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CRAFT DEVELOPMENT IN ARUBA

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PREFACE

The need to analyze and describe the situation of craft in Aruba, in order to prepare and implement future activities for the national development of crafts, was the reason for the Aruba National Commission for UNESCO to conduct a study on craft development in Aruba. This objective formed part of the framework of UNESCO's Major Programme IV, particularly of the Subprogramme (IV.3) "*Strengthening links between culture and development*", and directly responded to its main line of action "Promotion of arts and crafts". At the same time, it contributed to the ongoing regional project of "*Craft Development in Central America and the Caribbean*". This national study on craft in Aruba was made possible as a cooperative effort funded by UNESCO's Regional Office for Culture.

For the realization of this project, the Aruba National Commission for UNESCO approached dr. Glenn Sankatsing, director of the Caribbean Reality Studies Center, to conduct a scientific study on craft development in Aruba, based on the history of craft, craft products, craft workers and craft organizations. The result of the study was to be presented in a report that was ready for publication. In addition to regional research experience in the Caribbean, dr. Sankatsing conducted various national and sectoral research projects on social and cultural issues in Aruba, with several technical reports and publications in the last ten years.

'Craft development in Aruba' is the second title in a series of publications by the Aruba National Commission, geared towards contributing positively to the social, cultural, economic and scientific development of Aruba. The realization of this study provides the opportunity to all stakeholders in the field of craft, including policymakers, craft workers and the Aruban community, to reflect on the significance of craft and its development for the island. At the same time, it provides a valuable tool to the Aruba National Commission for UNESCO to elaborate its policy in support of craft in Aruba, by means of project financing, international cooperation and other initiatives that value craft as a genuine expression of the national culture.

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Chairperson Aruba National Commission for UNESCO



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INTRODUCTION

The power of craft does not reside in its capacity to compete with modern industrial production supported by sophisticated technology and automation processes. Given the superior use value that can be created by modern devices far below the cost price of craft, the natural destiny of craft is extinction, unless it is valued for other purposes than its mere use value. The power of craft, then, resides in its representational capacity of culture, history, geography and society, in an undertaking where human agency is not divorced from nature. It is this proximity to life and nature, of human agency shaping with bare hands or simple tools, that historically secured the survival of craft, and that still offers ample prospects for its further development.

No one else is more aware of the relevance and power of craft than the very craft worker. But, at the same time, nobody is more conscious that the production of craft is a constant struggle against the currents and the tides, always in need for support of society and government. That, maybe, was the prime reason that this study could count on the full support of all craft workers and their organizations that were approached, all eager to tell the story of so many difficulties encountered and so little understanding and support found.

Given the serious obstacles that have been met, it is not too much of an exaggeration to state that the main reason why craft survived in Aruba was due to the vocation of some professional craft workers, not willing to give up, as the present study may well illustrate. The believe that craft has a place in society that cannot be erased by modernity, motivated craft workers to creatively search for options to represent culture and history in the form of artifacts. It is due to their full cooperation and willingness to provide details, backgrounds and information that this modest



study on craft development and perspectives in Aruba could end up in the present report.



1. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study is to analyze and describe the situation of craft in Aruba that can form the basis to prepare and implement future activities for the national development of craft, by promoting and valorizing local craft works of the country as authentic expressions of its identity and cultural creation and, at the same time, as a source of income.

The aim to strengthen links between culture and development, a salient point in UNESCO's Major Programme IV, led to focus on the promotion of arts and crafts in the form of the regional project "Craft Development in Central America and the Caribbean". This initiative forms part of the aim to integrate research findings and strategies on craft development in the region. For a rapid assessment of the situation on the island, the Aruba National Commission for UNESCO contracted Caribbean Reality Studies Center to elaborate this study on Craft Development in Aruba. The awareness that the current process of globalization harbors a special vulnerability to national and local craft expressions, even with a danger to disappear, underscores the need for such a study.

Given its overlap with other areas and activities, such as art, antique and folklore, there is a need to clearly define craft from the outset, in order to establish differences and connections between these different interrelated cultural expressions. The intimate relation of craft and culture needs to be highlighted, too, since the survival of craft cannot be deduced from the nature of the artifacts, which usually cannot compete with industrial production. Therefore attention is dedicated, as well, to the



relation between craft and the economy, particularly given the importance of the tourist sector in Aruba.

The history of craft, craft products, craft workers and craft organizations, as well as the contemporary situation, are mapped, in order to appreciate craft activities in Aruba from a future oriented development approach. In the execution of this research, the most important craft institutions, persons and other related sources of Aruba were therefore identified, a selection of which was approached for information on craft history, artifacts, policy, bottlenecks and prospects for the future. An understanding of craft history and its current conditions constituted the base to formulate a strategy for a craft policy in Aruba.



2. DELIMITATION OF CRAFT

In a sense, craft is a survival of the past. There was a time, before machines and electronics dominated the scene, when the most skillful craft generated the best of human production of items for daily use. Nowadays, craft is not capable to compete with the use value delivered by modern industrial production, steered by sophisticated technology and electronics. The natural destiny of craft in a world dominated by competition and selfishness is extinction, unless its worth is extended beyond the mere use value into the symbolic world of representation, in order to secure its survival.

2.1 Definition

The first task is to clearly delimit the meaning of craft, handicraft or craftwork, terms that are usually taken as synonyms. Craft is handmade work that gains its value and competitiveness not from the merits of its use value alone as a commodity, but rather from its aesthetic and decorative value representing the collectivity, culture, geography or history. It further gains value from its authenticity as the product of the agency of direct human skill and talent to shape available materials using bare hands and physical force or only simple manually operated tools.

