CASE STUDY 20

Safeguarding and income generation by exploring new markets for traditionally produced cloth in Uganda

Bark cloth, traditionally made from the bark of a rare species of fig tree known locally as Mutuba, has been produced since the thirteenth century by the Buganda people of what is now southern Uganda, and also in the kingdoms of Bunyoro, Busoga and Tooro.

The bark is sustainably harvested from the Mutuba trees, pounded flat with mallets, stretched and then dried in the sun. Trees are protected after the harvest using a banana leaf wrapping applied to the trunk. From a 1.5 m2 piece of bark, a 3–4 m2 bark cloth sheet can be obtained. Bark cloth has traditionally been used in a wide range of household contexts, as curtains, bedding and mosquito netting. It was also a medium of exchange, given by peasants as payment to local chiefs. Bark cloth is still widely used for clothing, worn in a sarong style by both men and women, and on special occasions such as burial ceremonies and the coronation of kings. In the latter case, the bark cloth is dyed to highlight the higher social status of the king.

#### Addressing threats to the viability of bark cloth making

The introduction of cotton cloth to Uganda by Arab traders in the nineteenth century and growing urbanization in Uganda during the twentieth century led to a reduction in the use of bark cloth. Producers of bark cloth in Uganda have a low social status, although theirs is highly specialized work. Bark cloth making was thus devalued, and not considered an attractive career option by young Ugandans. Recent decades have seen a revival in the use of the cloth, however, and its local status has been boosted by international recognition.

In 2005 UNESCO proclaimed the tradition of bark cloth making a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In December 2007 a two-year pilot project was launched to revitalize and safeguard the practice of bark cloth making in Uganda within the framework of the UNESCO/Japan Funds-In-Trust for the ‘Preservation and Promotion of the Intangible Cultural Heritage’[[1]](#footnote-1) In 2008 the element was inscribed on the Representative List.

Some of the safeguarding activities implemented as part of this project were:

* documenting the suitable types of Mutuba trees and their use;
* planting Mutuba trees to ensure the availability of raw materials in the future;
* training young people in the production of bark cloth;
* developing a museum visitor programme, particularly for schools;
* exploring the possibility of obtaining legal protections such as a trademark for bark cloth;
* encouraging the use of bark cloth in craft production;
* establishing a certification process in the national vocational education system to recognize the skills of bark cloth making; and
* informing the general public about bark cloth making through radio programmes, a museum exhibition and a brochure.

The project planted a number of Mutuba trees, although some were damaged by drought. A museum visitor programme was created, thus raising awareness of the importance of the ICH element. More young people were trained in bark cloth making and it was incorporated into the vocational curriculum. However, the project did not lead to a large-scale sustainable revitalization of the tradition in the area concerned. One of the problems was that Mutuba trees are slow to generate income from bark cloth making, compared to other cash crops. Also, since bark cloth has been traditionally linked to death, products made from bark cloth are still difficult to sell in Uganda.

#### New markets and new products

In a separate initiative, a Ugandan design company, Royal Bark Cloth Designs (RBCD), founded by Sara Katebalirwe, has now used bark cloth in contemporary designs. RBCD has partnered with a Dutch design firm to make and market a range of bark cloth products including handbags, cushion covers and laptop sleeves. RBCD strengthens the bark cloth in innovative ways to make a stronger fabric. Products are designed for the export market and also sold as corporate gifts in Uganda. RBCD employs approximately sixty artisans, many of whom are single mothers. It generates income for local producers and designers as well as for local farmers who produce the bark cloth.

Because of this business initiative, Katebalirwe was a finalist in the Cartier Women’s Initiative 2010, a business award for projects characterized by creativity and social impact. She is also lobbying the Ugandan Government to promulgate geographical indications legislation and to certify Ugandan bark cloth.[[2]](#footnote-2)

RBCD products can create broader international awareness of traditional skills and knowledge used in bark cloth making while contributing to innovation in the use of traditional materials. The business also provides sustainable income for local farmers, cloth manufacturers, designers and craftspeople.

The marketing of Ugandan bark cloth encourages the transmission of the knowledge and skills for traditional bark cloth manufacture within the communities concerned.

For further information:

UNESCO, Uganda National Commission for UNESCO, Revitalisation of Bark Cloth Making in Uganda.

1. . UNESCO, Uganda National Commission to UNESCO, ‘Revitalisation of Bark Cloth Making in Uganda’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . S. Katebalirwe, ‘Bark Cloth from Uganda as a Potential GI Product’, ACP-EU Seminar, Cape Town, 10–11 May 2010. http://tradecomacpeu.com/resources/files/42/bark-cloth-from-uganda.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)