

# **Crafting a Post Covid-19 World: Building Greater Resilience in the Crafts Sector through Strengthening Ties with its Community's Cultural System**

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## **Abstract**

In the pre-Covid-19 era, the crafts sector in Asia had ridden on the crest of globalized trade and international tourism. It had transformed itself dramatically from serving the needs of its community and acting as a conduit of cultural expressions to a labour intensive production unit catering to demands of mainly non-local markets.

However, Covid-19 has brought an untimely demise to these evolved craft-based industries. The collapse of the global economy and the abrupt halt of international travel have jeopardized those who depended on this sector for their livelihoods.

Rather than seeing this period as a tragedy, this paper proposes that the craft sector could also consider this as a unique opportunity to build greater resilience to mitigate against similar future occurrence. One means is to re-visit the nature of crafts and re-establish its networks within the community's cultural system. This echo the theoretical framework of crafts - an entity which is rooted in and reflective of the cultural lives of the community; it encompasses the body of expressive cultural associated within the fields of a community's folklore and cultural heritage.

This paper examines two case-studies where craft producing communities have sustained themselves through focusing on their local traditional markets and also re-integrated themselves into the local cultural system.

The first case study cites the crafts sector of Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Because of the context of Afghanistan, any form of export from the valley of Bamiyan is, at best, challenging. Yet, the craft industry has survived through the ravages of war and uncertainties. Utilizing the data from recent UNESCO pilot surveys on the supply and demand of the crafts sector, this paper describes and explains the intimate relationship between crafts and the practicing cultural ecosystem in Bamiyan. As a result, even in this war-torn country with limited opportunities, the crafts sector has been sustained, relatively unaffected by external forces.

The second case study examines a ceramic production unit in Bali and its innovative response during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the pre-Covid period, the marketing channel of this thriving craft enterprise was through the hospitality industry; hotels and resorts purchased their flatware for their food and beverage outlets. A significant percentage was also marketed

through their retail outlets, targeting at expatriates living in Southeast Asia. However, due to the decline of the markets from these sectors, this craft enterprise has re-aligned itself by linking its products to the traditional cuisines of Indonesia, namely targeting both its domestic and non-domestic markets.

Thus, paper proposes that one means of building greater resilience for the crafts sector is to strengthen its network with the local cultural system and to re-focus on the local community as its primary market. Ironically, it is only through diving deep into the roots and the *raison d'être* of the practice that the crafts sector, like a tree, will be able to strength itself to mitigate against future crisis, reaching greater heights.

## **A. Context**

The genesis of folk arts and crafts grew out from the context of the community (1) ( 2). It is within each community's circumstance - utilizing resources from its immediate environment, working with local and appropriate technologies, applying skills that have been handed down through generations, drawing design inspirations from its surroundings, stories, myths and belief systems to express cultural sentiments while fulfilling physical, cultural, economic, political social and even spiritual needs - that folk arts and craft have emerged. Hence, folk crafts and its community' cultural system - both tangible and intangible - are intimately connected and directly related (3). It is when crafts are practiced and the product is experienced within such a context that it is most appreciated and respected, highlighting its authenticity and the integrity of the object (4).

However, in recent eras, because of the social, cultural, technological and economic changes that have swept the world, folk arts and crafts no longer fulfilled the needs of communities as communities themselves began to evolve. This initiated the slow and steady decline of folk arts and crafts practices, affecting the general health of global tangible and intangible cultural heritage (5).

Specific to the endangerment of cultural practices, knowledge and skills, UNESCO established the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. Beyond safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO in 2005 also established the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions to recognise the distinct nature of cultural goods and services, strengthen culture-based economic growth and cultural acceptance (6). Significantly, the foundation of these conventions focuses on the community, beyond other strategic goals - conservation, capacity building, credibility and communication. Vocalising this thought, New Zealand proposed adding the 'fifth C' - Community - as humanity is at the heart of conservation. This was proposed during the World Heritage Committee 31<sup>st</sup> Session in Christchurch, New Zealand, 2007 (7).

Supported by these conventions, folk arts and crafts have changed, often into a commodity of international trade. In recent times, for example, according to United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Creative Economy Outlook: Trends in International Trade in Creative Industries (2002 - 2015) Report (8), the international trade in arts and crafts

totalled \$35 billion in 2015. World exports increased from \$19.9 billion in 2002 to \$35 billion in 2015 with an annual average growth rate of 4.42% during the period 2003-2015.