Craft, then, is the manual production by direct skilled human action of any product with a use value in the present or in the past. The craft worker may benefit from simple tools that function as an extension of physical capabilities and senses,



but his direct shaping of the product by human skills is not substituted by machine or industrial technology. Critical for craft is, therefore, that tools are instrumental to human agency without becoming independent agents that accomplish automated tasks beyond the intervention of physical human action.

Craft is derived from 'Kraft' in German, which means force, power and ability, expressing direct human agency. Therefore, craft is about technique and skillful work that is not detached from physical human agency. There is no alienation in craft between the producer and the product, as is the case of industrial production. Craft is holistic, because the product is created as a whole and not dissected into separate routines as in production lines of factories, where assembling of parts is required in the end to obtain the final product. The immediate non-intervened relation that is maintained between man and nature makes craft as a survival of the past atypical in the capitalist mode of production. That is the reason why efficiency criteria that force industrial processes to increase the output of products per hour do not apply to craft.

Craft is not in the first place about technology, precision and efficiency, but about crystallized craftsmanship, materialized culture and symbolism. In a sense craft and industrial technology are opposites. The use of human intelligence in industrial technology is geared towards the substitution of human power to create use value, while intelligence in craft is used for mastery by the hand to create representational value.

This has not always been the case with craft, because centuries ago its competitiveness was gained primarily from the use value of its products. At the time that the state of technological development did not exceed simple tools, the best and most competitive of work and production was due to craftsmanship and direct human skills. That is still the case in tribal and communal societies that are not incorporated in Western modernity. Typically for craft is, therefore, the way in which it is shaped and the representation it stands for.



Historically, the place and meaning of craft changed significantly, particularly as a consequence of the process of modernization in the West and its global diffusion. Craft became particularly marginalized as core production with the advent of the industrial revolution, which progressively substituted handwork for manufacture.¹ What at one point was a mainstream market for social production of commodities appreciated primarily for their use value, nowadays has become a niche market of products with some use value, but which are primarily valued for purposes of aesthetics, decoration and remembrance. Notwithstanding its incapacity to competitively survive in the production chain, craft did not disappear but conquered a remarkable place in society to serve a partial market not vulnerable to competition by modern commodities. It is the nature of this market that should be analyzed thoroughly, in order to save craft from extinction under the weight of modern technological developments.

Any attempt to design a strategy for the survival and development of craft should take the basic element into account that craft can only survive as a niche market related to culture, history, aesthetics, religion, and the closeness of man to nature by direct non-mediated physical agency. Only that can turn the artifacts of craft into authentic, unique, culture and geography-bound products, that cannot be substituted by more efficient production elsewhere, since any imitation is a surrender of authenticity.

2.2 Craft, art and antique

Handcrafted items are related to the intention to be used (wear, sit, sleep, walk, drink, etc.), or functioned so in the past. For that reason they have a purpose beyond simple symbolic meaning. That is what distinguishes craft from art, which has no

¹ 'Manufacture' is a crude misnomer, since it literally means 'made by hand'.



practical use as a commodity but only a symbolic and emotional meaning as the product of intellectual or rational processes of creation and representation. The criterion of originality in artistic creation demands that no two products of art should be the same. The opposite holds for craft, where the products are rather replicas of a prototype. What determines the real value of craft is precisely the degree of perfection in reproducing a replica and the consistency in design, which in the case of art would rather merit the label of forgery.

While craft is the result of skilled physical work according to a preconceived design, art is a free-floating aesthetic expression of the mind. In art, the product is open ended, because the artist himself is not quite sure what the product will look like in the end of the process of creation. In craft, the product is preconceived according to a previous model or design. Art creates innovations by the brilliance of the mind, while craft reproduces authenticity by the brilliance of skill to reshape and further design. Since art and craft address different fields of agency, they do not form any simple dichotomy or contradiction, as the existence of artistic craft clearly illustrates. Even when a replica is made of an ancient design, each product can have its own artistic touch or originality in painting and decoration. In art, the design is the product, in craft, the design is the mold. This close relation between craft and art should be taken into account, because craft and art development typically go hand in hand.

Antique is a product of craft that has special value, because it is esteemed for its age. Old furniture or utensils, even when their use value has been reduced or completely faded away by decay and deterioration, can maintain and even enhance their value. Antique is dated craft produced long ago, that is valued for its old age and its use value at the time. For something old to be antique it should, therefore, be the product of craft in the past.² An ancient painting or sculpture, for that reason,

² It was an amusing distraction for the author, back in the 1970s, to be taken by a hustling street venter to what he promoted as a “fábrica de antigüedades”, a factory of antiques, in a dark back alley in the center of Lima (Peru).



does not belong to antique but to art, since it had no use value as a commodity. Since handicraft is usually based on tradition, craft often makes use of antique styles and icons in an attempt to recall the past.

2.3 Craft, culture and folklore

Craft does not survive by adaptation, modernization or technological innovation but by the preservation of ancient designs and traditional production rituals, devices and tools geared towards the conservation of reminiscences of history and geography. Craft is therefore closely related to culture, tradition, history and the proximity to nature.

Craft is embedded in culture and bears its trails, since the loss of a significant part of its utilitarian function forced it to resort to symbolic reference to culture as its primary source of survival. A dynamic understanding of culture is, therefore, critical for craft development. Culture is neither an archaic ornament of society, nor a creative decoration of social life, and much less a mere heritage of forebears. Culture is the dynamic materialization of the yearning to survive in interactive response to the forces of nature and the institutionalization of coexistence through conventions and shared social institutions in pursuit of order, stability and peace in a project of self-realization. Culture is not an adornment, but the heartbeat of society. As a collective convention, culture is the crystallization in material and immaterial traits of the drive of humanity to survive, defend itself, grow and develop, and to realize dreams in concert. Far beyond ancestor worship, culture is a heritage under constant social scrutiny, in order to comply with the urge of society to survive and develop. The vigor of culture does not lie in nostalgia of the past, but in the validity of its response to changing challenges.



