

When the Butter Got Done: The Resilience of Indigenous Design Processes During Dictatorial Regime in Uganda Between 1971-1978 and Their Continued Use in Kiruhura District in S.W. Uganda*

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Although African continent and Uganda in particular experienced the influence of the western economies which came with exploration, missionary work, and colonialism, and which put the indigenous design creativity to sleep, communities have continued to show resilience in utilizing indigenous design processes whenever there is a shift in the cosmetic African-West relationship. This paper describes and assesses how indigenous processes become fundamental and sustained a fragile economy of Uganda after the military takeover of government by Idi Amin in 1971. It looks at how Ugandan artisans employed their long forgotten skills in designing processes that allowed communities to function. For example artisans made spare parts for the abandoned factories, made soap, and processed salt for consumption. The paper takes a pro-vocal approach and traces how this worked, how it is still working even when the country is presumably peaceful with the majority of the population engaged in agriculture production. The author carried out an ethnographic study on 90 participants in Kiruhura district in S.W. Uganda to establish how families integrate indigenous design processes in their daily activities. The author investigated why families continue to use indigenous material cultural items such as carvings, pottery, baskets, and iron work yet government policy emphasizes commercial agriculture. Results indicate that most families still use indigenous design processes in agriculture, housing, and treatment because of the superficial and unstructured ability by most families to use western made technologies, and that many of them do not have the necessary resources to acquire the modern technology. Results further indicate that families have a special attachment to indigenous materials which gives them an identity and ownership and that some items work better than the Western designed products. The paper concludes that those indigenous design processes are fundamentally good opportunities for entrepreneur actions that could be viable household enterprises. In addition to improving household incomes, the author theorize that re-engaging indigenous design processes, may facilitate ownership, resilience, and creativity of indigenous African creativity and design processes that could lead to sustainable development.

Keywords: resilience of indigenous designs, dictatorial regime, material culture, Kiruhura district

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Introduction

Indigenous designs are long practiced informal economy activities which were, and still well thought, their rationale depends on the solutions they provide in meeting the needs of local and proximate customers (Ayende, 2013; Williams & Youssef, 2013; Mutungi & Ghaye, 2013). Indigenous designs have been an activity where people express their creativity and more so their identity. Although some school of thought may applaud Western civilization as a “desire for something more sustainable than decomposing materials” often produced by the hand, and also believe that a “theorist is better than the craftsman because ideas last” (Sennett, 2008, p. 124), still “the process of making material objects by hand can be identified as one way of thinking intellectually” (Sennett, 2008, pp. 149-153).

Indigenous design processes are inherent of any traditional community functions. It is a way community learns, adapts, tames the environment, and promotes adaptive co-management of natural resources (UNESCO, 1982, 2009; Janke, 2003; Gombe, 2012; Burford, Kissmann, Rosado-May, Dzul, & Harder, 2012). Design and production of material culture items is a reflection of the relationship between humans and their environment within their historical, cultural, and social contexts (Tung, 2012). Furthermore, Tung (2012), Elatta (1990), and Kwesiga (2001) inform us that before the coming of Western influences, artisans were skilled craftspeople who used locally available materials to create products which were used to improve their wellness.

The study believes that indigenous design clearly manifest themselves through what the “other side of the globe” regards as crafts. The new thinking promoted by the “other side of the globe” captures indigenous designs as crafts and hence define them as “those produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand-tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 26). It is important therefore that indigenous design processes, with their practices rooted in society’s local knowledge and accumulated for a purpose over time, are an important development pathway that builds from our cultural heritage and should be preserved and revitalized.

Although African continent and Uganda in particular experienced the influence of the western economies which came with exploration, missionary work, and colonialism, and which put the indigenous design creativity to sleep (Ndoreliire, 2004; Gombe, 2012; Wasyanju, n.d.), communities have continued to show resilience in utilizing indigenous design processes whenever there is a shift in the cosmetic African-West relationship. Development actors have since started to acknowledge the importance of indigenous design processes in achieving sustainable development. In Uganda this was clearly displayed during the period 1972-1978 when the country was under the dictatorial rule of President Amin.

