marginalised rural cultural practitioners. AFL undertakes systematic documentation of the art forms, facilitates heritage skill transmission to the younger generations, and develops the technical and marketing capacities of the actual practitioners.

The paper presents the work of Contact Base with rural indigenous communities like the Rajbanshis and Santhals in West Bengal in eastern India. Recognising the need for intervention, men and women who were adept at this household craft were supported to explore new market avenues and opportunities for their traditional basketry. Tradition bearers were mostly women. They collaborated with contemporary designers to co-create diverse weaving patterns and explore different ways of slicing the bamboo into fine slips. Through experimentation, bamboo basketry evolved into innovative products which found wide appreciation in urban households. The craftspeople now make a wide range of floor lamps and lamp shades, vases, boxes, trays and containers. They make decorative items, wall hangings, and even fine jewellery using fundamental basketry techniques.

Skill development initiatives were implemented to educate the practitioners on various bamboo varieties and their suitability for different end uses. Master artists and designers delved into material experimentation, resulting in the integration of bamboo work into terracotta pottery and kitchenware. Additionally, safe dyeing techniques were explored to enhance the aesthetic appeal of bamboo products. This process of innovation not only empowered the makers with access to new markets, but it also broadened their perspectives, transforming what they once considered ordinary utility items into objects of creative expression. As the basketry weavers began participating in exhibitions in major Indian cities, the appreciation they received bolstered their confidence and pride. Presently, over 2,000 individuals in West Bengal are engaged professionally in bamboo basketry, with governmental support extending to bamboo cultivation and the establishment of common facility centres to streamline production.

The article provides valuable insights on the technical intricacies of bamboo basketry and creation of a skill transmission ecosystem enabling sustainable production and consumption practices for a green economy. It highlights the importance of the bamboo revival movement not only to preserve the tradition but also to create economic opportunities for rural communities while promoting environmentally conscious practices.

Bamboo Craftsmanship in Rural West Bengal

Bamboos are tall arborescent grasses, distinguished by their fast-growing woody culms, complex branching, robust rhizome systems, and infrequent flowering (Soderstrom and Calderon, 1979). As a fast-growing, renewable, and versatile natural resource, bamboo thrives under a wide range of climatic and edaphic conditions. Its significance extends beyond being a mere plant species, playing crucial roles in rural society, the economy, biodiversity conservation, erosion control, riverbank protection, carbon sequestration, and forest health (Shinohara et al., 2019). Bamboo's adaptability and rapid growth make it an essential bio-resource for communities in the tropical and subtropical belts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where over two billion people depend on it for their subsistence (Kiruba et al., 2007).

Since the inception of human civilisation, bamboo has been integral to the daily lives of rural communities. Its uses vary widely across regions and cultures, reflecting the specific environmental and societal needs of each area. Bamboo has been utilised for fuel, food, housing, and shelter, fulfilling basic human requirements. In many societies, bamboo is a critical source of food and beverages, fodder for livestock, medicinal remedies, and materials for construction and fishing (Banerjee et al., 2022). Moreover, its role in the handicraft industry demonstrates its cultural significance, where bamboo crafts serve both utilitarian and artistic purposes.

Bamboo Artist,
2017 © Contact
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Bamboo's contribution to the green economy is undeniable. However, the full potential of bamboo remains unrealised due to several challenges. Deforestation and habitat loss have diminished bamboo forests, threatening its availability as a sustainable resource. Additionally, there is a significant lack of awareness regarding bamboo conservation and its ecological importance, further exacerbating the issue (Singh, 2008). The rise of cheap plastic alternatives has also undermined bamboo's traditional uses, as these materials are often favoured for their lower cost and availability, despite their detrimental environmental impact. Consequently, bamboo's potential role in promoting a green economy and sustainable livelihoods is often overlooked or underutilised.

Bamboo holds a central place in the everyday life of rural India. Traditionally, bamboo craftsmanship has been practiced for generations, to create essential household and utility items such as baskets, winnows, headgears and other items of daily use. The demand for these bamboo goods was traditionally limited to local markets, with craft practitioners primarily skilled in producing a range of utility items. Since 2016, Contact Base has been working with bamboo basketry makers of rural West Bengal, a state in the eastern part of India. Our intervention, destined to revive bamboo craftsmanship through product and design diversification and market integration, particularly focussed on bamboo craft practitioners residing across several districts in West Bengal. Our intervention followed a three-pronged approach. First, it enriched the bamboo craft practitioners' skill set through capacity-building training, enabling them to derive a better understanding of raw materials and production process and move beyond traditional utility items. Second, the initiative facilitated collaboration between the artists, designers, and craft experts to create a new and diverse range of bamboo products. Finally, it established direct market linkages, providing bamboo craftspeople access to broader markets and connecting them to relevant government schemes to support their livelihoods. This paper reflects on the intervention and offers insights into its impact.



Bamboo Container, 2021
© Contact Base

The Intervention

The Need: Bamboo craftsmanship in rural West Bengal faced significant challenges. Traditionally, bamboo makers focused on creating basic household utility items, such as containers, baskets, hand fans, and flutes, with no specialised skills to expand

beyond this minimal range. The process primarily involved splitting bamboo into flat and round strips for weaving, but many craftspeople lacked the proficiency to cut bamboo into fine slips, a crucial step for producing finer products. While around 40% had the necessary cutting skills, the majority relied on rough, tough bamboo fibre, which was less malleable and unsuitable for crafting higher-quality goods. Furthermore, the practitioners were only skilled in making the basic three parts of baskets—base, sidewalls, and rim—limiting their capacity to innovate or diversify.

Another significant limitation was their lack of access to techniques for modifying shape and style, as well as their limited knowledge of product finishing and accessorising them to meet contemporary market demands. Finishing techniques were often unrefined, with craftspeople having minimal understanding of needles, tools, or the application of natural dyes to enhance aesthetic appeal. Additionally, the craftspeople were unfamiliar with bamboo processing and seasoning methods, which are essential for enhancing product durability. The absence of proper storage facilities for both raw materials and finished goods further compounded these challenges. These combined factors severely restricted their market reach, stifling the growth and sustainability of the craft.

The Project: The Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH) project, launched in 2013, is a collaborative initiative between the Department of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises and Textiles (MSME&T), Government of West Bengal, and UNESCO New Delhi. Contact Base has been the implementing partner of this project, working closely with rural communities to promote cultural preservation and socioeconomic growth. The project is designed based on the Art for Life model of Contact Base, which aims

Women
craftspeople at
work, 2023
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at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while addressing economic prospects for tradition bearers (Bhattacharya, 2015). The project has professionalised both handicraft and performing arts, and strengthened grassroots creative enterprises across rural Bengal. In 2016, the bamboo basketry makers across West Bengal became part of this extensive initiative under the RCCH project. Over 2,500 bamboo craft practitioners were engaged, with a strong focus on empowering women—65% of the participants were female craft practitioners. They are from districts such as Birbhum, Purba and Paschim Bardhaman, Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, and Purulia, and represent indigenous communities, such as the Santhals and Rajbangshis. Through this intervention, they received targeted support to revitalise their traditional craft practices while promoting innovation and providing opportunities for socioeconomic advancement. The initiative sought to address longstanding issues such as limited skill sets, knowledge of processing and seasoning of raw materials, and market reach.

The intervention led to the following impacts:

Raw Material Improvement: The intervention began with a focus on enhancing the bamboo craft practitioners' access to and understanding of their raw material. Traditionally, basketweavers relied on locally grown varieties like Jeotha bamboo, primarily suited for crafting utility items. Through the initiative, they were introduced to new types, such as Tolla or Makla bamboo, which proved more conducive to the production of decorative items due to their fine texture. Workshops on bamboo seasoning and fumigation were introduced to train the practitioners on ways to treat bamboo for improved durability, a critical step in ensuring the longevity of their products. Craftspeople learned techniques for softening bamboo fibres and cutting fine slips, which are essential for producing more delicate and intricate items. Additionally, previously discarded parts of the bamboo, such as the plant's ends, were repurposed into new products like wind chimes, reducing waste and adding value to their craft. These steps not only improved the quality of their work but also opened the door to more refined and diverse product offerings. Bamboo craftspeople were interlinked with other craft clusters in Rural Craft and Cultural Hub. They are now commissioned to develop green stage decorations in festivals and make eco-friendly packaging for other crafts, encouraged to collaborate, share resources, and learn from one another, strengthening their sense of community. This collective approach led to innovations like cylindrical bamboo containers, used as eco-friendly packaging for Patachitra-painted scrolls. By blending bamboo craft with



Bamboo Tray,
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Base

traditional Patachitra art, the practitioners created a unique packaging solution both functional and aesthetically appealing, demonstrating their ability to merge distinct crafts and enhance the overall value of their work.

Process Improvement: Bamboo craftspeople were introduced to specialised tools and trained to identify and use them effectively, enhancing their overall efficiency in crafting. Workshops on advanced weaving techniques, such as coiling, braiding, plaiting, and multi-directional weaving, enabled the makers to create more intricate and varied designs. Workshops on natural dyes, colour combinations, and design aesthetics provided craftspeople with new skills to explore different colour palettes, making their products more appealing to contemporary markets. Through exposure to new weaving techniques, usage of tools and materials, bamboo craft practitioners were equipped to improve their process of production. This was supported by specialised training in fine bamboo slip cutting and the innovative use of bamboo strips as rope, reducing the need for nails in assembling furniture and decorative pieces. Furthermore, the craftspeople relied on hand measurements in traditional times, which often led to variations in product size. To address this, the intervention introduced the use of standardised measuring tools, such as calibrated tools, allowing them to create products with precise and uniform dimensions.