According to this alternative concept of culture, craft and folklore are insensitive to the dynamics of history that demands constant adaptation and cultural change, but rather represent lifeless cultural traits snatched from the past that maintain a strong symbolic meaning. Although craft and folklore are vindicated by the nostalgia for the past, their genuine social function is to support development in a future-oriented process by vindicating them as expressions of cultural patrimony.

2.4 Craft, mass production and economy

There was a time when craft was the top of the line production technique to respond to the needs of society and deliver products of utilitarian function. In recent centuries, industrial development, automation and mass production turned craft obsolete as a device for production of competitive goods. When sophisticated machines did not yet separate the relation between man and nature, the distance of man with his environment was small and intimate. Men worked with materials provided by nature with bare hands or using tools that did not substitute direct contact with the process of creation.

Although craft products have a meaningful use, the market for craftwork differs from manufacture and industrial production, since it is not driven in the first place by usefulness, functionality and capital accumulation. A decorative function, cultural representation, typical use, relation to geography, a living image of the country, a memory of lived experience, historical background and symbolism, those are the main factors and traits that condition the demand for craft products.

By definition, craft in the modern era is destined for a niche market, since the value of craft does not lie in its competitive utilitarian function but in its relatedness to culture, handwork, geography and history. Craft cannot compete with mass



production of commodities in modern production processes, since productivity of craft cannot be enhanced by technology or sophistication.

In economic terms, tourism is one of the most important sectors for the demand for craftwork. Tourists, coming to a large extent from technologically advanced countries, are especially interested in purchasing typical locally shaped articles that reminds them of their vacation or are typical and genuine for the places they visited. Since the economic basis of Aruba is primarily related to tourism, craft can count on an important market. This demands a systematic effort of the government and private sector for genuine development of local craft, both in the benefit of the craft worker and the national economy.



3. CRAFT PRODUCTS IN ARUBA

3.1 History of craft in Aruba

Aruba displays a different craft development history, if compared with the larger societies in the region. As a small-scale society, both with regard to its population size and geographical extension, one of the most salient features is the absence of a longstanding tradition related to craft techniques in use or to continuity in a line of production of traditional artifacts.

Contemporary craft in Aruba is not based on traditional production techniques of handicraft that have been transferred from one generation to the other. In general, little continuity can be found in the history of handicraft in Aruba, where craft is periodically born all anew, along with new craft workers.

The social evolution of Aruba typically sprouts from immigration both from the own region and from Europe. Aruban culture and cultural expressions are therefore closely related to the cultural traits of the different groups of immigrants that were added to the social landscape, which fused together to certain degree. During centuries the population of Aruba never exceeded 10.000 inhabitants. It was well in the twentieth century that the population size began to grow rapidly beyond that figure, primarily as a consequence of immigration, first to respond to the labor demands of the oil refinery and afterwards to the needs of the growing tourist sector and the related construction projects for the required buildings and infrastructure. In the meantime, an increased entry of women in the labor process substantially increased the demand for household help. As a result, the population size doubled in



the last fifty years, notwithstanding a steady emigration from Aruba to The Netherlands.

In an early period, immigrants from the region typically arrived in Aruba from the English-speaking Caribbean, Suriname and some Latin American countries. More recently the share of Latin America and Haiti increased substantially. Each new group brought along different cultures and cultural traits, including craft, music and folkloric expressions. The consequence was that newcomers introduced new types of craft. In a first phase, craft products were simply imported ready made from the country of origin, where production costs are low and raw material easily available. Afterwards, some of these products were produced locally by immigrants who were already established in Aruba, or by their offspring.

It is difficult to answer the question what should be considered typically Aruban, in a society where the vast majority is of immigrant origin. Notwithstanding traces left behind by indigenous Indian culture, contemporary culture has been typically shaped by cultural input from outside confronted with the new context.³ The consequence is, that given the small scale of the Aruban society and the prominent role of inputs from abroad in its social and cultural formation, little continuity is found in craft production in Aruba.

Craft techniques and craftwork in Aruba, usually, did not sprout from family tradition in flourishing branches of craftwork. In most cases, it did not form part of a longstanding tradition transferred from one generation to the next. It was rather born all anew, when individuals mastered a craft technique, often after training that introduced widely accepted procedures by persons from abroad. In Aruba, the local nature of craft does not lie in traditional production devices but in the motives, themes and representation of national culture and assets that form the basis for craftwork. Therefore, the process of promotion of craft could not easily build on past

³ See Alofs, Luc and Merckies, Leontine. *Ken ta Arubiano. Sociale integratie en natievorming op Aruba, 1924-2001*. Aruba, VAD/De Wit Stores, Tweede herziene druk, 2001

experiences, since continuity in traditional techniques was usually absent. Local craft in Aruba is rather produced by reconstruction and use of national and cultural symbols, often based on existing knowledge of the past or historical study.

The production of craft in Aruba typically started after training in pottery, metal work, leatherwork, woodwork, printing or painting. Once the craft worker mastered a craft technique, the next step of indigenization turned the focus on traditional motives related to the Amerindian background, the national culture, history, landmarks and typical Aruban icons and elements. In this regard, the findings of archeological studies, available paintings in caves and other nationally valued icons are widely used as central motives for craftwork. The line of production that was usually chosen made use of those old paintings, designs, elements and craft. Other motives were salient geographical, natural or architectural landmarks, such as Hooiberg, the Lighthouse, Fort Zoutman, the dividivi tree, beach, sun and sea panoramas, and cultural expressions.