Amin Takes Over Power

The coup d’état of January 1971 overturned much of what the colonialist had put in place but on the other hand awakened a “century of sleeping creative genius” in indigenous peoples in Uganda. The African went into a design sleeping mode when the African interior came into contact with Arab traders, European explorers, and missionaries. It could be argued that the ascending to power of Idi Amin as President in 1971 was as a result of long sleeping mode that Africans had been convinced to take when the Western type of government was introduced. There was an imaginary canvas painted through education which created more administrators and politicians than creative innovators and scientists. The seizing of power therefore was inevitable because many

educated Ugandans felt they could be better leaders than others after independence. Moreover, Milton Obote while Prime Minister abrogated the constitution in 1966 (refer to Museveni, 1997; Kyemba, 1977; Kategaya, 2006), he promoted Idi Amin, removed the ceremonial President Kabaka Mutesa and became an Executive President. He worked with Idi Amin until 1971 when Amin ousted him in a coup. Reasons for the coup among others were lack of trust between the two. Milton Obote wanted to arrest Amin because Idi Amin was accused of financial misconduct, attempted assassination on Milton Obote in 1969, and continuous recruitment from West Nile tribes. Idi Amin acted first and removed Obote.

As soon as Idi Amin took over power, he indicated that he was to hand over power to civilians because for him he was a soldier. He later changed his mind and declared himself President, suspended the constitution and replaced it with the Advisory Defense Council. In 1972 he declared the “economic war”, expelled Asians and Europeans and took over their property. Idi Amin expropriated businesses and properties belonging to the Asians and handed them over to his supporters. The businesses were mismanaged, and industries collapsed from lack of maintenance. In the first place, no African was trained in the technology that was used in those factories, second there were no factories set in Uganda that produced spare parts for machinery used in the factories. The expulsion of the Asians and Europeans who controlled all the manufacturing industries, knew the source for spare parts, and had the expertise to repair and service the machinery resulted into the collapse of most of the industries and the result was scarcity of essential goods.

Household Items Become Scarce

As soon as the foreign dominated manufacturing and service industry was placed in the hands of the indigenous people as owners, managers or caretakers, Uganda was hit with scarcity of most essential goods. In the first place, many of the new owners of these industries were Amin’s friends and had no technical or managerial experience. In fact some were middle level managers or technicians. Few were able to sustain the operations of the industry while others could not. Many industries had to close mostly due to lack of expertise, external market or spare parts for repair and service. As a result, families lacked essential materials such as sugar, salt, soap, and drugs. It is in this state of affairs that the creativity, the innovation and indigenous skills that were once termed ignorant, archaic, ant-development by the colonialists were awakened and put to use.

The Resilience of Indigenous Design Processes

When the factories collapsed, and households could not find essential goods indigenous skills were revived. I will look at a few of these in relation to indigenous design processes.

The booming colonial economy had made indigenous designs irrelevant and not applicable to the new form of life that was introduced. The indigenous people were producing items to satisfy their needs. Items were acquired across social classes through the barter trade system. Material culture producers supplied items in exchange of food items or other animal products such as skins and hides. Then garment, dairy and other agro industries were introduced. These were meant to supply a bigger external market not the local market and the result was the abandonment of the local technologies that facilitated the local demand.

When Amin declared the economic war in Uganda, all the factories and other industries came to a standstill. Households resorted to what they had abandoned. There were no ceramic, plastic, aluminum, or any other metal processing industry functioning normally in Uganda. This meant that essential items in a home were also missing. Gureme (interviewed 2011) recounts how “Magendo” black market was institutionalized.

During that time you would only access a service or purchase anything with an authorization chit from an important person in government. As a result, families resorted to using the indigenous items long abandoned. Families kept, served and transported milk in milk pots instead of aluminum or plastic containers. This created a market for the milk pot carvers, and iron workers who made the tools for carving.

