

Craftsmanship: A Heritage of Cultural Syncretism And National Unity

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Since the dawn of the civilization the craftsman has been an essential member of society throughout the world and the history of crafts is as old as the history of mankind itself. The study of craft and craftsmanship is always thought of as part of the concern of researchers in material culture. What this paper purports to accomplish is to show that our concern in material objects only can take us back to the antiquarian era, this is one objective, the other is to show how by studying crafts and craftsmanship as ideas, knowledge, customs, beliefs songs and transmission can lead to understand the process of cultural syncretism and contributing to problems pertinent to national unity.

The literal deference, says Kroeber (1948:295-6) is of course obvious "physical objects as against institutions and ideas. But do they stand for something basically different? Do they function with significant deference in culture? The answer seems no. what counts is not physical axe, boat or water wheel, but the idea of them and the knowledge of how to produce them, their place in life. It is this knowledge, concept and function that get themselves handed down through the generation and diffused to other cultures"

In the view of the present writer it can be a false dichotomy to distinguish between the study of material culture and nonmaterial culture as two separate disciplines. the use of the terms, material culture and folklore to denote different disciplines might be misleading. The study of certain objects of material culture, for example, does not only concern their structure and their outward forms. This is, of course, but it is also important to know how they are made, used and how

these objects function in daily life in addition to knowledge about transmission and distribution.

If the concern is mainly with the objects themselves, then, this would be purely antiquarianism. We need not, therefore, use words like indirect contrast to this oral folklore is physical folklife, generally called material culture.

In fact material culture and folklore are not in contrast, but rather, they are integral parts of one body that are supplementing and complementing each other. For example, for the study of marriage ceremonies in a certain area in the Sudan one needs to record all customs and practices, with their related costumes, object, ornaments as well as song tales oral history. The same can be said about recording harvest festivals. What we are doing is not purely material culture and not purely nonmaterial, it is a part of the whole life of the group.

Erixon explains the aims and purposes of studying material culture and other related fields that should be consulted. He says:

“ what we seek is objective knowledge of the material associated with man’s every life and actual conditions and functions attached to it, along with the distribution, origin and sources” (Erixon, *Folkliv*, I 1937 :9).

It is clear, therefore, as explained by Jenkins (Jenkins 1968:6) that in folklife studies we are concerned with everything concerning the life of people; in their minds, their speech, their houses, their fields, their workshops and their leisure activities.

“in folklife studies we are concerned with the study of man as a cultural being with his mental, spiritual and material struggle towards civilization” (Peate, *Gwerin*, II, No. 3, 1959:101).

Sayce’s statement (Jenkins, 1968:3) explicitly states that the study of material culture without recourse to other related disciplines would remain one sided:

“ the student of folklife, although concerned with material remains, is also concern with such topics as linguistics, sociology, customs beliefs and oral

tradition. Although the archaeological record may help him in his work, that record only forms a small part of the information that he seeks”

To serve the objective of this paper we would take as examples the craft bedmaking and boat building in the Sudan.

The first step in organizing and establishing the craft of bed-marking in the Sudan came with the introduction of the bow-lathe during the early 19th century. Since that period bed-making has been restricted to certain families. Now in most towns one finds two or three families associated with bed-making industry. We have observed that in many craft there is always a father to son continuity which may last for several generations. Transmission, at first, was restricted to the family, from a father craftsman to his sons. Later on, when school education became wide spread, the masters of craft preferred to take their children to school rather than to train them to become craftsman. Consequently a chance turned up for other families to participate in bed-making activity. The masters started to take boys from other families as apprentice transmission started to be a mixed process, as a combination of transmission from a father craftsman to his son and from a master craftsman to apprentices.

Masters of the craft started to train boys and pay them some money. No apprentice fees were paid by the new recruits. At first they were given simple tasks like cleaning the tools or taking them to the black-smith to get sharpened. Direct instructions were sometimes given to the apprentice but they learnt more by only watching what the master and the other craftsman did.