A factor that hampered craft development in Aruba is that, historically, handicraft was not valued as an important expression of the own culture, but was often seen as a social welfare activity to be promoted among disabled persons, the unemployed, the prison population and elderly people, in order to offer them meaningful employment and integration options, along with a source of additional income.

Overall, the historic record clearly shows that there was a chronic lack of coordination of craft activities in Aruba. One major shortcoming was a typical absence of government policy on craft. The possibility for training craft workers, a critical condition to stimulate craft, was often absent, except for irregular courses delivered by foundations, often when an expert happened to be around. Notwithstanding the substantial tourist market that exists for craft products, craft workers had no adequate outlet for their products or were forced to sell them at low prices to intermediaries or tourist shops, often at less than half the price charged to the buyer.



3.2 Contemporary craft

It is not easy to draw the contemporary map of craft activity and production in Aruba. In the last decades, a number of persons and agencies, varying from a small group of individual professional craft workers to incidental craft persons and organizations of craft workers, privately produced a number of craft products without systematic government or institutional support. The lack of professionalism and the absence of a clear craft policy typically led to a lack of continuity and development of craft production in Aruba. This low degree of professionalism and persistence can be detected in the fact that not one single entry is found for craft in the yellow pages of the national telephone guide.

3.2.1 Organizations

Several organizations have been active in the field of craftwork. Some were short lived without much impact, while other survived during decades with ups and downs.

The oldest, the *Fundacion Artesania Aruba*, was founded in 1972 as a non-profit organization, with a seed fund of ILO and UNDP. The main goal of the organization was to create employment and income in the field of craft through the development of handicraft and the promotion of Aruban craftsmanship. Parallel to that, Aruban culture was promoted by craft products that were inspired by national themes and Indian designs from archeological findings. One of the significant contributions of the foundation has been the training of craft workers in leatherwork, ceramics, screen-printing and hand arts.⁴

Income was generated in the foundation by fees for training, the sale of craft products made at the courses and the commission gained with the sale of products of artisans who were in need of an outlet for their craftwork. Still, the income from

⁴ Oduber, Milta "Report on review of arts & craft". Aruba, Artesania Aruba, March 1995.



these activities was not large enough to run the foundation in a professional way. Notwithstanding incidental government support and some funds received from private foundations, the whole history of the organization is marked by hard times, which made it difficult to realize the proposed targets.

The need to generate resources by reselling with profit the products of craft workers created some tension with the producers of craft, who saw part of their possible earnings disappear. Several interviews conducted with persons active in craftwork stressed the negative impact that this relationship had on the trust in the foundation from the part of craft workers.

Until 1977, the foundation could manage pretty well with own revenues, personnel and the delivery of courses in pottery, leatherwork, and screen-printing, among others. A number of the still active craft workers were initially trained by the foundation and could benefit from its facilities, such as the ceramic oven, screen-printing facilities and a center for training, exchange, exhibition and marketing. The foundation went through several critical periods that threatened its existence, particularly when it was forced by the Government to move to another location that was not suitable for its purposes. The main complaint of the Foundation Artesania Aruba is that, in four decades of existence, it could never really count with government or official support for its activities, but rather became the victim of ad hoc decisions, that undermined the capacity to realize the objectives. Due to a number of setbacks, the foundation is presently passing through difficult times. Investments are urgently required to restore production facilities, such as the ceramics oven and the screen-printing department, for which some ongoing funding requests have been filed.

Asociacion Artesanonan di Aruba (ASARA) is a more recent organization of craft workers. Its establishment was directly triggered by government plans to change the function of the downtown harbor area by building a cultural square, the Plaza Cultural. By eliminating existing kiosks at the location, space will come available for



local craft expressions to be offered to a most interesting category of buyers. These plans triggered the enthusiasm of a number of full time and part time artisans, who decided to join together.⁵ The result was the foundation of the Asociacion Artesanonan di Aruba (ASARA), concerned with the development of craft, and more immediately with the need for a regular outlet for craft products. The organization was able to mobilize some 80 persons, the majority of which were part time, incidental or aspirant craft workers. Its president, a full time craftsman participated in the commission in charge of the Plaza Cultural, a government project that was widely supported as beneficial to craft workers, although the location was not considered ideal by everybody, since some craft workers preferred the option to build a craft village. The juridical problems of the government with existing kiosk holders at the location, which led to a court case, enhanced the doubts among the members of the association in the actual execution of the project.

Presently, ASARA is a very low profile organization, and for some time now members have not met. Given the poor perspectives for craft, the lack of sustained interest of the members and the skepticism of an early realization of the Plaza Cultural, the immediate priority of the full time craft workers among the members, including the president, is now to improve their own craft enterprise. Since most other members are not very active, there is very little confidence that something will still come out of the organization. As for the relation between ASARA and Fundacion Artesania Aruba, all interviewed members expressed their disappointment over an active and supportive role of the latter. In their view, rather than trying to generate income with the product of the craft worker, the role of the foundation should focus more on the promotion of independent craft workers and the support of their aspiration to make a living with their craft.

⁵ Diario. Asara ta apoya Plaza Cultural. Diario, April 26, 2002.



3.2.2 *Craft workers*

No reliable estimates are available of the number of craft workers in Aruba. A report of the Ministry of Labor, Culture and Sports, adding up the numbers of craft persons as claimed by the different craft organizations, indicates 159 craft workers as a conservative estimate, based on an explorative study on craft workers in Aruba.⁶ However, some of those organizations including the largest is presently inactive, while most of the alleged craft workers are only part time or incidental craft workers in addition to a full time job elsewhere. In this way, most of the craft workers only receive a small secondary income out of part time craftwork, in order to enhance the regular family income.