Product Development: Traditionally focused on basic household items, the basketeers were trained to experiment with bamboo and to integrate other materials into their craft. Collaborations with contemporary designers played a crucial role in reimagining bamboo craftsmanship, resulting in innovative products like bamboo basketry combined with terracotta pottery and kitchenware, thus merging traditional

forms with modern design aesthetics. Through specialised training, the practitioners refined their skills in motif creation, appropriate sizing, and overall aesthetic enhancement, applying these techniques to a variety of lifestyle products and accessories, including a wide range of floor lamps and lampshades, vases, boxes, trays, and containers. They make decorative items, wall hangings and even fine eco-friendly bamboo jewellery utilising the fundamental basketry techniques. They mastered the fundamental principles of design, exploration techniques, quality standards, and technical knowledge, enabling them to create sophisticated products using available resources. In Kushmandi village, bamboo craftspeople were trained to create



Bamboo Lamp,
2019 © Contact
Base

unique masks from the ends of bamboo trunks, which gained popularity as decorative home items. These new techniques enabled them to expand their product range

beyond simple functional items, to include an array of home décor, accessories, and lifestyle products.

Development of Business Skills: Bamboo craftspeople received training in costing, pricing, market segmentation, and understanding current trends, which helped diversify their income streams while offering valuable insights into design and customer preferences. This approach ensured their economic sustainability. With enhanced capacity building and improved market access, many bamboo craft practitioners from Bengal gained new opportunities. Tripura, the leading state for bamboo crafts in India, has served as an inspiration. Leaders from the artist communities also participated in exposure visits, where they learned about various product innovations and variations, further enriching their craft.

Market Integration: The intervention greatly enhanced the market connectivity of rural bamboo practitioners by facilitating their participation in government-sponsored fairs, exhibitions, and festivals. These platforms allowed craftspeople to reach beyond local markets, significantly expanding their customer base. Notably, one artist was invited to showcase his bamboo creations at the Baltica Festival in Lithuania in 2017, marking an important step towards international recognition. Through capacity building and stronger market access, many bamboo artists from Bengal have gained national and state-level recognition for their craftsmanship, bringing both personal pride and greater community acknowledgment of their cultural contributions.

Development of Grassroot Entrepreneurs: Design interventions and market integration have empowered grassroots entrepreneurs, enabling the practitioners to emerge with greater agency and take ownership of their craft and livelihood. For instance, Srinath Tudu, a Santhal bamboo craftsman from Malda, initially focused on household items but, through skill enhancement, transitioned to creating specialised home décor pieces, such as lampshades and jewellery boxes. By innovatively combining bamboo with cane, he added value to his products and expanded his range. Similarly, Minati Das from Raiganj belonging to Rajbangshi community, after receiving training, moved from traditional basketry to making decorative items. A significant milestone in her journey has been her involvement in creating eco-friendly décor for Durga Puja, Bengal's signature festival. By integrating her basketry skills with sustainability practices, Minati has found new opportunities in the festival industry. As a master trainer and community leader, Minati is also actively involved in passing down her skills to the next generation, ensuring the craft's continuity while adapting to modern trends.



Bamboo
Container, 2019
© Contact Base

Conclusion

Contact Base's intervention has been instrumental in igniting a just transition that not only preserves intricate bamboo craftsmanship but also repositions it as a vibrant expression of rural culture. This transition holds immense future possibilities, as it encourages the continued evolution of bamboo craftsmanship through innovation and creative collaboration, enabling practitioners to explore new design avenues and reach broader markets. By fostering a deep connection between artists and their cultural heritage, the movement ensures that traditional techniques are revitalised and passed down through generations, promoting renewed appreciation for this unique craft. Additionally, the intervention has created socioeconomic opportunities by integrating design innovation and establishing market linkages, empowering artists to blend traditional craftsmanship with modern design sensibilities. This aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 1 (No Poverty) addresses income generation through bamboo product sales; SDG 5 (Gender Equality) promotes gender inclusivity by empowering women artists; SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) supports sustainable livelihoods through skill development; SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) reduces economic disparities by connecting artists with markets for fair remuneration; and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) encourages the use of eco-friendly materials and practices.

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Résumé

Le bambou joue un rôle central dans la vie quotidienne des communautés autochtones de l'est de l'Inde. Traditionnellement, ces communautés fabriquent une multitude de paniers et d'objets utilitaires — tels que des vanneuses, des outils de pêche ou encore des coiffes — en tressant des éclisses de bambou. Toutefois, la prolifération des produits en plastique et des alternatives fabriquées industriellement sur les marchés locaux représente une menace sérieuse pour ces savoir-faire traditionnels.

Cet article présente le travail de Contact Base auprès de communautés autochtones telles que les Rajbanshis et les Santhals, dans l'État du Bengale occidental. Conscients de la nécessité d'une intervention, hommes et femmes maîtrisant ce savoir-faire domestique ont été soutenus pour explorer de nouveaux débouchés commerciaux pour leur vannerie traditionnelle. Les principales dépositaires de cette tradition étaient des femmes. Elles ont collaboré avec des designers contemporains afin de co-créer de nouveaux motifs de tressage et expérimenter différentes méthodes de découpe fine du bambou. Grâce à ces expérimentations, la vannerie en bambou a évolué vers des objets innovants, largement appréciés dans les foyers urbains. Aujourd'hui, les artisans fabriquent un large éventail de lampes sur pied et d'abat-jours, de vases, de boîtes, de plateaux et de contenants. Ils créent aussi des objets décoratifs, des suspensions murales et même des bijoux fins en utilisant les techniques fondamentales de la vannerie.

Des initiatives de développement des compétences ont été mises en œuvre pour sensibiliser les artisans aux différentes variétés de bambou et à leur adaptation aux usages finaux. Des maîtres artisans et designers ont mené des expérimentations sur les matériaux, intégrant le travail du bambou à la poterie en terre cuite et à la vaisselle. Par ailleurs, des techniques de teinture non toxiques ont été explorées pour améliorer l'attrait esthétique des produits. Ce processus d'innovation a non seulement permis aux artisans d'accéder à de nouveaux marchés, mais il a aussi transformé leur regard sur leurs objets, autrefois considérés comme purement utilitaires, désormais perçus comme des formes d'expression créative.

La participation des vanniers aux expositions dans les grandes villes indiennes a renforcé leur confiance et leur fierté. Aujourd'hui, plus de 2000 personnes dans le Bengale occidental vivent de la vannerie en bambou, avec un soutien public croissant en faveur de la culture du bambou et la création de centres d'équipements partagés pour faciliter la production.

L'article offre des perspectives précieuses sur les aspects techniques de la vannerie en bambou ainsi que sur les politiques favorisant une production et une consommation durables pour une économie verte. Il souligne l'importance du mouvement de renaissance du bambou, non seulement pour préserver une tradition, mais aussi pour créer des opportunités économiques pour les communautés autochtones, tout en promouvant des pratiques respectueuses de l'environnement.

Sneha Bhattacharyya has completed her M.Phil. in Social Science and is presently pursuing a PhD on demystifying the cultural identity of Chhau practitioners of Purulia district in West Bengal of India. Working in the domain of inclusive growth and sustainable development following the pathway of culture, she is working towards ensuring women's empowerment and upliftment of indigenous and rural communities. Her work is dedicated to using culture as a vehicle for development and analyzing the resultant impact on poverty alleviation, gender issues, wellbeing, inclusive development, global cooperation and other related areas. Sneha has written many papers and presented them in various national and global platforms.

Spruce Root Basket-Making in Newfoundland

Terra Barrett

Heritage NL



10. Spruce Root Basket-Making in Newfoundland

Terra Barrett
Heritage NL

Abstract

Newfoundland and Labrador is the easternmost province of Canada, situated in the country's Atlantic region. It is a province with a rich living heritage, with both Indigenous populations and a settler population of predominantly English and Irish ancestry. Starting in 2008, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (Heritage NL) established its Intangible Cultural Heritage office. Its role is to sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations, and to safeguard the unique knowledge and customs of the province. Heritage NL is guided by an ICH Strategy with four main components: Documentation; Celebration; Transmission; and Living Traditions in Sustainable Communities. Training for practitioners, access to materials, marketing, public education and costs and taxation are some of the issues that affect the viability of heritage craft in Newfoundland and Labrador. Over the past four years, Heritage NL has been completing a major project focused on heritage crafts including basketry. Craft at Risk was an ambitious project to research, assess, and address the loss of traditional knowledge and craft in Newfoundland and Labrador. This included the province's first Craft at Risk list which listed traditional spruce root basketry. Through the Craft at Risk project, Heritage NL offered or supported more than sixty-five training events throughout the province as well as an immersive apprenticeship program, where participants worked with a skilled mentor to learn a craft that was listed as endangered or critically endangered. The 2021 Craft at Risk List listed

spruce root basketry—the process of harvesting and creating a basket out of spruce roots—as critically endangered. This means it is at serious risk of no longer being practiced in NL. As part of the project, three spruce root basket workshops were hosted in two communities, and two mentor-apprentice pairs completed immersive one-on-one training in the craft. Spruce root basketry is an Indigenous artform with a long and complex history. Renowned Mi'kmaq basket maker Anthony White, together with his son Danny, have been credited with reviving the tradition of Mi'kmaq spruce root basket weaving in Newfoundland. Eileen Murphy, one of Anthony's students, and Danny White were the two mentors with Heritage NL's mentor-apprentice program. This article will examine Heritage NL's involvement in safeguarding and transmitting spruce root basketry including the challenges, methodologies, and experiences used to create the Craft at Risk project, and how community led safeguarding approaches can build healthier communities, and carry traditions forward.