Given that a community's culture and its various forms and expressions are all part and parcel of the experience of a specific space, folk arts and crafts are also intrinsically linked to the tourism industry (9). For example, in Ethiopia 2007, tourist expenditure on crafts was US\$12.7 million, (10). In Laos, Luang Prabang – the ancient royal capital and today a UNESCO World Heritage Site - estimates that a total of US\$ 4.4 million of curios and craft articles are sold to tourists annually (10).

## **B. Impact of Covid-19**

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019. It is an infectious disease causing severe acute respiratory problems amongst other health issues. Because of its highly contagious nature, The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and by the first week of April 2020, half of the world's population was under some form of lockdown (11) (12).

With failing economies, unemployment, reduced spending, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have had a devastating impact on the global handicrafts sector. In India, for example, because of the disruption of supply chains, production has been sporadic at best, or halted completely. Meanwhile, overhead costs have increased due to low production but ironically, huge unsold inventory has also piled up at the same time. There has been no sale either through local or international exhibitions or orders. Whenever sales have been localised, revenues have reduced by 30% or more. Worse, there has been no certainty about when craft producers would be able to start their work again (13).

For the craft industries that have aligned themselves with the tourism sector, the impact of Covid-19 has been equally devastating. This is because the tourism industry has been an economic sector most severely affected by the pandemic (14). Referencing UNWTO's Report on COVID – 19 Related Travel Restrictions, as of end-April 2020, 100% of all worldwide destinations have introduced travel restrictions in response to the pandemic. Available data points to a decrease of 22% in the first quarter of 2020, with arrivals in March down by 57%. This translated into a loss of 67 million international arrivals and about USD 80 billion in receipts (15).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in the medium and longer terms, the expected lower levels of international and domestic tourism, the decline in purchasing power and the reductions of public funds and fall in private investment for arts and culture will amplify the negative trend of the general cultural industry sector, of which crafts is the dominant segment (16).

Significantly, this pandemic crisis has sharply exposed the structural fragility of the sector. Referenceing OECD, 'cultural and creative sectors, including the crafts industry, are structured in a unique way in comparison to other sectors. Public cultural institutions and big private

players alike rely on an interconnected and interdependent network of freelancers and micro-firms which provide creative content, goods and services. This “ecosystem” is vital to the sector and now faces bankruptcy due to a sudden and massive loss of revenue opportunities.’ (16)

### **C. Aim of this Paper and Proposition**

Quoting the European Commission’s Culture and Creativity framework ‘Cultural and Creative sectors operate within ecosystems. At the heart of this ecosystems approach is the idea that cultural and creative sectors work in an inter-twined way with different sectors adjacent to their own, or with completely different sectors, and also in a cross-sectoral way.’ (17) It is within this model that this paper expounds and proposes that in order to build greater resilience for the crafts sector to mitigate against future crisis, it is imperative to strengthen the linkages of craft products not only with other sectors but within the cultural system which it was initially made for. Furthermore, beyond appreciating the community as stewards of safeguarding the practice, the community should also serve as primary consumers of these cultural products and services. Thus, central to this paper is the suggestion that the primary context for folk arts and crafts is its local community - to fulfill its community’s need. The economic expansion beyond this local market into other areas – export, tourism, etc. should be considered secondary. Therefore, if and when a global crisis transpires, although there are negative consequences, its impact is ring-fenced because of its secured local demands.

This paper examines two case-studies - one in Bamiyan, Afghanistan while the second, a ceramic enterprise in Bali, Indonesia. Both cases have linked their products to the crafts parent cultural systems, thus sustaining the craft practices and mitigating a decline in sales, in spite of, and responding to, external threats.

### **D. Case Study 1: The Craft Sector in Bamiyan, Afghanistan**

The province of Bamiyan is located in the central Afghanistan region of Hazarajat, and lies approximately 240 kilometres north-west of Kabul. The average altitude of Bamiyan is about 2,550m with a population of about 100,000 (in 2014). Bamiyan, its main centre, has four districts with a total land area of 3,539 hectares. The total number of dwellings in Bamiyan is 4,435 (18).

UNESCO and the Government of Afghanistan are currently working together to foster sustainable development and creating opportunities through the development of Intangible Cultural Heritage, creative industries and heritage tourism within the Bamiyan World Heritage property. With a view to improve the understanding of the culture-based creative economy within the World Heritage Site, a survey on the local consumption of cultural goods and services was conducted in 2018 (19). The purpose of this survey was to comprehend if the community in Bamiyan was consuming any cultural goods and services and if so, what were these products and services, where were these products produced, what were the consumers’ opinion of the quality of these items and the frequency of purchase.

The proposition undertaken by this study was that although there were extremely limited external markets for products made in Bamiyan, but because of the support by the Bamiyan local community and its integral linkages with community's cultural system, these craft practices and enterprises have been sustained, regardless of the prevailing conditions of the country outside the province.