Inquiries among the active craft workers in Aruba indicate that the majority of the people working on craft are only involved in craft on a non-professional, irregular, part time and discontinuous basis. Added together, Aruba has less than ten professional craft workers, including some persons who do painting on craft products. Only some of them are able to make a substantial living as a full time craft worker. This clearly indicates that craft is still a relatively marginal and fragile activity in Aruba that depends directly on a small number of persons. Illness of one craft worker can be sufficient reason to close down a studio for a while.

Some artifacts are made with local raw materials, particularly with kwihi wood, cloth, plants and fruits, and materials originating from the sea. The majority of the craft products, however, are made from materials that are imported, the most important of which are clay, plaster, pewter metal and paints. Although there are small deposits of ceramic clay in Aruba, they require purification of the excessive saltpeter before they are apt for use. Due to this low quality of the clay, a costly process is required to make it suitable for production purposes. For that reason potters prefer direct import of several varieties of clay according to the purpose, mostly from the United States. In the past, kwihi wood was used for commercial

⁶ Boekhoudt, Byron G. "Rapport Explorativo riba posibel productonan pa Plaza Cultural". Aruba, Ministry of Labor, Culture and Sports, August 2002, p. 5



production of large traditional kwihi tables. Since kwihi trees are not widely available for production purposes, at certain point, kwihi wood was imported from other parts of the region to continue this production. Nowadays, craft workers make only small wooden items for decorative purposes that do not require large volumes of kwihi wood.

One of the characteristics already mentioned for contemporary craft in Aruba is that it usually does not sprout from a longstanding tradition of transference of skill and craft from one generation to the next. One clear exception is the production of kwihi tables, an old craft of a family in Savaneta that was passed to the children who still practice the craft.⁷ But in most cases, it was only after the craft worker was trained in a particular craft and material that she developed an own line of craft products, as three case studies of the craft history of fulltime craft workers may illustrate.

The most proficient craft worker in pottery does not come from an artisan background, but her interest in pottery was rather raised, when old Indian pots were found in excavations at her grandparents' place. After a one-year course in pottery at the Fundacion Artesania Aruba, she got a stipendium for a six months' course in pottery in The Netherlands. After the contractual obligation to work for two years at the Fundacion Artesania Aruba, she started her own craft activities as an independent craft worker, some 20 years ago now. In the meantime, she managed to make a living as a professional craft worker with a registered company looking now for expansion options.

A second case is a craft worker using pewter metal to produce a number of craft products, the most salient of which is the much wanted gilt dividivi tree on a kwihi base. Initially, the craft worker learned leatherwork from a US citizen at Fundacion Artesania Aruba, after which she went to Bonaire, where she got involved in the production of leather products. She later worked for Spaniards in Aruba who used

⁷ "Mesa di kwihi te ainda un producto hopi gusta". Observador, Semanario Informativo y Educativo di Aruba. Agosto 22, 1964, Aña 4, No. 132.



pewter metal for their craft products. When the Spaniards left, she bought over the facilities, including a number of machines used in the processing and gilding of the metal. She started to design by herself and could develop a successful line of products inspired by national culture, local vegetation and Aruban landmarks that still have good demand.

A third case is a craft worker who went to Puerto Rico, where she learned to work with porcelain. Back in Aruba, in 1969, she started making the typical small presents given to all guests on the occasion of a wedding or the First Holy Communion. Since there was no ceramic oven in Aruba at the time, she used to send her products by boat to Maracaibo (Venezuela) for baking, with quite some loss of broken items at return. She first bought a small oven in Miami and afterwards a larger one to enhance production to more items, such as images for churches and typical Aruban inspired items for tourists.

These three profiles illustrate the fact that craft in Aruba did not sprout typically from a long tradition of devices and production procedures, but rather started by learning a particular skill, which was afterwards used in products designed around cultural or national traits and symbols.

3.2.3 Artifacts

The importance of mass tourism in Aruba, characterized by the demand for local craft products, either to remember the stay or as a genuine Aruban gift to friends, turns craft work into a feasible production branch in Aruba.

Craft products that are made or were made in the past can be sorted in four categories. The first category is articles representing the Indian heritage, mostly known from archeological findings, particularly old pottery and paintings on rocks. Representations used by the Indians and the objects they used inspired craft workers in the field of ceramics, painting, metal work, leatherwork, and plasterwork. The most requested products in this category are replicas of ceramic pots and urns



from centuries ago of Indians who lived in Aruba or entered the island from the mainland, particularly from the Paraguana peninsula.

A second category is objects and images related to old Aruban culture and history that find their way into craft products, such as model cunucu houses (typical Aruban rural house), the 'aloë lekbak' (drip pan for aloe), a miniature of the 'caha di orgel' (street organ), sandals as made in the early twentieth century, typical Aruban trousers and shirts, leatherwork, the kwihi table, weaved hats, tiles with typical symbols, printed beach bags, T-shirts, and bath mantels.

A third category is related to geographical, architectonic and cultural landmarks in the Aruban landscape, panoramic views, and sea and beach sights. Popular among these items are the Hooiberg (the Haystack Hill), the Lighthouse, Fort Zoutman, rock formations and the natural bridge.

A fourth category is the stylistic representation of typical fauna, such as the iguana (yuwana), the rattle snake (cascabel), the parakeet (pirkichi), the trupial and other birds, and of typical flora, such as the dividivi tree always pointing to the west as a weather vane, the cactus and the 'kibrahacha' flowering in full yellow dress.