Lack of plastic and aluminum containers caused the milk pot (Ekyanzi), and watering can (Icuba) carvers to gain recognition. The milk pot is one of the artifacts produced and used in households especially those involved in cattle keeping. The milk pot is used for milking the cow, keeping milk and serving it. The milk pot is a non-spill product balanced at the centre, demonstrating the high skills employed by the carver. The carver uses different tools to bring out the final piece (see Figure 1). The tools are produced by the blacksmith and each plays a distinct role. To cut the wood to shape, the carver uses an axe and a panga. The initial opening of the milk pot (Okwigura) is done using a special tool called Embaijo. This is used to remove the wood inside the pot. As the pot becomes deeper, the carver uses another tool called Ekishoko. This is a tool made like a chisel, mounted with a long handle. Once the desired depth is achieved, the carver uses a curved round tool (Emparo) to clean inside (okwereeza) and to achieve the desired shape. There are two types of emparo—the closed one is used inside and is mounted with a long handle and the one for working outside the milk pot (okukuuba), which is half round and has handles on both sides. The carver uses a knife to shape and perfect the milk pot mouth and metal chisel to create the groove (omubabo) a scientifically put mark to signify three quarters of the milk pot.



Figure 1. From left Emparo (for inside) Emparo (for outside) Knife, and a carver in action.

The closure of industries awakened the science of iron work though too late. There was total lack of working tools such as pangas, slashing tools, cooking pans, and eating utensils. Many iron workers had forgotten the art of iron smelting but still had the skills of making functional tools. They started producing items from scrap metals especially old machine parts. Burwanira (interviewed 2010) an iron worker produced and still produces grass slashing tools for schools. He told me that schools prefer his items because they do not easily become blunt once sharpened, and they do not depreciate so easily. He also produces farm tools which are user friendly and which are not produced on the commercial market. He raises an average of Uganda shillings 750,000 per month (approximately USD 288) and he never satisfies the market.

Another iron worker Nshemererwe (interviewed 2011) who produces knives for harvesting finger millet (Omusyogw'engyesho), informed me that his sales in the period of December and January each year goes up to Uganda shillings 800,000 (approximately USD 307). Without studying and understanding the local landscape, the new cultures from the Western world introduced commercial farming which altered the social structure of indigenous communities. An example is harvesting millet which was a communal activity where several families would help each other to harvest. This activity continued to employ traditional tools despite the introduction of new technology. Unlike rice and wheat which are harvested using machines, millet harvesting

continues to use hand-made knives. It is this skill of producing millet harvesting knives that Nhemererwe manipulates to generate his income.

Pottery boomed during Amin's time. Traditionally pottery was a skilled practice with specific clans well known for pottery making. In some cultures, some clans were named after such practice for example the "abanogoozi"—potters. Various pots for cooking sauce such as meat (Orwabyarw'enyama) or beans (Enyunguy'ebihimba), for fetching water, making porridge (Ekisigisiro or Enyunguy'obushera) or brewing beer (Enjoga or Enyunguy'amaarwa) were produced. Producers of such pots become instrumental in society. In Kiruhura especially, their products were used and are still used in marriage ceremonies. The design processes did not remain static but evolved to match the contemporary standards. For example potters started producing serving pots "enyabya" (many) or Orwabya (one) with lids. This was an advancement of design. They further developed it by decorating pottery using African motifs.

The introduction of Agriculture as a main household activity also faced a set back during this time. Although agriculture was still subsistence by the time Idi Amin took power, there were basic materials such as hoes, pangas and other agricultural equipment. When Idi Amin took over power, factories that produced these items closed. Families had no alternatives but to resort to what had become rudimentary methods after abandoning for years. This promoted the use of basketry as the main item in handling produce either in pre-harvesting, harvesting or post harvesting. IdiAmin instituted a policy of post harvesting to avoid poverty in Uganda. He made each family to own a granary irrespective of whether one was a rearing cattle or growing crops. Many people designed and built granaries of which some families have up to now kept. This helped to minimize hunger in the community especially Kiruhura district. A number of other material culture products such as serving baskets "endiiro" have remained a symbol of unity and identity.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-method of quantitative and qualitative designs by utilizing descriptive cross-sectional survey, and ethnography. The two methods were thought appropriate because the study was gathering information in the population on indigenous designs, wanted to understand its resilience, make meaning, and explain it as social phenomena (Katebire, 2007; C. F. Nachmias, & D. Nachmias, 1996; Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006; Flick, 2009; Adams, Khan, Raeside, & White, 2007). The study took a pro-vocal approach and traced how indigenous designs worked during Amin's time, and how they are still working even when the country is presumably peaceful with the majority of the population engaged in agriculture production. The study describes the characteristics of indigenous designs as household enterprises and looked at behavior, beliefs, attitudes, and attributes (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006) of indigenous designs and their resilience.

