



Peter Weinrich

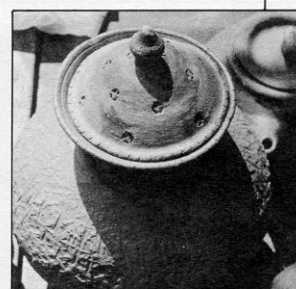


Elwood Pye

CRAFTS ECONOMIES

A QUIET RENAISSANCE

LORNE PETERSON



Elwood Pye

Dressed in clothes of many colours, the Mayan woman sat with a hip-strap loom attached to her waist. She began her weaving with a prayer. As she battened down weft threads of handspun and naturally dyed cotton and worked coloured yarns into designs and patterns, a beautiful cloth began to emerge. The Mayan people were worshippers of nature and this was reflected in the symbols of her weaving.

This woman lived some two thousand years ago. Today, we call her weaving work an art or craft. To her, it was a way of life — an expression of her culture and a means of sustaining life.

In Guatemala, Indian women who are descendants of the Mayans are still weaving on back-strap looms, and they still use many traditional symbols. But the effects of the Spanish Conquest and the impacts of the modern machine age have diluted and dissolved traditional weaving. Lilly de Jongh Osborne, a textile expert who studied Guatemalan weaving, wrote in 1965, "The Indian has been catapulted from an era of ancient custom and handicrafts into one of complex machinery, rapid transportation, and standardized clothing. Is it any wonder, then, that the Indian's crafts reflect his life by becoming an incomprehensible jumble of the ancient and modern? Indeed, the changes effected in the past few years... make it imperative to record as many of the techniques of Indian handicrafts as possible before they vanish entirely."

Similar stories can be told about the crafts of native cultures in countries throughout the world. But this situation has begun to change. A quiet renaissance in crafts production has been unfolding. In the last 10 years, efforts have been made in more and more countries to

revive traditional crafts and to create new handicraft skills.

The reasons for this crafts renaissance involve a realization by governments that unique cultures and their crafts are often the main tourism attractions, which increases foreign exchange earnings. Coupled to this is the failure of large- and medium-scale industries to provide enough employment for growing populations, and the alternative employment-creating potential of small labour-intensive crafts enterprises that use local technologies and materials. Craft industries provide the possibility of substituting locally made crafts products for expensive imported goods, and establish solid foundations for community development and for preserving precious cultural traditions.

These contributions of crafts to cultural, social and economic well-being have given rise to a new set of development questions. For example, what kinds of crafts enterprises have the capabilities to provide employment and income for people? What kinds of policies, assistance and incentives are needed to encourage and support such enterprises?

Such questions are only new in the sense that more governments, aid agencies and research institutes are beginning to pay attention to them. Since the 1950s, and especially in the last 10 years, hundreds of reports on crafts have been written, and many crafts development projects have been planned or initiated. The problem has been that most of these reports and projects have been ignored or underfinanced. A recent world-wide computer search of the literature on handicrafts and development undertaken by IDRC revealed another flaw — hardly any of the attention turned on the crafts industry was directed at the

artisans themselves. "Not much is known about the livelihoods of people who actually make crafts," says Elwood Pye, program officer in IDRC's Social Sciences Division, who initiated the search. "This is one reason why previous crafts programs have failed. The dynamics of the industry have not been captured."

There is still much work to do. "Most countries do not have statistics on crafts," says Peter Weinrich, executive director of the Canadian Crafts Council. In 1981, Weinrich attended "The International Conference On Rural Income Generating Craft Projects," in Bangkok, Thailand. Mainly Third World

of the goods were exchanged for goods from neighbouring countries — China was a particularly important trading partner. Although the crafts industry went into a decline during the periods of Spanish, then American colonization, because of competition from imported manufactured products, it has returned as a force in employment and exchange earnings today. The Philippine Chamber of Handicraft Industries estimates that about 700 000 people in the country depend on crafts for their livelihood. The estimate is supported by export statistics. In 1970, just US\$6.25 million in handicrafts were sold; by 1979 the

industrial manufacturers, and a lack of business skills and marketing assistance, further handicap the craft artisans.

To overcome these problems, the government and handicraft agencies have encouraged the creation of handicraft co-operatives. But most of the co-operatives have not been successful. They have suffered from a lack of capable leaders and from being too small and isolated to influence government policy and to effectively market their products.