A variety of raw materials are used in Aruban craftwork. Local craft products are made of clay, wood, plaster, metal, leather and synthetic fabrics. Craft products are also based on whatever the sea provides, recycled products, and material proceeding from plants and cloth.

3.2.4 Problems and bottlenecks

A major issue for craft workers is the role and position of intermediaries, which tend to economic exploitation of the labor of craft workers by offering them only a small part of the retail price. One of the main limitations indicated by the craft workers is the absence of a place that is frequented by tourists to directly exhibit and sell their products. Craft workers have always insisted on the need to have a spot on a strategic location to market their products, because the only option left otherwise



was to sell their products to retailers for low prices. One craft worker reported that she received less than fifty percent of the retail price for the delivered product. The full cost price and labor invested in the item was less than the profit of the vendor.

The solution, however, is not to let all craft workers market their own product, in order to get the full price. Commercial marketing and shop management is a different skill than the production of craftwork. The experience of some craft workers that did gain a post at the harbor area, the airport and other places has not always been encouraging. The lack of professionalism has been a bottleneck that led to failure in marketing. The organization of craft workers in associations, cooperatives or federations can open new options for marketing craft products at reasonable prices, while activities can be coordinated to enhance supply.

A second problem is that numerous products made outside Aruba are offered at very competitive prices, often provided with the label 'Aruba', in order to vein originality as local craftwork. Low prices for labor and raw materials in many countries of the region allow end products of craft to be offered at retail prices that are below the cost price of a similar item made in Aruba. An example is ceramics made with easily accessible river clay in other countries and with cheap manpower that is nonetheless highly skilled due to techniques sprouting from a longstanding tradition. In this way, high quality Indian craft made elsewhere can be offered at prices far below the production costs with clay imported in Aruba from the United States.

The first step of immigrant participation in craft is, usually, to import end products from their country of origin that are offered on the Aruban market as local craft. At a next stage, raw materials are imported and the craftwork is done in Aruba itself. The effect of these forms of competition is an overall weakness of local craft in Aruba, which becomes highly unattractive as an office for new craft workers, due to low returns. Given this state of the craft sector, the infrastructure and production capacity is weak, as a consequence of which no professional answer can be given to



seasonal demands for large numbers of representational gifts by companies or organizations.

Particularly demands for Christmas, the New Year, national holidays and international meetings cannot be met, due to a lack of capacity. Notwithstanding the high demand from tourists, quality products were not produced in sufficient numbers by the small number of skilled artisans. As a consequence, imported craft products overran the market from countries like Haiti, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Guatemala, China and Taiwan. The consequence was that the demand for craft in Aruba was filled to a large extent by imported craftwork, mostly from neighboring countries, in some cases identified with the word Aruba. This combination of a lack of national production and a high demand for craftwork, particularly by tourists, provoked an invasion of foreign made products that were offered as local craft.



4. CRAFT PROMOTION AND DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Government craft policy

In the past, regardless of the political party or coalition in charge, craft and craft development never had any priority in government policy in Aruba. No specific policy has been formulated to support, sustain or develop craft. As a consequence, there was no systematic support for craft workers, while no measures were taken to legally protect local craft against products from abroad. Only when craft workers took the initiative to pressure the government and its agencies, some temporal concession was made in the form of small subsidies or support.

The combination of a lack of a craft policy and the incapability of craft workers to compete against imported products, mostly from countries in the own region that were presented as authentic Aruban craft, had disastrous consequences for craft development in Aruba. It became extremely hard and unattractive for any professional craft worker to make a living out of handicraft. In interviews both with local craft workers and craft organizations, the general complaint was that no support of the government or government agencies was given and, instead, craft workers were permanently engaged in an uphill battle for space and opportunity. That was seen as the main stumbling block to mobilize craft workers in Aruba, since most of them were forced to reduce their craft into a complementary activity next to a regular job elsewhere.

The current policy statement of the Ministry of Culture foresees in the construction of a 'Plaza Cultural' in the downtown harbor area for small vessels,



where the market operates today.⁸ The cultural plaza will be located at a strategic down town seashore area with heavy tourist traffic, close to the cruise ship terminal not far from Main Street, known as the “Schoenerhaven”. For that purpose reorganization was required of the existing kiosks for fruits, fish and meat products, garments, souvenirs and paintings.⁹ The debate concerning the legality of the kiosks triggered a public controversy between the government and the present owners that conducted to a court case, which has been recently decided in favor of the government. That has opened the path for the realization of the Plaza Cultural, with a salient architectonic design that artistically unites culture, sea and land in a harmonious interplay.

The objective of the Plaza Cultural, intended as a multifunctional space to organize social and cultural activities, is to promote the culture of Aruba, to offer local craft workers a location for the production and exhibition of their products and the possibility to sell their works directly to the buyer, especially to tourists. The need for local craft workers and artists to have a location close to a place frequented by tourists to sell their products can be met by some 30 kiosks that will become available in the compound for craft and art. That will meet the needs, since different products can be offered at the same location, without a necessity for each craft worker to operate an own shop.