Data Collection

The primary sources of data for this study were semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and participant observation of households particularly those involved in production and use of material culture items all taken with a pro-vocal approach. In total the author conducted 54 interviews, observed 13 producers and users, and held 5 FGDs. Of the interviews, 23 were taped; some were not taped because of the nature and location they were held for example in the gardens, market places or ceremonial functions. The 54 families were purposively selected in the whole district. The researcher used the Community Development Officers (CDOs) in the 18 sub-counties in the district to identify those families that would provide me with

useful information. The study selected and observed 13 producers in their work place to understand the underlying factors that inform the design process in producing the materials. The researcher followed them in the market places to see how they market, and who their clients were. FDGs to analyze different perceptions of different players in the design process and use of the indigenous material culture items were held. Consequently, five FDGs were conducted in the district. FDGs were used because they are essential in obtaining in-depth information on concepts, ability to explore beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and ideas of a target group (O. M. Mugenda, & A. G. Mugenda, 2009; Katebire, 2007). The study benefited a lot from the interviews with CDOs because they are responsible with socio-economic development of households. They were able to single out which families and individuals are involved in indigenous design systems and production.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was applied because the study wanted to systematically describe the perceptions of the respondents in regard to indigenous designs. Content analysis was appropriate because of the narratives and verbatim responses (Adams et al., 2007). For each emerging perspective out of the interview, observation or FGD, the study carefully and systematically analyzed the content putting in consideration socio-economic factors that could have affected the use of a particular design and why it is still being used. The study also used simple descriptive statistics to present the data in a meaningful and understandable manner.

Results

Results indicate that most families still use indigenous design processes in agriculture, housing, and treatment. This is because of the superficial and unstructured attachment by most families to western made technologies, especially that many of them do not have the necessary resources to acquire the modern technology.

All the 90 respondents representing families, opinion, and local leaders were found to be using indigenous items. This was not about whether the family was poor or not. Many families believe that some imported items are of low quality or are increasingly becoming of low quality. Most of the respondents were not sure of the raw materials some of them were made from and therefore not sure if they did not have any healthy risk. In particular, for example they were not sure about plastic items which keep losing colour as they grow old.

They raised the issue of affordability. Whereas many agree that some items are superior to the traditional ones, there was a question of the cost. Many agree that indigenous designed products could serve the same purpose if it was not the perceptions and mindset of communities. They feel the modern ways of living have relegated traditional designs, and the young people especially those in school or the educated ones do not want to use the indigenous items.

Results further revealed that many families were deriving their livelihoods from production and sale of material culture (see Table 1). Families actively involved in material culture production were raising incomes comparable to those in agriculture which has remained largely subsistence.

Results further indicate that families have a special attachment to indigenous materials which gives them identity and ownership. It was found out that all families in Kiruhura district give marriage gifts to their children at marriage. Marriage gifts include western made items and traditional items. Among the traditional items, Omugamba (assortment of milk pots, pots, gourds which combine carving, pottery, basketry, and iron work) see in Figure 1, is the main gift item.

Table 1

Total Family Incomes From Basketry, Pottery, Carving and Iron Work for Three in (UgShs)

Discipline	No. of Respondents	Total income	Mean
Basketry	8	2,280,000	285,000.0
Pottery	7	2,250,000	321,428.6
Carving	5	2,760,000	552,000.0
Iron work	5	2,080,000	416,000.0



Figure 1. Omugamba. A collection of traditional gift items used in a marriage ceremony. These items include six to ten milk pots, a churning gourd (Ekishaabo), watering bucket (Icuba) and assorted pots (Engyemeko).