It has been suggested that these problems could be resolved by developing regional and national level co-operative structures to give local co-ops support and assistance in training competent leaders and in marketing crafts.

This approach to developing crafts economies has worked in other countries. For example, Inuit arts and crafts co-operatives in Northern Canada have built up a successful system for producing and marketing their products. Effective government assistance and skillful marketing and promotion have made the co-operatives financially successful and independent. But another key reason, says Michael Casey, general manager of the co-op system, is that the co-operatives do more than produce and sell arts and crafts. "The co-ops we buy from are self-contained and multifaceted businesses in their communities. They operate retail stores, hotels, fish plants, airline agencies, contracting companies and so on. In each community, the co-op is generally the largest employer, outside of the government."

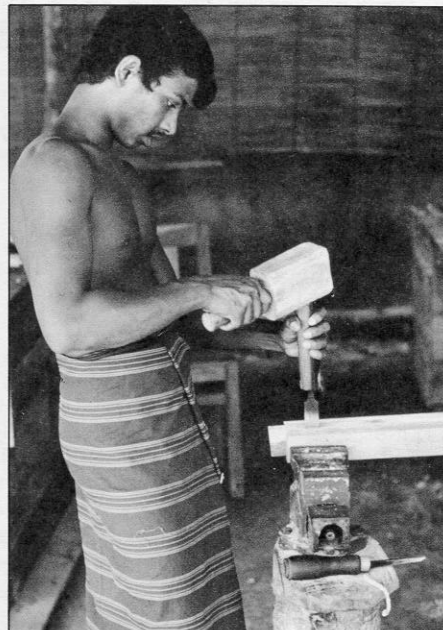
Native peoples in other countries have also combined crafts enterprises with other local industries to build up self-reliant economies. The Otavalan Indians of Ecuador, for instance, have become among the most prosperous native people in Latin America through establishing a crafts industry integrated into national and international markets, and by combining this industry with farming.

The first thing that impresses visitors in Otavalo is the special presence of the Indian people. The Otavalan men and women, who still wear their traditional costumes, radiate cultural pride and dignity. They have used their traditional weaving skills to establish a crafts industry that has allowed them to preserve and strengthen their culture. Since the early 20th century, most of the growing income from their crafts cottage industry has gone towards buying back land that had been taken away by the Spanish. For Otavalans, land, in the form of family farms, is an essential foundation for economic and cultural independence.

The Otavalans have demonstrated that a regional culture can develop economically on its own terms, and thereby retain its unique customs and heritage.

The economic and cultural potential of community-based crafts produc-

The crafts industry has been studied, but not the livelihoods of the people who actually make crafts. The oversight is one reason crafts development programs fail.



Craft industries provide employment and inexpensive goods for local consumption — such as baskets (left, Thailand), or furniture (right, Sri Lanka). They also provide important export earnings.

people were at the conference. "The message we got was that they knew more about the crafts situation in 1880 than they did in 1980." (Many crafts field studies were done as anthropological studies in the 1880s by the Smithsonian Institute and others.)

"More research is needed about what is being made, who makes it and where it is sold," says Weinrich. There is also a need for crafts development policies. "All the conference delegates felt they were floundering in terms of policy."

In the few countries where policies have been formed to encourage and support crafts, there are some impressive figures on the contributions of crafts to employment and foreign exchange earnings.

Handicrafts have played an important role in the economic and social life of the Philippines, for example. Prior to the 16th century, crafts were produced in virtually all villages. Many

sales had risen to US\$133 million. The increase represents a yearly growth rate of about 40 percent — nearly 2 1/2 times the increase in exports for the economy as a whole.

In India, over eight million people work at making handicrafts. Export sales of Indian crafts have been over US\$1 billion annually, and have accounted for 20 per cent of total export earnings.

But despite the efforts being made in India to encourage the growth of crafts, such as crafts training schemes, people who make handicrafts are still experiencing a major problem. Most of them live below the poverty line. Indian researchers say the primary reasons for this situation are the low labour productivity involved, and unfair prices for crafts. Artisans lack credit to buy tools and raw materials, which results in indebtedness to moneylenders and exploitation by crafts traders or middlemen. Competition from large

tion, combined with other local enterprises, is just beginning to be seen and understood. To survive and prosper, crafts producers will need to receive much more attention and support from governments. There must be a realization that crafts economies are just as important as industrial economies.