The survey was conducted in the final months of 2018. A total of 120 individuals were surveyed along with 60 households within the Bamiyan town centre. Random sampling methodology was employed to attain an unbiased representation of the population. Working in parallel to this survey, the author also visited shops retailing craft products in Bamiyan so as to establish concurrence (or not) with the survey findings. The author and the survey team also visited a typical dwelling of a resident to understand the context of usage within a domestic setting.

The survey found that there was a diverse range of cultural goods and services consumed by the Bamiyan town community. Within this paper, the following types of folk arts and crafts products, and cultural services were identified:

- Embroidery on traditional garments such as wedding dresses, groom clothes, longi (man's headcloth), handkerchief, gundag pich (traditional embroidered garments) for children; contemporary garment accessories such as scarves, household soft furnishings included cushion and quran covers;
- Tailoring services to make garments and household soft furnishings such as mattress covers for newly born, mirrors, TV and bed covers, table cloths, etc.;
- Felt products included traditional vests and coats such as barag chapan, khujin (bag), covers for donkeys and contemporary products such as bedroom slippers;
- Floor covering such as carpets, rugs, kilims and palas;
- Wool products were mattress and wool yarns for weaving;
- Ceramics products included bird bowls, dik chowani, tanor stoves for bread making, ghashgho, digdan, etc.;
- Metal and jewelry works such as farming tools as well as gold and silver ornaments and accessories;
- Wood products including cradles for babies, baskets, dambura (string musical instrument), traditional and contemporary furniture.;
- Stone carving services to produce grave stones and also gem stone polishing;
- Herb products for the practice of traditional medicine;
- Traditional cultural services that were identified by the survey included catering, making of dairy products and providing services during festivals such as Holi Quran events, etc.

In terms of frequency of purchase, as some of the items were used to celebrate and signify life milestone events (such as birth, marriage and death). Some were purchased once in a life-time. Others were purchased annually to participate in festivals and celebrations. Other essential items were bought more frequently serving the necessities of daily living.

Findings from visits to a typical domestic dwelling, markets and shops collaborated with the survey data; many of the items were found in use at home and readily for sale in shops in Bamiyan.

The reasons cited for purchase were varied. For household products where cultural value were minimal (for example, utility items such as kettles, cooking pots, stove, etc.), the need to purchase was mainly practical in nature; it served the daily needs of the user and when defective, replacement would have been necessary. Against the background of Afghanistan's peculiar situation, similar products that were imported were expensive and infrequent. Hence, the isolation of Bamiyan valley has bred a high degree of self-reliance where localized production of these essential goods and services have developed and flourished.

More significantly, for products with cultural values where expressions of culture were manifested in its designs, forms, materials, skills and usage, these were inevitably linked to cultural habits and aesthetics, traditional and/or religious practices, folk belief systems, social norms and mores. As explained by one of the interviewees, because of the nature of Hazara's wedding ceremony, the bride and groom would need to wear traditional clothes. These would need to be purchased locally because it would not be possible to import these garments from elsewhere (because of the on-going political and economic instability of Afghanistan). Importantly, other ethnic craft makers (such as the Pashtuns) would not be able to fulfill the needs of the Hazara cultural equipment. For instance, only those who were familiar with Hazara's wedding cultural norms would be able to make and supply these garments to fulfill the requirements of a Hazara wedding. Therefore, it has been the observations of Hazara wedding customs by the community that have sustained the livelihoods of embroiders and tailors in Bamiyan. Furthermore, marriage and weddings were important milestone occasions that were marked and celebrated by the community, regardless of external circumstances. Other similar events included birth and death rituals where cultural practices have also sustained the crafts sector. Hence, in spite of an on-going war and the volatile situation in Afghanistan, the Bamiyan crafts sector has been well sustained.

Likewise, appreciation for traditional music by the community has led to the sustained practice of making dambura. Because of the eating of traditional breads and yoghurts, tandor stoves and a special type of yoghurt pot have been continuously made in Bamiyan for the local market.

Beyond the cultural practices of the Hazara community in Bamiyan, most of the raw materials needed by the crafts sector have also been sourced locally. For example, the wool that has been required to make mattresses, felt fabrics, carpets and the textiles were all obtained within the province.

Hence, notwithstanding the current crisis that Afghanistan has been under-going, the crafts sector has established its own ecology system - with the physical environment and its linkages with the community's cultural system - and folk craft practices have been sustained.