Introduction

In 2021, the centuries-old tradition of spruce root basket-making in Newfoundland, Canada, was classified as critically endangered. This article will examine Heritage NL's involvement in safeguarding and transmitting spruce root basketry, including the methodologies and experiences employed in the creation of the Craft at Risk project. It will also highlight how community-led safeguarding approaches can strengthen communities and ensure the continuity of traditions.

For me the most important thing about [spruce root basketry] is my connection to my family that I have with this. When I touch that basket I can pretty well feel every one of them around me. I don't do it for sales. I do it because I love doing it and to carry on the tradition.

Danny White

This quote from an oral history interview with master basket-maker Danny White in 2022 accentuates the significance of spruce root basket-making to the province and underscores the role of craft within the community. The significance of this craft was recognised through the Heritage NL Craft at Risk List 2021. This list was a joint project between Heritage NL and the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, aimed to assess the current viability of traditional heritage crafts in Newfoundland and Labrador, and identifying those most at risk of disappearing. The list highlighted traditional spruce root basketry—the complete process of harvesting and creating

a basket from spruce roots—as a critically endangered craft, placing the tradition among those in serious risk of no longer being practised in the province.

Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador

Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada's easternmost province, lies in the country's Atlantic region. The province has a rich living heritage, with both Indigenous and settler populations.

Newfoundland, the island portion of the province, is the unceded traditional territory of the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq. The Beothuk were Algonkian-speaking hunter-gatherers whose culture has been lost and cannot be recovered (Pastore, 1997). Ktaqmkuk, the Mi'kmaq word for the island portion of the province, is the home of Miawpukek First Nation of Conne River and the landless band, Qalipu First Nation, representing 67 communities across the island (People of the Dawn Indigenous Friendship Centre, 2021). Labrador is the traditional and ancestral homeland of the Innu of Nitassinan, the Inuit of Nunatsiavut, and the Inuit of NunatuKavut.

Basque, Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish fishers and sailors visited the shores early in the post-contact period; early colonists were primarily of English and Irish ancestry. Later waves of settlement included colonists from France and Scotland, followed by immigrants from various corners of the world.

The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, also known as Heritage NL, was established in 1984 with a mandate to preserve the architectural heritage of the province. In 2008, Heritage NL established its Intangible Cultural Heritage office with the goal of safeguarding the province's intangible cultural heritage for present and future generations. This is achieved through policies that support initiatives

Left: A purple Mi'kmaq ash basket, Stephenville. The basket was purchased in Gallants, about 65 years ago by Mariah Evens. Basket owner and informant Daphne Pretty recalls women would ride the NL railway in the spring of the year selling baskets
Right: A round spruce root basket made by Anthony White of Bay St. George. Constructed c1960. Close up of diamond wrapped ear. Basket owner and informant Dave LeDrew, 2012
© Heritage NL



1

Mi'kmaq workbaskets—potato, apple, egg, etc.—are woven from ash splints by “plaiting”—interweaving crosswise and lengthwise splints at right angles. The time-consuming process begins with cutting of a tree. The logs are quartered, the heartwood removed, and the wood squared and pounded or shaved to separate it into the long flexible strips needed for weaving.”
 Butland, G. *Baskets of Atlantic Canada*. [online] Saltscapes. Available at: <https://www.saltscapes.com/roots-folks/533-baskets-of-atlantic-canada.html> [Accessed 25 Sept. 2024].

2

Adapting to this, Newfoundland makers tended to use black spruce (*Picea mariana*) root for weaving baskets on a frame of wild raisin (*Viburnum nudum*), also known as witherod, or pin cherry (*Prunus pensylvanica*).

Mr. Anthony White (1913–1988), Mi'kmaq spruce root basket maker, originally from Shallop Cove, 1979 © Fran Innes

celebrating, recording, disseminating, and promoting living heritage and build bridges between diverse cultural groups within and outside Newfoundland and Labrador. The goal of this work is to create sustainable communities with active intangible cultural heritage. Author, Terra Barrett, is the Intangible Cultural Heritage Program Planner with Heritage NL and works to document and celebrate the province's intangible cultural heritage, including the crafts featured on the Craft at Risk List.

Mi'kmaq Spruce Root Baskets in Context

The Mi'kmaq in Atlantic Canada have been making baskets since time immemorial. Mi'kmaq baskets in the Maritimes are woven from split wood—notably ash¹. Acadian settlers to Atlantic Canada arrived with their traditional basketry techniques, which were incorporated into Indigenous traditions through trade and intermarriage. Materials and techniques evolved over time in response to local conditions. While Mi'kmaq makers on the mainland traditionally worked in ash, black ash is not a common plant in Newfoundland and usually only found in southern and southwestern regions of the island (NCC staff, 2023). Adapting to this, Newfoundland makers tended to use black spruce root for weaving baskets on a frame of wild raisin, also known as witherod or pin cherry².

In an online article titled *Baskets of Atlantic Canada*, Grace Butland describes, “Spruce root baskets came to Newfoundland's west coast, northern New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia's French Shore with early French settlers. Historically used for harvesting potatoes, these baskets are made with a framework of wooden ribs and handles—usually young cherry—and a filler of spruce root”. The baskets made on the west coast of Newfoundland are typically gathering baskets with an overhand

handle, framed around two circular rim-and-handle hoops formed on a mould, and held together with four-point diamond wraps, locally called “the ears” (Gordon, 2005, p.37). The current form of spruce root baskets in Newfoundland incorporates Mi'kmaq basket-making techniques with traditional Acadian forms, using Newfoundland materials.

Renowned Mi'kmaq basket-maker Mr. Antoine (Anthony) White, together with his son Daniel (Danny) White, has been credited with reviving the tradition of spruce root basket weaving in Newfoundland. The round, ribbed basket with a handle, known to Anthony's daughter Jacqueline White-Snook as the



potato basket, was the most common style created by Anthony White. He also tried his hand at weaving trout baskets for friends and family and lunch baskets for those who worked in the gypsum mine in nearby Flat Bay. As described by Emily Urquhart in the online article *Basket-making in Newfoundland and Labrador*, "The woven spruce root basket's current form can be traced to one man: Anthony White (1915-1990) of Shallop Cove. Mr. White learned the craft by watching his mother, Adelaide (Benoit) White, of Mi'kmaq lineage, a well-known basket-maker. Originally, the baskets were used by Mi'kmaq people for transporting harvested berries and other small foods. Mr. White returned to the craft in his retirement in the 1970s.³"

In an oral history interview, Jacqueline White-Snook notes that both Anthony's Mi'kmaq mother and Acadian father were basketmakers, demonstrating the connection between Mi'kmaq and Acadian basket-making, "[Anthony's] father came from Margaree, Nova Scotia, his mother was from what they call the gut—Stephenville Crossing—down that way. She was Adelaide Benoit. [My father] told us that he was introduced to the basket as a young boy when his mother and his father made baskets. As a young fellow, he would watch them, and I don't know if he ever made any, but he certainly watched them do it. My dad was a very crafty man, so when he retired and decided to plant himself a little vegetable garden, he decided he wanted something to pick his vegetables in. So, he went out, rooted up, and started and made himself a spruce root basket (White-Snook, 2012)".

Another west coast basket-maker was Edward Young of Fischells. Edward learned to make spruce root baskets from Mr. Anthony White when he was only 13 or 14 and went on to sell baskets in shops both on the west coast and in St. John's during the 1970s and 1980s (Innes, 1979). His work was described by his stepdaughter, Jane Daly, who learned how to weave from Edward as a young girl. In an oral history interview with Dale Jarvis for the Living Heritage Podcast produced by Heritage NL, Jane described the different styles of baskets he would make: "They used them for almost anything. Picnic baskets—there was a different shape we would make that was lined, and you would use it as a purse. Mostly he made round ones, but he also made long ones and even a couple of square ones that were proper picnic baskets (The ICH Blog, 2020)."

Master basket-maker Anthony White went on to share the tradition with many others, including his son, Danny White, and Corner Brook-based educator Eileen Murphy.

3

Urquhart, E. (2012). *Basket-making in Newfoundland and Labrador*. [online] Memorial University of Newfoundland. Available at: <https://www.mun.ca/ich/search-ich-collections/basket-making-in-newfoundland-and-labrador/> [Accessed 25 Sept. 2024].