The managing authority that will coordinate the whole Plaza Cultural will monitor the presence of local craft according to a set of criteria established to define the nature of the products for sale. To do so, the managing authority is entitled to see to it that the establishments meet the criteria and that conditions for the lease of the

⁸ Nota di maneho pa cultura 2001/2005. “Expresando nos idendidad”. Aruba, Ministry of Labor, Culture and Sports, November 2002, p. 7

⁹ Reorganisacion di mercado di fruta, waf chikito y vecindario. Aruba, Ministry of Labor, Culture and Sports, January 2002.



locations are fulfilled. This includes the right of inspection of production locations, facilities, processes and devices of craftwork.¹⁰

The reaction of craft workers to these plans was enthusiastic, since facilities will be incorporated for the marketing of craft products. There was some caution, however, regarding the time it might take before plans on paper become a reality. The announcement of the plan for the new plaza even triggered a mobilization of some 80 craft workers that resulted in the establishment of the Asociacion de Artesanos de Aruba (ASARA).

4.2 Craft and national development

To understand the meaning of craft for the future of society and culture, a critical issue is to determine in which sense craft can contribute to national development. Development is the mobilization of the own potentialities and social forces in a project of self-realization, in interactive response to nature, habitat, resources and history. Development, therefore, cannot be transferred or donated; it can only be triggered, encouraged, stimulated and maintained. That was the main reason why all development theories of the last fifty years have failed, without exception. According to the new development/envelopment paradigm,¹¹ what was referred to as 'development' for more than half a century was not development but envelopment, a disrespectful process of insertion, annexation and incorporation into an external project, a process of envelopment. Envelopment, the antithesis of development, is based on imitation and mimicry by overwriting the own culture and history, and on the denial of the principles of creation, evolution and progress. Development, in contrast, is focused on own potentialities, resources, context and agency.

¹⁰ Concept Beheersregels Plaza Cultural, behorende bij Landsbesluit Plaza Cultural.

¹¹ Glenn Sankatsing, The Caribbean between envelopment and development at www.crscenter.com



From the viewpoint of the new development/envelopment paradigm, the translation of development into a strategy for the promotion of craft turns the footlights on the following relevant aspects.

1. The motives and designs in craft are directly related to the cultural traditions of a people and country, and craft development can therefore foster the belief in own values, achievements and agency.
2. Craft as national production should increase the multiplier effect in the economy, by enhancing the proportion of each spent dollar that is kept within the national economy rather than exported by transfer of money or imports of goods. In a primarily tourist country, the enormous potential for craft production and marketing can offer a living to numerous Aruban families.
3. Craft is an economic activity that normally has no major negative impact on natural resources, environment, nature and society.
4. A craft conservation and development strategy is an imperative part of national policy to secure the survival of the collective memory as crystallized in the material responses to the demands of nature. Since reminiscences tend to disappear in oblivion, unless kept alive actively, craft is permanently in danger of extinction under the weight of modernization and, particularly nowadays, by ruthless globalization.
5. When primarily shaped and sustained as a provider for tourist's taste and demand, folklore and craft may easily derail into cultural prostitution, since cultural traits are turned into a commodity to be sold, which easily leads to deterioration of its content.
6. Whenever local craft is not protected against forgery from outside that pretends to offer authentic craft, craft promotion and growth can be harmful for the own culture and economy.



These pros and cons should be taken into account when designing a craft development strategy that should always be embedded in a national cultural policy.



5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CRAFT DEVELOPMENT

Craft is always context-embedded and bears a close relation to the own culture, history, geography or environment. This gives the aesthetic, historic and cultural function a prominent place in craft development. Authenticity is not in the first place established by the favorable verdict of the tourist, but rather by the internal judgment of the national society. Like in the case of folklore, promotion and development should serve one's own cultural purposes, in the first place. Only when authenticity is guaranteed from within, it is really possible to share the non-adulterated trait with the visitor, tourist or community from abroad. The implication is that craft policy should always be an integral part of the cultural policy of a country, to assure that craft is not subordinated to the commands of mass tourism. Although the market is essential for production, it is counterproductive to simply adapt craft to the taste of foreigners, since that, in the long run, will erase its specificity and its local nature.

Since the Aruban economy is primarily supported by the tourist industry, craft production and craft development should take a prominent place in government policy as a priority area for support and promotion. Part of tourists' spending is always dedicated to the purchase of locally produced products that are typical for the country, population or landscape, as a remembrance of the visit, a token of moments shared with loved ones, or as an authentic gift to friends and family back home. That is the reason why, in contrast with the market for modern commodities, local and national craft is less vulnerable to competition and globalization, since the demand for authenticity cannot be satisfied by foreign produce or substituted by context-free supply.



The promotion of craft should be located in a comprehensive development process as a future oriented project based on self-realization and the mobilization of all available potentialities. To promote and develop craft as part of the national development, the joint action of government, craft workers and private sector, should focus on the following tasks.

1. Craft production should be enhanced through professionalization of craft workers by training, workshops and regional orientation in all fields of craft production that can be relevant for Aruba. The history of craft in Aruba clearly shows that most contemporary craft in Aruba is the outcome of embedding newly acquired skills of craft workers in the own context and reality, rather than stemming from a longstanding tradition of craft production techniques transferred from one generation to the next.
2. In the development of craft, devices, motives and designs of the past take a prominent place. Even when new craft is invented, it will always build on existing cultural expressions or icons. To identify authentic designs, motives and styles, systematic historical study should, therefore, be undertaken on culture and craft expressions from the past. That may constitute the reference and basis to develop specific styles, designs and products. Research geared towards the creation of historically based authentic designs, e.g. dated typical Aruban houses, can constitute a powerful source for attractive craft work both by the production of a replica of old craft and by incorporating old designs in newly shaped craft.
3. The best craft is found in products that are easily recognizable by their very design and representational value as belonging to a particular country or region, without need to display the name of the country on an outside label. The same design or recurring motives can characterize a whole line of products and encourage buyers to purchase the whole set as a collection.
4. To benefit from the advantage of offering some unique local or national product, it is imperative to protect the national craft production against forgery and fake



products presented as national. For that purpose the logo "Aruba" and the label "Made in Aruba" should be protected legally.