Arguably, this attachment has promoted the continued production of such items. Although there has been modifications to meet the changing demands, the original idea, meaning and symbolism has been kept. For example, one significant design consideration is the production of a prototype of (orugyegye) Milk items platform. Traditionally, every family is supposed to have orugyegye where all milk pots are displayed and kept. One carver, Rubangirayo realized that newlywed couples were not using milk pots in town apart from selecting one or two as a decoration. He then designed a prototype Figure 2b to remind families living in urban areas of the real platform as in Figure 2a. The milk pot platform in Figure 2a is shown in its functional setting while in Figure 2b the designer made a proto type not utilitarian but with a decorative function.



Figure 2a. Orugyegye with its contents.



Figure 2b. A prototype of Orugyegye.

Conclusions

The study concludes by arguing that indigenous design processes are fundamentally good opportunities for entrepreneur actions that could be viable household enterprises. In addition to improving household incomes, the study theorizes that re-engaging indigenous design processes, may facilitate ownership, resilience, and creativity of indigenous African creativity and design processes that could lead to sustainable development.

As household Enterprises

It is undoubtedly true that most households are engaged in production and use of items from indigenous design processes in one way or the other. Research further reveals that indigenous systems are part of entrepreneurship in the informal economy. The sector utilizing indigenous design systems account for a big share of economic activity in many parts of the world (Schneider et al., 2007, Sobrevila, 2008). The argument therefore is that if indigenous designs have continued to be fundamental inputs in household enterprises even after a century of Western ideologies, and are now encouraged by those who under looked them, then indigenous design systems are a reliable pathway to sustainable development. Government in developing countries need go beyond just acknowledging that indigenous designs exist and are important to supporting them as household enterprises.

On Facilitating Resilience

Although poverty, instability, disease, illiteracy, and corruption are assumed to represent developing Africa (refer to Pascal Eze's PIDIC in Jeri-Malanda, 2008 as cited by Mugendi, n.d.) this does not take away the fact that Africans were creative and still continue to be creative. Moreover, Mugendi (n.d.) posit that;

...beyond this form of glorified pessimism, a picture of a vibrant engaging and resilient people begins to crystallize. Africans are beginning to redefine their own destiny in terms amenable to their own aspirations. (p. 1)

The study argues this resilience is the driving factor to the thriving jua kali sector in Kenya that employs a big section of the labour force. This was also evident in Uganda during Amin's regime when Katwe market took up the fabrication and casting of spare parts for industries and cars. The study concurs with Mugendi (n.d.) that because of the way indigenous design processes are learnt, applied, and used, they are a good avenue through which Africans can be mobilized to be responsible for their destiny and prevent the continent from serving interests of the world's powerful countries.

On Facilitating Creativity and Ownership

It is a good feel for University students to get excited with new technologies as they join different design disciplines however, it would be more exciting if they invented or made new creations while at the university other than becoming experts in manipulating existing innovations from the West. For example, Odoch-Pido (2001) analyzed first year students of Nairobi University and found out that their expectations as they join the university is to design motor vehicles such as those of Japan. This mind set kills indigenous design processes and creativity and has been going on for ages. It originates from how young people are taught, who frames the curriculum, and who provides the money for the sector. To understand how this mind set was created by the western ideologies, Odoch-Pido (2001) clearly argues that while at school all the traditional materials were neglected and only western materials were allowed even when they were not enough. Odoch-Pido (2001, p. 21) observes that "before embarking on the process of transformation, the school ignored our experiences. It

assumed that we were ignorant. By ignoring our experiences, school education dislocated our journey to design” yet, Renfrew (1986, p. 146) observes that “the development of a new commodity is generally social rather than technical”. The study therefore argue that indigenous design processes should be supported and promoted because they will free Africans from that kind of mind set, will awaken creativity, and create a sense of ownership. Moreover, “traditional crafts, involving practices rooted in local knowledge and accumulated over time, are part of our cultural heritage and should be preserved and revitalized” (Tung, 2012, p. 71).

That way indigenous design systems shall be a stepping stone and consistent pathways for sustainable development and wellbeing.

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