## **E. Case Study 2: Jenggala Ceramic, Bali Indonesia**

Jenggala is a craft-based enterprise that designs and creates ceramic products. The company was established in 1976 and is based in Bali, Indonesia. The marketing channel of Jenggala has been through the hospitality industry and also via their retail outlets. Accordin

g to their website (<https://jenggala.com>), Jenggala has their own in-house designers to create their own products but they also collaborate with their clients to develop bespoke creations.

Jenggala has won numerous awards for their products. For example, in 2010, two of Jenggala's products - Modern Kendi Collection and the Rantang Collection received the UNESCO Award of Excellence for Handicrafts. As the author was a member of the jury, he signed up to their newsletter so as to receive periodic updates.

Shortly after the WHO declared the Covid-19 pandemic, the author received a series of emails from Jenggala entitled "Jenggala Home Recipes". These were a series of cooking instructions on preparing traditional Indonesian food. Examples of dishes included Shredded Spicy Garlic Fish, Jack Fruit Rendang (a type of dry curry), Indonesia Pumpkin Pie, etc. The recipes listed specific ingredients, quantities and instructions on how to make them. Interestingly, the photographic representation showed the cooked dish, plated on some of Jenggala's products. At the bottom of the email, there was a link stating "VISIT OUR ONLINE STORE" to take the reader to the webpage where the product in the photograph was featured. Beyond this primary product (which the food was plated upon), the email also showed other related products. For example, for the Bok Choy and Shitake Mushroom Soup, the Bali Ago Warmer Set was featured as a suggestion of how to keep the soup warm during the meal.

It has been totally understandable that during this period of lockdown where in-person sales have been curbed, most retailers have gone on-line to continue marketing their products. The approach that Jenggala has taken was not unusual but rather, a mainstream commercial response. However, the significant aspect was the content and the approach the company had taken to e-market their wares. The linkage of its products to the culinary culture of Indonesia was emphasised in order to frame and contextualise the products. Hence, the marketing narrative was not primarily focused on the product itself but rather, it played second fiddle, almost as a prop or an accessory, to the traditional food of Indonesia. Interestingly, in the email, there was never a mention or any text regarding the product. Rather, the products were communicated through its photographic representation; the texts only focused on the ingredients needed to cook the dish and the instructions of how to make it.

Jenggala's marketing strategy supports the proposition of this paper that crafts are essentially linked to the cultural system that they made from/for. There is a symbiotic relationship between both entities - traditional Indonesia cuisine and the products that are involved in the cooking and the plating up of such dishes. Granted that the marketing strategy was not solely directed to the local Indonesian market, but Jenggala's approach was pivotal upon its relationship with its contextual cultural practice.

One may counter-propose that Jenggala was merely exploiting this opportunity by linking its products with cooking especially when home-cooking, as a form of therapy, has been one of the few identified and promoted domestic activities during this lockdown period (20). If so, the question remains - Why traditional Indonesian recipes have been identified and not recipes from other types of cuisines? The author proposes that in connecting with Indonesian cuisine, it highlights the sense of place and culture - Bali, Indonesia - and thus, articulated the authenticity and integrity of the product (4). Importantly, it offers a distinctive prospect, through a cultural

perspective, to differentiate itself from its competitors by highlighting its unique selling point – USP.

## **F. Conclusion**

The Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted all sectors of life, and at all levels – locally and globally. In order to build greater resilience for the folk arts and crafts sector to mitigate against future crisis, this paper proposes that the sector could consider strengthening its linkages of its products within the cultural system which it was intentionally and initially made for. This re-orientation - pivoting its local community as its primary market - may serve to hedge against the uncertainties of external markets.

In Bamiyan province, because of the Hazara community's cultural practices and requirements, cultural products were required to participate and celebrate their cultural lives. These can only be obtained locally because only Hazara craft makers would be able to understand and produce items that served the community's cultural needs. Hence, there has been a healthy and steady demand for locally-made craft products. This has assisted in sustaining Hazara's folk arts and craft practice in spite of the unstable external situation.

Jenggala, the Bali-based ceramic enterprise in Indonesia, has re-established its linkage with Indonesian cuisine as its marketing strategy during this Covid-19 pandemic. Putting Indonesian food centre and fore-front has established a cultural narrative and context for its products. It echoes the notion of authenticity and cultural validity while ascertaining a subtle under-tone - use these ceramics to cook delicious Indonesian food - to engage and entice potential customers.

Therefore, resonating with New Zealand's proposal to add the 'fifth C' – Community - in heritage conservation (7) – by prioritizing the local communities and home markets, and reconnecting with local cultural systems are possible means to strengthen the crafts sector. It may serve to circumvent and ring-fence the negative consequences of future global crisis.

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