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The cultural significance of plant-fiber crafts in Southern Africa: a comparative study of Eswatini, Malawi, and Zimbabwe

Deepa Pullanikkatil ^a, Gladman Thondhlana ^b, and Charlie Shackleton ^b

^aClimate Change Unit, Ministry of Tourism and Environmental Affairs and UNDP, Mbabane, Eswatini;

^bDepartment of Environmental Science, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Traditional handicrafts made from various plant materials are produced by most cultures around the world. Many originated through symbolic and utilitarian needs that became ritualized through time, thereby gradually attaining greater value as cultural items or symbols rather than solely functional ones. Here we report on a survey of 343 crafters across Eswatini, Malawi, and Zimbabwe in southern Africa regarding the cultural uses and significance of the items they make from wild plant fibers and sell to local communities or tourists. The plant materials used were largely dictated by tradition and local availability and were crafted into a diverse range of products including baskets, mats, brooms, storage containers, hats, fish traps, ornaments, and furniture. Many products had uses and cultural significance at major ceremonies or rituals, such as weddings, funerals, initiation, and divination. The preparation and design of the different crafts were influenced by tradition as well as market demand as indicated by tourist fashions and advice provided by government or non-government agencies to boost income generation from crafts. Although the crafting of cultural objects is increasingly commercialized and subject to the tastes and fashions of tourist markets in the region, the traditional and cultural significance of such artifacts remains widely recognized and valued.

KEYWORDS

Crafts; culture; cultural ecosystem services; gender; non-timber forest products; tradition

Introduction

Various handicrafts are produced by almost every society around the world, although some are more well-known than others. They include a diversity of products made from an enormous range of materials collected from the wild and human-dominated landscapes. These raw materials are then processed and may be combined, in different ways to create decorative, utilitarian, cultural, or spiritual items. Many handicrafts fulfil two or more of these decorative, utilitarian, spiritual, or cultural functions, whilst contributing to cultural expression and identity. In this way, crafts that serve the same function in different communities or regions can be made of dissimilar materials, using different techniques and look very different from one another despite their equivalent function, such as a storage basket, mask, or anklet.

The processing knowledge, skills, and designs often span generations, and hence many handicrafts, albeit not all, are deemed as traditional items having been produced in particular ways and styles for decades or millennia, giving expression to local culture and identity