Craftsmanship was and still is a good alternative for school leavers. When the boys fail to continue their education their fathers take them to work under the guidance of craftsman, at the age of eleven or twelve. The new recruits are not necessarily related to the master and there is not any formal contract. The boy is just put under the guidance of a master and the master is responsible for training him to become a skillful craftsman. The master is always keen to train his apprentices very well, he is keen not to fail in achieving that end because he does not want to threaten his prestige as a good and reliable master. Besides the

vocational training of the boys the master is also responsible for looking after them. Ideally the master acts as a master and guardian at the same time.

The craftsman's place in society is essentially that of utility. He is the one who supplies the group with its day to day necessities. But, there is another important role he plays in the vocational training and education of the boys. This is a part of the informal African education that boys normally receive.

The bed-maker is always respected and lives in close –co-operation with others. He is the one who makes the most important part of the Sudanese furniture that people need for marriage, life and death

As has been mentioned earlier the study of the historical development of the objects of material folk culture in their structure, types and function is not the only objective of the students of material folk culture. Beside this it is equally important to know what implications these objects have for the form of society in socio-cultural terms or else our study will be merely a kind of technological antiquarianism. It is important to know what these objects can tell us about the people who make and use them.

The endeavour in the remaining part of the paper is to see how the contents of as a cultural component can help us to describe and so understand better the cultural morphology , syncretism and national unity in the Sudan, using the craft of boat building as an example.

The contents of this cultural component are:

- (1) Vernacular technical terms used to describe the different parts of the boat and the tools used in this craft;
- (2) Texts of work songs and other texts.
- (3) Beliefs and practices.

These contents I believe can, when analyzed and traced back to their origins, tell us about how different cultural influences can come together from different origins to form the features of a certain culture. This is brought about in the course of time at the points of cultural contacts by the media of the different factors that lead to culture change. And in the end this cultural process would lead to the

creation of a harmonious cultural blend which can be held by a group of people as their own culture, accepted and transmitted from one generation to the next.

This blend bears the elements and features of indigenous culture as well as . The newly introduced. It will be performed by members of group unconscious of what is indigenous and what is foreign.

The basic characteristic of Sudanese culture is the interplay of diverse cultural features, African, Asian and European. Between cultures, as will appear from the material cited in the appendix, there is always a covert dialogue and inter-action leading to a harmonious cultural blend which is shaped without the intention or consciousness of this or that group.

This will happen and it is very important to stress this for the benefit of our present discussion if three conditions are met namely that:

- (1) Peaceful means of interaction are granted.
- (2) The power of each group is observed not threatened.
- (3) The one-sidedness of a central government cultural policy is avoided.

By understanding our cultural setting in this way we will be able to help the cultural policy makers to formulate and adopt a more open- minded and balanced cultural policy. We need to decide whether there is a so-called central dominant culture surrounded by other peripheral minor cultures.

The material collected and cited for the study of bed making.⁽¹⁾ and boatbuilding show how different cultural influences have created the present cultural blend. This process of cultural accumulation has been visualized by Gasim.⁽²⁾

.....as a horizontal tape extending through time on the surface of which are imprinted the various cultural current which succeeded each other in the region. For the Sudan was an important highway for civilization and had become a meeting point of cultures and colloquial language represents in this respect

the final product of this process of cultural cross fertilization.⁽³⁾

It must be noted clearly that it is not my intention to favour this or that cultural influence, but rather to show objectively how culture or a culture of a certain group of people is formed through contact with other cultures, thus creating, through time, a cultural admixture which is very much alive , dynamic and changing as long as people are meeting and exchanging their cultural values. It is a give and take ongoing process. For we ourselves are not at the end of time.

- (1) Yousif H. Madani, Alangareb, Sudanese bed craft industry, M. A. thesis, I.A.A.S. university of Khartoum 1980.
- (2) Yosuf H. Madani, Boat building in the Sudan, material culture and its contribution to understand Sudanese cultural morphology, I.D.F.S, Leeds university
- (3) Gasim, A.A. "Some Aspects of Sudanese colloquial Arabic", Sudan notes and records, vol. 46, 1965, pp 47-48.