Several spruce root baskets constructed by Anthony White of Shallop Cove. These baskets, which include a trout basket, lunch basket, a round spruce root basket and 2 small "half baskets", a jewelry box and a planter, all now belong to Anthony White's daughter, Jacqueline White Snook, of Flat Bay, 2012
© Heritage NL



Mentor Danny White and Apprentice Arlene White collecting spruce roots for basket making, 2022
© Danny White and Arlene White

Craft at Risk

Following the launch of the Heritage NL Craft at Risk List 2021, and recognising the importance of tradition-bearers in the transmission of craft, Heritage NL developed a grant programme designed to pass on these skills at risk. The Heritage NL Mentor-Apprentice Program was a one-on-one immersion programme that provided funding of up to \$10,000 to support the teaching of endangered crafts and skills from an established mentor to an apprentice craftsperson or tradesperson. For the mentorship to be funded, the craft or skill had to be listed as either critically endangered or endangered on Heritage NL's Craft at Risk List.

Safeguarding and Mentorships

Through the Craft at Risk project, Heritage NL offered or supported more than sixty-five training events throughout the province, working with community members and craftspeople to deliver interactive, introductory workshops on historic skills. A total of 61 people from around the province participated in the Mentor-Apprentice

Apprentice Arlene White and Mentor Danny White preparing spruce roots, 2022 © Danny White and Arlene White



Program, including two pairs of basket weavers. In addition, three spruce root basket workshops were hosted in two communities.

Mentor Danny White learned the teachings, stories, and process of basket-making from his father and has taught courses and held exhibitions at powwows, schools, and colleges. His work has been documented in

newspapers, magazines, and videos. While he currently lives in Ontario, he has taught several basket-making workshops and courses in Newfoundland, including Flat Bay and Conne River.

Danny completed a one-on-one mentorship with Arlene White. Prior to completing the Mentor-Apprentice programme, she had taken a workshop with Danny in 2018. She had a basic understanding of how to dig spruce roots, how to harvest some of the material, and had made two baskets. Arlene was interested in taking her knowledge to the next level to keep the skill alive and pass it on to the next generation to ensure the tradition continues for years to come.

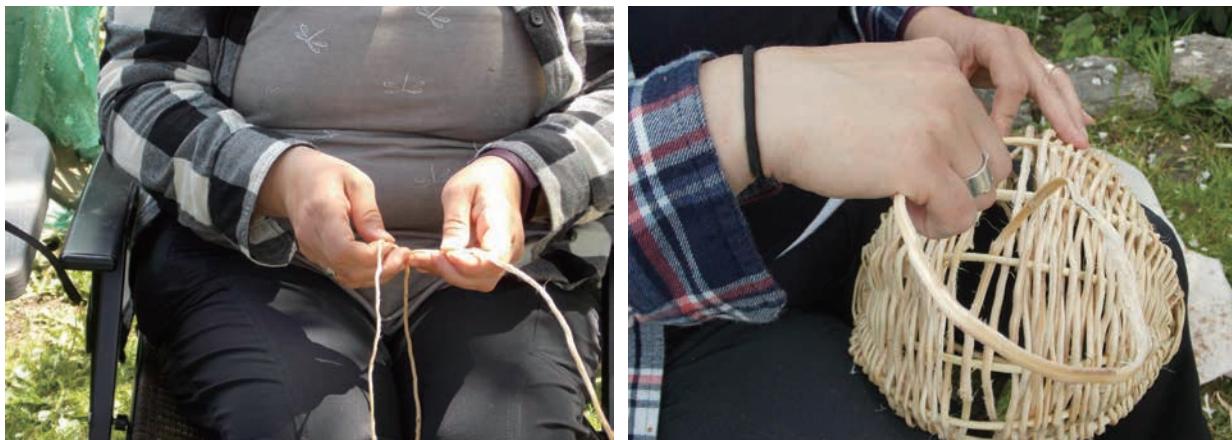
The pair worked together to harvest roots in the spring of the year, then split the roots to prepare baskets. In addition to traditional baskets, Arlene plans to incorporate the spruce root weaving into more contemporary styles. The mentorship lasted throughout the summer, and following the end of their formal mentorship, it was noted that Arlene would be able to connect with Danny for the rest of their lives, as he is committed to seeing this tradition continue for future generations. The other spruce root mentor was Eileen Murphy. Back in 1980, Anthony White taught the tradition of spruce root basketry to a small group of visual arts students at the Bay St. George Community College. Anthony became Eileen's instructor and mentor. She has been making spruce root baskets for 44 years and has both taught and demonstrated at workshops, festivals, in school settings, and with individuals wishing to learn this important part of the province's culture and heritage.

To pass along what she had learned, Eileen worked with apprentice Sandi Yates. Sandi had experience weaving branches into tension baskets and composing large-scale sculptures using driftwood, seasoned birch, and discarded found objects. At the time of the mentorship, Sandi was studying Fine Art through Memorial University, Grenfell Campus, and working seasonally in the craft industry.

In addition to working in a Mentor-Apprentice pair, Eileen taught the first spruce root basket workshop in Cow Head, hosted in partnership with the Cow Head Conservation and Heritage Committee. This workshop took place over three days and taught six participants everything from digging the roots to adding the ribs and weaving the baskets. The final two workshops were held in Stephenville and were hosted in partnership with the Mi'kmaw Cultural Foundation (previously the Qalipu



Mentor Danny demonstrating how to make the basket mould, 2022 © Danny White and Arlene White



Left Apprentice
Sandi Yates
splitting spruce
roots
Right Apprentice
Sandi Yates
weaving a spruce
root basket,
2022 © Eileen
Murphy

Cultural Foundation). These were two-day workshops facilitated by Scott Butt, which educated participants on how to harvest spruce roots and create a spruce root basket.

Conclusion

As a direct result of the Craft at Risk project and the Mentor-Apprentice program, 26 students took part in short 2–3-day workshops in Spruce Root Basketry, and two apprentices were involved in an intensive one-on-one apprenticeship. Now, there are more people available in the community to lead workshops and to teach future generations this endangered craft.

The goal of the Craft at Risk Project was to encourage sustainable community development, and to encourage community discussion and participation in cultural practices to pass them on to succeeding generations. To have a lasting impact on the historic crafts in Newfoundland and Labrador historic documentation occurred at each training event, workshop, and with each Mentor-Apprentice pair. This led to the documentation of more than 20 historic skills including photographs, videos, and oral history interviews. Over 35 oral history podcast episodes focused on historic crafts and skills were completed as a result of the program. Three in-depth videos were recorded on letterpress printing, weaving, and birch broom making, with additional short videos produced for Heritage NL's social media. All of these photos, videos, and oral histories are being placed on an online digital archive, Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative (<https://dai.mun.ca>), which is freely and publicly accessible.

Funding tradition bearers with a focus on transmitting their knowledge allows for the continuation of endangered crafts while allowing craftspeople to stay in their communities to pass this knowledge on to the next generation. Supporting community led initiatives such as the spruce basketry workshops helps communities play a role in maintaining their own traditions and culture. Programs like Heritage NL's

Craft at Risk and Mentor-Apprentice program give communities the support and tools they need to pass on endangered crafts for future generations. As noted by mentor, Danny White, in a program survey about the Mentor-Apprentice Program, "The more young people we get to do these cultural things from the past the safer it becomes as it is protected by their knowledge" (White, 2022).

At the end of the project, mentor Eileen Murphy noted, "Sharing a traditional technique is always very rewarding. This experience did not disappoint. Telling the history of this craft is so important and in this situation the audience is waiting and eager to hear the makers/mentor's experiences and knowledge. Knowing that this information and the unique techniques will continue as part of our province's heritage is a relief." (Murphy, 2022).

Although traditional crafts continue to face barriers to their transmission, community-led safeguarding approaches help strengthen communities, and carry traditions forward.



Apprentice Sandi Yates, and Mentor Eileen Murphy. Sandi is holding her spruce root basket, 2022
© Eileen Murphy

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Résumé

Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador est la province la plus à l'est du Canada, située dans la région atlantique du pays. C'est une province riche d'un patrimoine vivant, comprenant à la fois des populations autochtones et une population de colons principalement d'ascendance anglaise et irlandaise. Depuis 2008, la Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (Heritage NL) a mis en place un bureau dédié au Patrimoine Culturel Immatériel (PCI). Sa mission est de préserver le PCI de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador pour les générations présentes et futures, ainsi que de sauvegarder les savoirs et coutumes uniques de la province.

Heritage NL s'appuie sur une stratégie PCI comportant quatre axes principaux : documentation, célébration, transmission et traditions vivantes dans des communautés durables. La formation des praticiens, l'accès aux matériaux, le marketing, l'éducation du public ainsi que les coûts et la fiscalité sont autant de facteurs qui influent sur la viabilité de l'artisanat patrimonial à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador.

Au cours des quatre dernières années, Heritage NL a mené un important projet dédié aux arts et métiers du patrimoine, dont la vannerie. **Craft at Risk** (Artisanat en Danger) était un projet ambitieux visant à rechercher, évaluer et combattre la perte des savoir-faire traditionnels dans la province. Ce projet a notamment permis d'établir

la toute première liste des métiers en danger, où figure la vannerie à base de racines d'épinette.