5. A system of authentication and registration of national craft should further prevent confusion among buyers regarding the origin of the product. Only then benefit can be drawn from the advantages of a niche market of local craft that can flourish without external competition. There is a need for an authorized institute or system of authentication of all craft products that can be considered as national and genuine products of Aruba or as belonging to Aruban culture. To monitor craft production and marketing, artifacts can be provided with a seal of authentication or a certificate of authenticity. Among the criteria to be considered in determining the degree of authenticity may figure the following.
 - The item is produced in Aruba itself.
 - The degree of use of local materials.
 - The degree of traditional craftsmanship involved.
 - The degree in which a good replica of old craft is achieved.
 - The use of designs, elements or motives related to the own reality, history, culture or geography, such as 'Dera Gai' and 'Dande' as cultural traditions, the 'Hooiberg' as a geographic landmark, and the Lighthouse and typical Aruban houses representing architecture.
6. To protect original ideas and authorship of local craft workers and artists, patent application for original designs of Aruban craft should be promoted and supported.
7. The lack of entrepreneurship among Arubans is a complaint heard regularly in all branches of the economy. In part this is due to the lack of the educational system to offer management training that prepare for entrepreneurship. In a research project on vocational education in Aruba at the lower and middle level (EPB and EPI) a recommendation was made to incorporate a training in entrepreneurship in



the programs at the middle level of vocational training (EPI).¹² As a branch that offers ample opportunities for local entrepreneurship, craft in Aruba will widely benefit from that, both for the improvement of production and for a more efficient marketing.

8. Since craft typically points a finger to the past, whenever possible old areas of activity should be recovered or used for the creation of new items. In the past a flourishing industry of tannery existed in Aruba producing goat leather for handicraft. For quite some time now, no such activity is undertaken on the island. Leatherworkers were therefore forced to import leather from Curacao, Bonaire and elsewhere. Since the use of local raw materials of locally produced semi-manufactured articles enhances the degree of authenticity of craftwork, the possibility for the reactivation of tannery as a form of craft should be studied seriously. Additionally, the availability of locally produced leather will stimulate craft workers and benefit local craft development.
9. To promote and market locally produced craft, adequate sale outlets must be available for the craft worker. A professional catalogue with a description of all authenticated craft items and their cultural historical background will constitute a handy guide for tourists to purchase genuine Aruban craft. An official website, with online inquiry options and interactive online ordering options, can be useful for tourists preparing for their holidays.
10. The realization of the Plaza Cultural in the down town harbor area will provide a strategic marketing location that can booster craft in Aruba. Its proximity to locations frequented by tourists, the location along the walking route from the cruise terminal and its very design as a architectonical landmark will offer an excellent opportunity to booster craft development in Aruba.

¹² See Glenn Sankatsing "Beroepsonderwijs en Arbeidsmarkt op Aruba. EPB- en EPI-afgestudeerden 2000". Aruba, CELA (Conseho di Educacion y Labor), Aruba, 2001



6. CONCLUSIONS

Craft is presently not an organized or flourishing branch of labor in Aruba, but rather a scattered business of separate self-made individual craft workers, less than ten of which are to be considered professional craft workers. The larger part of the group performs craft as a hobby or a discontinuous activity to add to a regular income elsewhere.

Since craft cannot compete with modern industry, its fate cannot be left to the whims of market forces, unless one is willing to run the risk of its extinction. The chronic absence of a craft policy and institutional support drove craft workers into a permanent individual fight for space and outlet for their products. Only few could keep afloat under similar adverse conditions. That turned craft into a profession that could not attract the energies of many potential craft workers, notwithstanding the fact that the tourist environment generates a variety of buyers with a sizeable demand throughout the year.

Under conditions where the chances to make a living out of craft are dim, it should not surprise that few people are to be attracted by craft. Among the factors that further complicated the picture, the most salient was an unfair competition by foreign products that were presented as genuine Aruban craft, a practice that could flourish from a lack of legal or governmental protection.

It can be concluded that, given the significant demand for craft by the tourist sector and the pool of available craft workers that can be trained to work a variety of products and themes from culture, history, geography, architecture and landmarks, all ingredients and potentials are present in Aruba for a flourishing local craft sector with excellent growth and development perspectives. The need to mobilize own potentialities for a future oriented project locates craft in a strategic position for



marketable creation out of own culture and history that can strengthen the economy and foster development.

A coordinated action of government, craft workers, craft organizations and the tourist sector can turn craft into a flourishing productive activity. In addition to underscore the own cultural expressions of Aruba, it will provide a source of meaningful engagement and income for Aruban families. A craft policy understood as part of the cultural policy of the country, will include training, promotion, protection and coordinated marketing. A socio-historical study of the Aruban past and of the social evolution of the country in the last half-century, will provide a valuable body of knowledge that can nourish local craft.

The realization of the Plaza Cultural and the enforcement of legal provisions and proposals for coordination, control, monitoring, protection and promotion, provide all the relevant conditions as a new starting point of concerted action for a flourishing craft sector in Aruba. Still, that will take lots of efforts and hardships, since human and financial investments will be needed for the training of craft workers, the acquisition of skills and the effective protection of a marketable local product.

That is the only option to recover craft from the realm of dead culture, oblivion and possible extinction in an era of merciless globalization. It is the only option, too, to position craft back in the creative stream of human agency embedded in culture, values and tokens that allow to proudly present what is dear to the Aruban society and its collective memory.



Contributors

The following persons and institutions cooperated with the study by providing information in interviews, by showing their facilities or by making relevant documents available.

Persons

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