A number of studies are now being planned and carried out that will contribute to a global awareness of the vital contributions that crafts can and do make to development. The World Crafts Council (wcc), a nongovernment organization structured as a federation of national crafts councils, with members from 79 countries, is conducting a study on the role of crafts in the development process.

Unesco is also organizing an international crafts conference, to identify

ideas and recommendations on how to protect, promote and enhance the role of crafts in cultural and economic development.

The multicountry research on crafts in Asia supported by IDRC represents the most comprehensive study of the essential elements of the industry — the artisans, how they work, and what sort of difficulties they encounter in producing and marketing their work. (See sidebar for details.)

Perhaps the most important part of the process of developing policies for crafts economies is to ask the craftspeople themselves what kinds of assistance they want. In the past, development policies have too often been made only from the point of view of well-meaning researchers and governments. In effect, policies have

been imposed on people. Frank Salomon, an anthropologist who has studied the weaving-farming economy of the Otavalo Indians, wrote, it is time "to cease thinking of how to manage other peoples' livelihoods, and to begin thinking how livelihood can become less a matter of management and more a fruit of local creativity."

To be relevant and to work, policies for crafts economies will have to be set primarily by craftspeople and their communities. □

Lorne Peterson works as a writer and researcher with an interest in social and economic development. He has a special interest in crafts, and has lived in Guatemala and travelled in several other Latin American countries.

In Asia, the handicraft industry is of central importance to the economies of virtually all countries in the region. Five areas can be identified where crafts industries play a vital role in fulfilling national development goals.

First, in employment generation, in both rural and urban areas, handicrafts employ millions of people. In India, for example, at least eight million people are directly involved in crafts production. Second, crafts industries earn large quantities of foreign exchange through overseas exports and domestic sales to tourists. Thailand now exports over US\$300 million to overseas markets, the Philippines sells at least US\$150 million, and India's exports of handicrafts total over US\$1.35 billion, or 20 percent of its total foreign trade. Third, handicrafts make a contribution to equity and income distribution, as crafts making is often undertaken by people with little or no land. In Asia, land-person ratios have reached 1500 persons per square kilometre of arable land (Nepal); people must therefore seek work outside of agriculture. Crafts production fills this need. Fourth, these industries employ a large number of women and tribals, groups that are usually the most difficult for development agencies to reach. Finally, handicrafts contribute to the basic needs of the majority of low-income groups, as many craft articles are used in the home and have a nominal purchase price.

Despite the significance of crafts industries to Asian economies, very little research has been done on their main economic and social parameters. In particular, the people who actually make crafts, the artisans themselves, have rarely been studied. One can attribute this lack of interest to the fact that artisans often represent the lowest stratas of society and are usually

SETTING FREE THE ARTISANS



Studying the crafts: extending development to those most difficult to reach.

ignored, they are widely dispersed geographically and therefore difficult to reach, and finally, they are not organized and cannot call attention to their industry in a dramatic fashion.

This lack of interest is rapidly changing however, as policymakers become increasingly aware of the benefits of a vibrant crafts sector. However, constraints prohibiting the growth of the industry need to be identified and removed through appropriate policy measures. Planners are therefore asking for national level data as well as microlevel data on individual industries. In many Asian countries, the IDRC's Social Sciences Division is now being asked to assist in this research effort.

During the 1984-85 period, the IDRC is planning to fund crafts research in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, the Philip-

pines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. These teams will link up with researchers already studying the crafts industry in India, and plans are underway to expand this network still further in Asia and at some future stage to involve countries in Africa and Latin America.

This Asian network represents the most comprehensive research program on the crafts sector ever undertaken anywhere in the world. With an approximate sample size of 5600, separate questionnaires will be prepared for artisans, investors, marketing middlemen, raw material suppliers and policymakers. In each country three key industries will be studied and data collected on the organization of production, the market structure, the socioeconomic conditions of craftspeople, demand constraints, supply constraints and finally, policy constraints. Industries have been selected that capture the dynamics of the international, domestic, tourist and local markets.

Research results will be disseminated through reports published in-country and through national policy dissemination workshops. Secondly, an international comparative publication will be released showing trends across countries. Finally, an international workshop is planned for late 1985 to which policymakers, researchers, and international agencies active in this field will be invited.

The IDRC believes it is important to work closely with other agencies and researchers interested in the development of the crafts sector. As such, any inquiries would be most welcome and interested parties are requested to write: Elwood A. Pye, International Development Research Centre, Tanglin P.O. Box 101, Singapore 9124.

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