Dans le cadre du projet Craft at Risk, Heritage NL a organisé ou soutenu plus de soixante-cinq sessions de formation à travers la province, ainsi qu'un programme d'apprentissage immersif où les participants travaillaient aux côtés d'un mentor expérimenté pour apprendre un métier jugé en danger ou en danger critique. La liste de 2021 plaçait la vannerie à base de racines d'épinette dans la catégorie « en danger critique », ce qui signifie que cette pratique est menacée de disparition à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador.

Trois ateliers de vannerie à base de racines d'épinette ont été organisés dans deux communautés, et deux binômes mentor-apprenti ont suivi un apprentissage intensif en tête-à-tête. La vannerie à base de racines d'épinette est une forme d'art autochtone au passé riche et complexe. Le célèbre vannier Mi'kmaq Anthony White, ainsi que son fils Danny, ont été reconnus pour avoir relancé la tradition de la vannerie à racines d'épinette mi'kmaq à Terre-Neuve. Eileen Murphy, l'une des élèves d'Anthony, et Danny White ont été les deux mentors du programme mentor-apprenti de Heritage NL.

Cet article analysera l'engagement de Heritage NL dans la sauvegarde et la transmission de la vannerie à racines d'épinette, en abordant les défis, les méthodologies et les expériences mobilisées dans le cadre du projet Craft at Risk. Il montrera également comment des approches de sauvegarde menées par les communautés peuvent contribuer à bâtir des communautés plus saines et à faire perdurer les traditions.

Terra Barrett holds a BA in Folklore and a MA in Public Folklore from Memorial University as well as a Social Media Certificate from Algonquin College and a UNESCO Certificate of Completion in Living Heritage and Sustainable Development. As an Intangible Cultural Heritage Program Planner, she is currently documenting untold histories, traditional skills, and the associated narratives of Newfoundland and Labrador's historic places. Previously for Heritage NL, Terra conducted fieldwork in several communities, and worked with Collective Memories, Oral History Roadshow, and Craft at Risk projects. She volunteers as the chair of Mummers Festival, and has experience working with MUNFLA, Them Days Inc., and The Rooms.

Screw Pine Basketry Tradition in Kerala

Vakil Jayarajan

Folkland



11

11. Screw Pine Basketry Tradition in Kerala

Vakil Jayarajan
Folkland

Abstract

The Screw pine craft tradition of Kerala, India, is deeply ingrained in the cultural heritage of the region, with its origins dating back over 800 years. It is primarily practiced by women artisans and serves as both a means of economic empowerment and a reflection of sustainable living practices.

Screw pine, also known as Pandanus, is a plant native to Kerala and plays a central role in this craft. Its leaves are harvested, dried, and woven into various products such as mats, baskets, bags, and decorative items. The craft employs techniques like coiling, plaiting, and twining to create intricate designs and patterns.

Despite its historical significance, the Screw pine craft has faced challenges in recent years, including the scarcity of raw materials and competition from plastic alternatives in the market. Initiatives like the one undertaken by Folkland aim to address these challenges by revitalizing the craft through training programs, documentation of traditional knowledge, and market development efforts.

The craft not only showcases the skill and creativity of artisans but also promotes environmental sustainability, as Screw pine products are biodegradable and eco-friendly. Additionally, Screw pine mats hold ritual significance in local customs, such as the Perunkaliyattam (mega Theyyam Festival), where they are used for serving food.

Overall, the Screw pine craft tradition embodies the rich cultural heritage of Kerala while also serving as a reminder of the importance of preserving traditional crafts and fostering sustainable livelihoods for future generations.

This paper explores the efforts undertaken by Folkland, an organization dedicated to the preservation of traditional crafts, to revive and sustain the Screw pine basketry tradition in Kerala, India. The Screw pine basketry tradition, deeply rooted in Kerala's cultural heritage, has faced challenges such as scarcity of raw materials and limited marketing opportunities, leading to its decline in recent years.

Folkland's initiative focuses on revitalizing this age-old craft by conducting baseline surveys, providing training to the younger generation in Screw pine weaving techniques, and documenting indigenous knowledge passed down through generations. Through these efforts, approximately 300 women have been trained in the art of Screw pine mat and bag weaving.

Moreover, the paper examines the significance of Screw pine mats in Kerala's cultural rituals, such as the Perunkaliyattam mega Theyyam performance, where large Screw pine mats are used for serving cooked rice, symbolizing the importance of food in local traditions.

The study highlights the importance of preserving traditional crafts not only for their cultural value but also for their contribution to sustainable practices and economic empowerment, particularly for women artisans. It underscores the need for collaborative efforts between government bodies, NGOs, and local communities to ensure the continuity of such crafts amidst modernization and changing market trends.

By documenting Folkland's intervention and its impact on Screw pine basketry, this paper aims to contribute to the discourse on heritage preservation, sustainable livelihoods, and community development in the context of traditional crafts in Kerala, India.

Introduction

This research analyses the initiatives implemented by the Folkland International Centre for Folklore and Culture in Kerala, India, to rejuvenate and preserve the screw pine (*Pandanus*) basketry tradition. The skill, with a history of over 800 years, has significantly influenced the socio-economic conditions of Kerala's people, particularly women craftsmen. The shortage of raw resources and competition from contemporary alternatives contributed to the craft's downfall. Folkland's activities, including training programs, market development, and the establishment of self-help groups (SHGs), have rejuvenated the tradition, offering livelihoods to more than 15,000 individuals. This research emphasizes the significance of screw pine products in Kerala's traditional rites, their environmental sustainability, and their socio-economic relevance. The study underscores the imperative for cooperation among the government, NGOs, and local communities to preserve traditional crafts. This

research documents Folkland's intervention, contributing to the discourse on cultural preservation, sustainable development, and women's empowerment.

Screw Pine Basketry in Kerala

Kerala, located in the southern part of India, is home to a rich tradition of handicrafts, including the screw pine basketry tradition. Known locally as *Thazhapaya*, this eco-friendly craft is made from the leaves of the screw pine plant, a species native to Kerala's coastal regions. With a history spanning over 800 years, the craft not only serves as a source of livelihood but also as a cultural cornerstone. However, in recent years, this tradition has been on the decline due to several socio-economic factors. This paper provides a comprehensive look at Folkland's intervention to revitalise this craft, which plays a vital role in both Kerala's cultural rituals and sustainable practices.

Usage: Screw pine products were traditionally integral to the daily life of Keralites, serving primarily as bedding alternatives in the form of mats. These mats were also utilised in the construction of houseboats and for thatching roofs. Beyond mats, the craft has expanded to include a wide range of items, including hats, ropes, sails for small boats, baskets, and more recently, lifestyle products like handbags, table mats, beach hats, and household items such as bowls and coasters.

These products, recognised for their eco-friendly and biodegradable nature, have gained a renewed place in contemporary markets. They are increasingly sought after as gifts for weddings and housewarming ceremonies, symbolising a blend of tradition and sustainability. In recent years, the market for screw pine craft has expanded, catering to both local and international consumers, thus contributing to the economic empowerment of women artisans.

Significance: The screw pine craft holds profound cultural and ritualistic significance in Kerala. In traditional customs, these mats are offered to visitors as honoured articles to sit upon, symbolising respect and hospitality. The craft is also integral to rituals such as the *Perunkaliyattam*, a grand Theyyam performance, where large screw pine mats are used for serving rice, signifying the importance of food in local traditions.

Beyond its cultural value, screw pine craft exemplifies sustainable living by



Collecting Screw
pine leaves,
2025 © Pradeep
Vellur

employing green practices and promoting the judicious use of natural resources. The entire plant is utilised in the craft—leaves for weaving and roots for making paintbrushes—ensuring minimal waste. The craft provides steady employment to women artisans, empowering them economically while preserving an ancient tradition.

History: The history of screw pine basketry in Kerala stretches dates over 800 years, making it one of the state's oldest cottage industries. Traditionally, the craft was practised by women, particularly in the Kerala's coastal villages, such as Trikaripur in the Kasaragod district. The Pulaya community, skilled in weaving screw pine mats, passed this down craft through generations.

In the past, the craft flourished when screw pine mats were essential in daily life. In earlier times, houseboats in Kerala were roofed and walled with these mats, while people lived in houses with cow dung floors where the mats served as bedding. However, with modernisation and the economic boom fuelled by gulf migration, demand for traditional mats declined. The construction of concrete houses and the influx of plastic alternatives further accelerated the decline of this once-thriving industry.

Land reclamation projects also impeded the growth of screw pine plants, leading to a scarcity of raw materials. This scarcity forced many artisans to abandon the craft in favour of better-paying jobs in construction and other sectors, jeopardising the continuity of this cultural heritage.

Weaving a mat
from screw pine
leaves, 2025
© Pradeep Vellur



Historical and Cultural Significance of Screw Pine Basketry

The screw pine craft history in Kerala spans more than 800 years, predominantly by women in coastal and riverine areas. The craft's beginnings are fundamentally linked to the region's natural environment, since the screw pine plant proliferates along Kerala's streams, mitigating soil erosion and sustaining local ecosystems. The leaves of the screw pine plant are elongated, sword-shaped, and robust, rendering them suitable for weaving into many items. Artisans use methods such as coiling, plaiting, and twining to produce elaborate designs that merge functionality with creative expression.

Screw pine mats were historically indispensable household products in Kerala, used for sleeping, sitting, and roofing thatch. They also played a crucial role in religious and cultural rites, such as the *Perunkaliyattam* (grand Theyyam performance), when big mats were utilised for food service. The craft's functionality included daily life, producing items such as baskets, purses, ropes, and caps crafted from screw pine leaves.

In recent years, several initiatives have been launched to revive this tradition and empower artisans. KITS, an NGO based in Thrissur, has played a pivotal role in this revival by providing training in screw pine handicrafts with the assistance of the Handicrafts Department, Government of India. They have established their marketing outlets, ensuring that the artisans' products reach a broader audience. In the Kottayam district, the Thazhapaya Thozhilali Cooperative Society has also contributed significantly to the production of screw pine handicrafts, empowering local artisans through organised efforts. The Kuttanadu area of South Kerala, known



Weaving a basket from screw pine leaves, 2025
© Pradeep Vellur

for its abundance of screw pine plants, has been another key centre for this craft. These initiatives not only help preserve the traditional knowledge of weaving but also provide sustainable livelihood options to women in these regions.

The social and economic significance of screw pine weaving is paramount. Historically, the craft was transmitted through several generations of women, affording them a means of income and economic autonomy. The craft additionally advocated for sustainable living by using all components of the screw pine plant, resulting in biodegradable and eco-friendly items. Notwithstanding its historical and cultural importance, the screw pine craft experienced a decrease in the second part of the 20th century owing to many problems.

Challenges Facing the Screw Pine Craft



Screw pine
Basket, 2025
© KIDS
(Kottapuram
Integrated
Development
Society)

The deterioration of the screw pine craft might be ascribed to various sources. A major difficulty has been the shortage of basic supplies. The natural proliferation of screw pine trees was hindered by land reclamation for roadbuilding, residential projects, and several other developments. The decline in the supply of screw pine leaves compelled craftspeople to forsake their profession in pursuit of alternate means of sustenance.

Furthermore, the proliferation of plastic products on the market presented a significant challenge to traditional craftsmanship. Plastic mats, bags, and baskets, being more economical and accessible, swiftly supplanted screw pine wood goods in numerous households. The advent of modern

homes using concrete floors diminished the market for screw pine mats, which were once essential in traditional Kerala residences.

Economic variables further exacerbated the craft's deterioration. A multitude of artisans, especially from the Pulaya group in Trikaripur, abandoned their traditional trades in favour of more lucrative employment in construction and several other sectors. This alteration in work patterns jeopardised the preservation of a complete cultural legacy. The screw pine craft faced the imminent threat of permanent loss without action.

Folkland's Revival Efforts

In response to the pressing necessity to safeguard the screw pine craft, the Folkland International Centre for Folklore and Culture started a series of initiatives in 1990. Folkland initiated baseline surveys in Trikaripur to identify the existing craftsmen and

evaluate their needs. In partnership with the Department of Handicrafts Development Commissioner of the Government of India, Folkland distributed identity and insurance cards to over 500 recognised artisans. This afforded craftspeople acknowledgment and a sense of stability, incentivising them to persist in their craft.

Folkland concentrated its efforts on two primary objectives: modernising the craft and broadening business potential. Training sessions were conducted to instruct artists on diversifying their product offerings. Although screw pine mats were historically the principal product, artists have recently been instructed to create a diverse array of goods, such as baskets, money purses, vanity bags, and decorative objects. This diversification enabled artists to access new markets and augment their revenue.

Folkland established self-help groups (SHGs) for artisans to safeguard the longevity of the craft. These associations cultivated a feeling of community and facilitated access to resources like raw materials, tools, and marketplaces. The Self-Help Groups significantly contributed to the resurgence of the screw pine craft, enabling artisans to create high-quality goods that are sought after domestically and internationally. Participation in exhibits enhanced the visibility of screw pine goods and created new market opportunities.

Impact and Future Prospects

Folkland's activities have significantly influenced the resurgence of the screw pine craft. Currently, more than 15,000 individuals in the region rely on screw pine basketry for their sustenance. The craft has been conserved and elevated, with artists gaining national and international accolades for their work. The success of the Trikaripur effort has motivated other villages in Kerala to implement analogous artisan revival schemes, aiding in the preservation of cultural legacy throughout the state.

Left **Screw pine Leaves Hamper Basket**
Right **Screw pine Leaves Hamper Box, 2025**
© KIDS (Kottapuram Integrated Development Society)



The increasing focus on sustainable and eco-friendly products has augmented the demand for screw pine items. Tourists in Kerala are attracted to distinctive, handcrafted handicrafts, with many opting to buy screw pine items as mementos and gifts. This trend indicates a favourable future for the craft, as it corresponds with global sustainability objectives and the growing consumer inclination towards eco-friendly items.

Conclusion

The screw pine basketry tradition of Kerala showcases the region's rich cultural heritage and fosters sustainable, eco-friendly practices. Despite encountering considerable obstacles in recent decades, the craft has undergone a notable resurgence, attributed to the initiatives of organisations such as the Folkland International Centre for Folklore and Culture. Folkland has empowered women craftsmen and safeguarded the preservation of this ancient legacy through efforts including training programs, the establishment of self-help groups, and market growth.

The successful recovery of screw pine craftsmanship in Trikaripur exemplifies a model for other ancient crafts encountering analogous obstacles. It emphasises the significance of safeguarding cultural heritage, not only for its historical worth but also for its capacity to offer sustainable livelihoods and foster community development. Moving forward, cooperation among governmental entities, non-governmental organisations, and local communities will be essential in preserving traditional crafts and securing their relevance in contemporary society.

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Résumé

La tradition artisanale du pandanus, ou screw pine, dans l'État du Kerala en Inde, est profondément enracinée dans le patrimoine culturel local depuis plus de 800 ans. Principalement pratiquée par des femmes artisanes, cette technique traditionnelle constitue à la fois un moyen d'émancipation économique et un reflet des pratiques durables de la région. Les feuilles de pandanus, récoltées et séchées, sont tissées selon des techniques de spirale, tressage et torsion, pour fabriquer une large gamme de produits allant des nattes aux paniers, sacs et objets décoratifs.

Malgré sa valeur historique et culturelle, cet artisanat fait face à plusieurs défis, notamment la raréfaction des matières premières et la concurrence croissante des alternatives plastiques sur le marché. Folkland, une organisation dédiée à la préservation des savoir-faire traditionnels, mène une initiative de revitalisation qui inclue des enquêtes de terrain, la formation de la jeune génération aux techniques ancestrales et la documentation des connaissances autochtones transmises de génération en génération. À ce jour, environ 300 femmes ont bénéficié de ces formations, leur permettant de maîtriser le tissage des nattes et sacs en screw pine.

La pratique du pandanus dépasse le cadre artisanal et revêt une importance rituelle dans la région. Par exemple, lors du Perunkaliyattam, un grand festival de Theyyam, de grandes nattes en pandanus sont utilisées pour servir le riz cuit, symbolisant l'importance du partage alimentaire dans les traditions locales.

Ce travail met en lumière le rôle essentiel de la sauvegarde des arts traditionnels

non seulement pour leur valeur culturelle, mais aussi pour leur contribution à des modes de vie durables et à l'autonomisation économique, en particulier des femmes. Il souligne la nécessité d'une collaboration active entre les institutions gouvernementales, les ONG et les communautés locales pour garantir la pérennité de ces savoir-faire face à la modernisation et à l'évolution des marchés.

En documentant l'intervention de Folkland et son impact sur l'artisanat du screw pine au Kerala, cette étude apporte un éclairage précieux sur la conservation du patrimoine, le développement communautaire et les stratégies de durabilité dans le contexte des métiers traditionnels.

Vakil Jayarajan is a cultural leader, scholar, and heritage activist, serving as the Chairman of Folkland International Centre for Folklore and Culture, Kerala, and Convener of INTACH Kasargod Chapter. Dedicated to revitalizing marginalized village art forms, he has preserved and promoted traditional music, theatre, and performance practices, presenting them at national and international platforms. An accomplished author and recipient of the William Evans Fellowship (University of Otago, New Zealand, 2013), he has presented research worldwide. He currently serves as Secretary General of ICCN (Inter-City Intangible Cultural Cooperation Network) and the Chairman of the Advisory Board of Culture Masters Organization, Republic of Korea, advancing cultural preservation and global cooperation.

Basketry, a Link Between the Ancestral and the Present

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12. Basketry, a Link Between the Ancestral and the Present

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Abstract

In the Argentine Republic, the Province of Formosa constitutes a cultural mosaic inhabited by Toba(Qom), Pilaga, and Wichí native peoples. The first two belong to the Guaycuru linguistic group and the third to the Matacomataguayo. From this point of view, the diversity is even greater; 17 dialect variants are spoken in the provincial territory. In 1984, the State of the Province, for the protection of this heritage, sanctioned the "Comprehensive Aboriginal Law", a pioneering law in Argentina that grants equal recognition to aboriginal people and allowed the legal recognition of indigenous communities, the delivery in landownership and the establishment of the bilingual intercultural education system. In this way, true inclusion was achieved in Formosa society which also recognizes the presence of immigrants from different countries.

In this context, the Estampas Nortenas Folkloric Association from the Town of Pirané develops different activities together with young Indigenous people belonging to the original towns.

In scheduled meetings, traditional games, and reflections on different Aspects of their culture are shared; Projects aimed at the study, dissemination and protection of heritage are prepared and carried out, even taking them to the performance, etcetera. In this article, we present an experience that began years ago with people

of these ethnic groups. As a result of talks about their cultural heritage, especially their music, language, and crafts, we create artistic proposals that, by reflecting them, contribute to demonstrating the depth of their ancestral beliefs. In this case, basketry has allowed us to research the meticulous and traditional way of producing it, and it has introduced us to a world in which through oral tradition we were able to learn about the raw materials used, the production techniques, the reasons for decoration, functionality, the right moment and the environment in which basketries are produced, all of them has been a source of inspiration for choreographic movements, representative scenes and musical creations through which Aboriginal basketry acquired another dimension. The experience allowed people to value and give a new dimension to their heritage, to improve and market it with excellent results, and its visibility, in other areas, demonstrates the value of non-literary cultures that nevertheless contribute to local identity. For us, the artistic works "Vuelta Fermosa" and "El Último Cacique"-among others- and exhibiting their crafts at festivals, forums and fairs are a way to contribute to their knowledge and appreciation.

Estampas Norteñas Folkloric Association was founded in Pirané in 1988 by Maestro Rubén Luciano Vergara, a native of Santa Fe who, after settling in Pirané, left an indelible mark on the town, particularly among the youth, for over four decades. Through the art of dance, he fostered personal and collective development, always adhering to his motto: "For a culture of peace, in the silence of weapons, through dialogue between people and nations." (Estampas Norteñas, 2024).

This article specifically refers to a significant experience from years ago, exchanging with people of different ethnicities, discussing choreographic arrangements or the elements that will be used to perform certain dances. We highlight in this case, the basketry, which after delving into the meticulous and traditional way of producing of Indigenous artisans, has introduced us to a world in which we could understand the importance of this family livelihood, which contributes to promoting and valuing the knowledge and skills of women linked to it.

These activities are maintained through the transmission from generation to generation, teaching techniques and the production of models and designs. The activities and achievements of Estampas has been recognized and incorporated by CIOFF® (the International Council of Organizations of Folklore Festivals and Folk Arts), an official UNESCO collaborating NGO accredited to the UNESCO PCI Committee. CIOFF® has included the association in the development of collaborative projects (Werken Mapu, 2024).

Formosa Province is situated in the northeastern region of Argentina, entirely occupying the Chaco Central area. Its savanna park characteristics define the vast ecosystem of the Chaco Plain, which also encompasses the Chaco Boreal (Paraguay) and the Chaco Austral (Argentina). The province is bordered by the Republic of



Paraguay to the north and east, Salta Province to the west, and Chaco Province to the south. It is also encompassed by three major rivers: the Pilcomayo in the north, the Paraguay in the east, and the Bermejo in the south.

Administratively, the province is divided into nine departments: Bermejo, Formosa, Laishí, Matacos, Patiño, Pilagás, Pilcomayo, Pirané, and Ramón Lista. Its principal cities include Formosa, Clorinda, Espinillo, Pirané, San Francisco de Laishí, Comandante Fontana, Laguna Yema, Ingeniero Juárez, and Las Lomitas. Formosa is a highly diverse territory, a cultural mosaic. Its population is characterized by a diversity of groups, including indigenous communities distributed throughout the province territory, with different ethnic compositions: Wichí, Qom (Toba), and Pilagá. According to the Institute of Indigenous Communities (ICA, 2022), from a linguistic standpoint, the diversity is even greater, as 17 aboriginal dialectal variants are spoken in the provincial territory.

This diversity was acknowledged by the provincial government, and in 1984, the Integral Indigenous Law No. 426 was enacted. This groundbreaking law in Argentina established equal and distinct recognition for the indigenous peoples of Formosa, enabling the legal recognition of indigenous communities, the transfer of land ownership, and the implementation of an intercultural bilingual education system, achieving true inclusion within Formosan society (Indigenous Policies of the Province of Formosa, n.d.). It is within this context, that Estampas Norteñas, from the town of Pirané, develops various activities in conjunction with young people from indigenous communities within the provincial territory.

From sharing artistic experiences and traditional games to meetings for reflection on common and specific situations, and, undertaking joint projects, these activities allow us to learn about their culture, immerse ourselves in it, and engage in exchanges, thus strengthening our bonds.

Left **Basketry technique**
Right **Natalia Gomez, Pilagá basket weaver, 2024**
© Estampas Norteñas Folk Association, photography: Gonzalo Pereyra

Materializing Memory: Dance and Basketry as an Ancestral Dialogue

Choreographic works such as ‘Vuelta Fermoza’ and ‘El último Cacique’ have been brought to the stage, along with exhibitions of their work at various festivals, workshops, forums, and cultural activities. In this context, members of Estampas Norteñas established contact with a Pilagá settlement in Pirané. There, two women, Alicia Gómez and Avelina Verón, graciously welcomed the group and engaged in a dialogue about general aspects of their community.

During a subsequent visit, as previously arranged, the women artisans, as they define themselves, demonstrated the step-by-step process of their craft, explaining each technique and emphasizing that this legacy is passed down from generation to generation. As a result, during the recent CIOFF® Argentina Forum of Group Directors and Youth Meeting, under the theme ‘United in a Single Culture. Weaving Our Identity’ (CIOFF® Ar, 2023) organized by Estampas Norteñas, participants were able to delve into the multiethnic and multicultural identity of Formosa province through three workshops led by various indigenous artisans and musicians.

One of the highlights was the presentation by Gómez and Verón on Pilagá basketry, known as *noonek*, made from a plant fibre called *carandillo* or *qatalaguá*. Avelina Verón demonstrated the process, as her mother, Alicia Gómez, only speaks her native language. Verón (2023) explained that to collect the raw material, they use a “hooked stick”, a type of machete made with a stick and a wedge at the ends to hook the highest leaves.

The artisan explained that the necessary leaves are those found in the centre of the palm, as they are long and in better condition.

To create the subsequent “braid”, the leaves are separated lengthwise, resulting in “strips” approximately one to two centimetres wide, which are exposed to the sun for several days to become “threads” and be able to sew the piece to be made. The

technique used is the “spiral”, distinguished by its use in basketry, and to perform it, the women make “stitches” that fit the base. What was most interesting about this conversation was not only learning about the production process, but also the cultural and social fabric woven around these “handcrafts,” as they define them.

From its importance as a source of income for their households to the safeguarding of traditions and customs, this knowledge is passed down from generation to generation,

Basketry
technique, 2024
© Estampas
Norteñas Folk
Association,
photography:
Gonzalo Pereyra



from grandmothers to mothers to daughters. Task division is fundamental, as is knowing the land, the “monte”, where they venture to collect the carandillo. The importance of working in groups, usually composed of women from the same family, and then returning to share their harvests with the “wiser” women, who begin the crafting process and teach the younger ones, is also significant.

We know that this practice is ancient, but over time it has been redefined, and as everything evolves, techniques and production methods have been updated. From giant baskets and traditional screens to completely innovative ornaments, or pieces that women have been complexifying in different ways, whether by transforming the raw material by playing with tones or fibre thicknesses.

In this sense, the work of Ivana Luz Sosa, a Qom artisan who was responsible for creating trophies for a women’s soccer tournament, has been the focus of attention in Formosa. Sosa (2024), in an interview with a local media outlet, expressed her happiness at having been invited to make the trophy, especially because it “makes visible the work we do daily” (Agenfor, 2024).

She expressed deep gratitude to her mother, acknowledging that “it was she who instilled this in me from a young age, and now, as an adult, I have the opportunity to teach others in my community so that this tradition is not lost” (Agenfor, 2024). This poignant statement encapsulates the cyclical nature of cultural transmission and the profound impact it has on individuals and communities. By participating in such a public event, Sosa has not only showcased her talent but has also contributed to the broader recognition and appreciation of Indigenous arts and crafts.

Estampas Norteñas does more than simply document these living testimonies; it



Natalia Gomez,
Pilagá basket
weaver, whit
her production,
2024

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Different basketry productions, 2024
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transforms them into artistic expressions. With great care and respect, they portray the everyday actions of an Indigenous community and incorporate handcrafted elements into their performances. The ultimate goal of this connection is to safeguard a heritage as precious as our origins. This cycle of preserving and sharing cultural knowledge ensures that traditions like basketry continue to thrive and inspire future generations.

Both are deeply rooted in culture and tradition, with basketry being a millennia-old technique that reflects the connection between nature and the Indigenous community, while dance is a way of expressing identity. In this fusion, they share a symbolic language that evokes the magic of the self, with patterns, designs, and movements that link us to our ancestors.

Thus emerges the work "Entre el Camalotal" (Estampas Norteñas, 2024) where handicrafts are incorporated into the scenery, creating atmospheres rich in symbolism and evoking natural landscapes and cosmogonic elements. From the choice of voice-overs for an introduction to the background screens that respect the environment and connect with our own, this gradually becomes a living dialogue between the past and the present, between ancestral tradition and contemporary artistic expression.

Loaded with symbolism and ancestral narratives, these elements find a privileged space for expression in dance. Headdresses made of carandillo, palm leaf fans, seed necklaces and textiles woven with natural fibres become extensions of the dancer's body, creating a deep connection with the earth and natural elements. In this way, two art forms are used to defend and promote culture, using every part of the body and encouraging creativity and innovation to establish an intercultural dialogue

between artists and artisans, fostering greater understanding and appreciation for cultural roots.

In our case, Estampas goes beyond being just a dance group, transforming into a vehicle that showcases the beauty and significance of basketry, elevating it and demonstrating that it is much more than just a commodity for sale or simple home decorations. It is an intricate tapestry of history, centuries of shared knowledge, and support networks among Indigenous women who resist the new industrial era. They are true resilient women, gaining confidence, self-esteem, and pride in preserving their identity and being, as they represent a fundamental pillar by making their work and knowledge visible.

The Estampas Norteñas experience has shown us that the dance and Indigenous basketry are much more than mere artistic expressions. They are vehicles of identity, knowledge transmission, and above all, cultural resistance. By intertwining these elements, we have built a bridge between the past and the present, strengthening the bonds between communities in Formosa.

This challenging endeavour invites us to reflect on our role as a society in preserving this valuable cultural heritage and inspires us to continue exploring new forms of collaboration and intercultural dialogue, ensuring the continuity of an invaluable legacy.

Acknowledgements

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Customer testing the basketry product, 2024
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Résumé

En République Argentine, la province de Formosa constitue une mosaïque culturelle habitée par les peuples autochtones Toba (Qom), Pilaga et Wichí. Les deux premiers appartiennent au groupe linguistique Guaycuru, tandis que le troisième est rattaché au groupe Matacomataguayo. Cette diversité est renforcée par la présence de 17 variantes dialectales parlées sur le territoire provincial. En 1984, l'État provincial, dans un souci de protection de ce patrimoine, a adopté la « Loi intégrale aborigène », une loi pionnière en Argentine qui reconnaît légalement les peuples autochtones, autorise la reconnaissance juridique des communautés indigènes, l'attribution de terres et l'instauration d'un système éducatif bilingue et interculturel. Cette loi a permis une réelle inclusion sociale à Formosa, qui reconnaît également la présence d'immigrants de différents pays.

Dans ce contexte, l'Association folklorique Estampas Norteñas, basée dans la ville de Pirané, organise diverses activités en collaboration avec de jeunes membres des peuples autochtones. Lors de rencontres régulières, des jeux traditionnels et des réflexions autour de leur culture sont partagés, tandis que des projets visant l'étude, la diffusion et la protection du patrimoine sont conçus et réalisés, parfois sous forme de spectacles.

Cet article présente une expérience commencée il y a plusieurs années avec ces communautés ethniques. À partir d'échanges sur leur patrimoine culturel, notamment leur musique, langue et artisanat, des propositions artistiques ont été créées afin de refléter et faire ressortir la profondeur de leurs croyances ancestrales. La vannerie a permis d'approfondir la connaissance de sa production minutieuse et traditionnelle, en révélant, à travers la tradition orale, les matières premières utilisées, les techniques de fabrication, les motifs décoratifs, la fonctionnalité, ainsi que les moments et environnements propices à la confection des paniers. Tous ces éléments ont inspiré des mouvements chorégraphiques, des scènes représentatives et des créations musicales, donnant à la vannerie autochtone une nouvelle dimension artistique.

Cette expérience a encouragé la valorisation et la réinvention de leur patrimoine, améliorant sa commercialisation avec d'excellents résultats. Sa visibilité dans divers domaines souligne l'importance des cultures non littéraires qui contribuent pourtant à l'identité locale. Pour nous, les œuvres artistiques telles que « Vuelta Formosa » et « El Último Cacique » entre autres, ainsi que l'exposition de leurs œuvres dans des festivals, forums et foires artisanales, constituent des moyens de promouvoir la connaissance et la reconnaissance de ce patrimoine.

Valeria Vanesa Villamayor is a dance teacher specializing in Argentine Folk Dance. She trained as a Teaching Specialist in Educational Guidance and Tutoring, allowing her to support academic careers comprehensively. She works in the Privately Managed Department of Public Education, Ministry of Culture and Education of Formosa, providing advisory, pedagogical support, and institutional strengthening. In culture, she directs the Estampas Norteñas Folk Association, preserving Argentine folk traditions, and serves as president of the Group Directors Committee of CIOFF Argentina, representing the country internationally. Valeria combines folk dance as a cultural expression and social tool with educational guidance to strengthen values and learning paths.

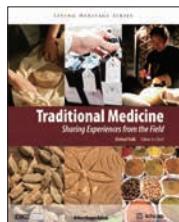
Lucía Itatí González is passionate about Argentine history and traditional culture. Trained as a History Professor and Folkloric Dance Professor, she is dedicated to preserving her country's roots. She teaches at a secondary school in Formosa and works as a newspaper editor at AGENFOR, the government news agency. Connected to folklore since age 6 as a dancer with the Estampas Norteñas Folkloric Association, she promotes Argentine traditions nationally and internationally. Lucía joined CIOFF at age 12 and has held key roles, including Vice President of the CIOFF Youth Commission (2020–2023) and Secretary of the CIOFF Group Directors Commission (2024–2028). She has participated in numerous national and international festivals, showcasing Argentina's rich folkloric culture worldwide.

Gonzalo Ezequiel Pereyra Bernal is a dancer and advocate for Argentine folk culture. Since 2012, he has been a member of the Estampas Norteñas Folklore Association, where he currently coordinates folk dance workshops as a teacher. His passion for dance and culture has led him to join the CIOFF Argentina Youth Committee and serving as Secretary of CIOFF Jóvenes Argentina (2023–2025). In the field of communications, he is part of a press team specializing in the development of materials to promote and disseminate cultural activities for the Municipality of Pirané. His goal is to contribute to the preservation and promotion of Argentina's Intangible Cultural Heritage, working on projects that highlight the richness and diversity of Argentina's traditions.

Alicia Gómez, Natalia Gómez, and Avelina Verón are artisans of Pilagá origin, an indigenous ethnic group from the province of Formosa. Each of their passions and livelihoods comes from their work with carandillo leaves, a material that connects them directly to their culture and ancestral traditions. Through their hands, the leaves are transformed into unique pieces that narrate the beauty and essence of Pilagá culture. In each piece, they reflect the living history of their people and the heritage of their ancestors, inspiring everyone to value and respect cultural diversity.

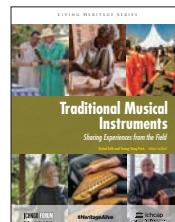
Ivana Luz Sosa is a prominent Qom artisan, one of the most prominent indigenous communities in the province of Formosa. Her work focuses on basketry, an ancestral art passed down from generation to generation that connects her directly to the history and traditions of her people. Her artistic work is distinguished by the use of natural and native materials, such as totora reeds and palm leaves, which she collects from the Chaco Mountains. Ivana Luz Sosa has shared her knowledge and talent through various workshops, where she teaches the traditional basketry technique of Qom women and preserves and disseminates the cultural identity of her people through the creation of unique objects. Each piece she creates is a living testament to the resilience and richness of the Qom culture.

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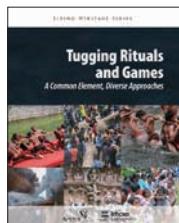
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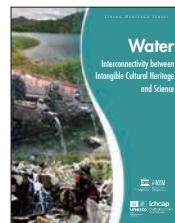
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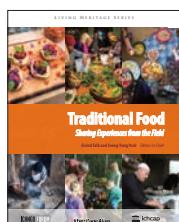
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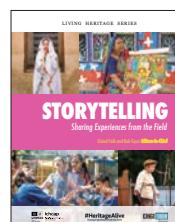
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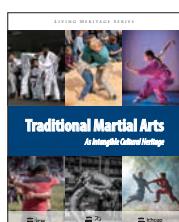
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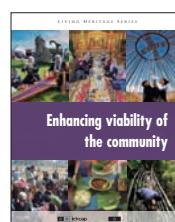
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For the past several decades, UNESCO has been increasingly championing the importance of culture as a driving force for the proliferation of cultural diversity and the sustainable development of a global society. Sustainable development in this sense, however, is not equated to economic growth alone, but also to a means to achieve an equitable intellectual, emotional, and spiritual existence among the global community.

At the same time, societies around the world have been facing challenges in promoting the values of cultural pluralism. As such, UNESCO has been an advocate for promoting culture and intangible cultural heritage in particular since the 1980s with the Decade for Cultural Development and later with the Living Human Treasures program (UNESCO 142EX/18 and 142EX/48). These promotions and programs culminated with the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Both of these instruments recognize the importance of sharing and promoting intangible cultural heritage to enhance understanding and appreciation of the cultural assets of the humanity.

In 2017, ICHCAP, as a UNESCO category 2 center in the cultural heritage field, and the ICH NGO Forum's #HeritageAlive started the *Living Heritage Series* to promote cultural diversity and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. In this publication project, ICHCAP collaborates with #HeritageAlive in odd-numbered years, and with other organizations in even-numbered years. Through these collaborations, information about heritage beliefs and practices from cultures around the world is shared, with the hope that intangible cultural heritage can be sustained by communities and the broader international society.

