



a programme funded by the European Union/
un programme financé par l'Union européenne/
برنامج ممول من الإتحاد الأوروبي



EUROMED HERITAGE 4 Workshop

28th-30th June 2011, Beirut, Lebanon

Session III: Apprenticeship and education: Methodologies, credits, recognition and remuneration

Session II: Knowledge Transmission and Appropriation

This presentation is based on the findings from a site visit to the Old City and craft workshops of Bourj Hammond.

The traditional craftspeople were asked questions about their practices on the theme of knowledge, transmission and appropriation.

The responses suggest that there are a number of factors inhibiting knowledge transmission and appropriation – and therefore the continued existing of many such businesses (which may also be understood as expressions of intangible cultural heritage).

The findings are here presented in three parts: i. Specific Issues, ii. The Broader Context: and iii. Recommendations

i. Specific Issues

One of the key factors inhibiting knowledge transmission and appropriation is the fact that many of the crafts take a long time to learn. Ideally people should start from a young age, but national legislation prohibits child labour, meaning that a significant period of potential training time is lost at the outset.

Largely as a consequence of this, young people often turn to work in factories and/or the service industry where the work is (typically) less time-consuming to learn and often pays better.

The view that Lebanese government should do more to encourage young people into the sector was voiced by a number of craftspeople.

It was, for example, suggested that the government could review current import/export laws to favour local businesses by staving off growing foreign competition (which is often cheaper and of inferior quality).

The shoe-making industry in particular is finding it increasingly difficult to compete in light of foreign imports from the Far East, China and India.

There are currently hardly any structures, institutions, policies or and/or legislation which specifically addresses this issue or that might (therefore) facilitate knowledge transmission and appropriation.

The lack of government recognition was noted as a key issue by a number of craftspeople.

One shoe-maker said that the government focuses much more on the service industry – namely tourism – and manufacturing industry.

The situation is made worse by the high cost of electricity, making it almost impossible to sustain certain kinds of craft practices.

For example, another shoe-maker (a business in which three generations are employed) said that his business survives on a 'day-by-day' basis. The current situation makes it impossible to plan ahead and develop a medium-to-long term strategy for his business.



a programme funded by the European Union/
un programme financé par l'Union européenne/
برنامج ممول من الإتحاد الأوروبي

When asked what kind of government-lead support would be beneficial to his business he said that it would be a 'waste of time' talking to government about supporting the sector with a view to revitalising the apprenticeships system.

He seemed at a distance from his government as well as being frustrated by their apparent lack of interest, and somewhat despondent about the future.

It was widely felt among the craftspeople that traditional apprenticeships are an important way to transmit the knowledge and skills necessary to sustain the craft businesses, and that this also brings a sense of continuity, identity and community cohesion.

In this connection, a number of craftspeople made a point of showing old photographs of their father and/ or grandfather at work when they themselves were young children 'learning the trade'. This sense of ownership and identity was very important, making many of the practices deeply meaningful to current practitioners.

Indeed, community cohesion in Bourj Hammond seemed to be especially strong fostering a kind of 'we're in this together' type attitude among the local community.

However, the ever-pressing need for profitability has led to an intensification of time-pressure which limits the time available for training.

For example, a handbag maker said that he simply does not have time to train anyone – not even his son (who only works part time over the summer months). He also said that given the opportunity he would like to expand his business.

One way in which the government might alleviate these pressures is by offering financial incentives to both trainer and apprentice which might also improve the economic viability of the craft industry as a whole. It might also serve to raise the profile of the sector – especially among the young – by ensuring that craftwork is a viable career option.

However, at the current stage it is difficult to foresee the creation of a robust apprenticeship system for traditional crafts without adequate government investment.

One way in which traditional craft businesses resist harmful external forces – such as (often inferior) foreign competition – is by diversifying their skills base and service and/or product range.

For example, a metal-worker who makes highly specialised components for industrial machines of varying kinds also makes keys, necessitating new skills, techniques, materials and equipment.

This clearly puts added pressures on the importance of knowledge transmission and appropriation as well as *adaptation*.

Adaptation can be central to accessing new and wider markets – both locally and abroad in light of emerging global communications technologies.

ii. The Broader Context

Three key areas of concern in ensuring knowledge transmission seen within a broader context were identified as:

- Political – i.e. the government to take a lead in ensuring appropriate policies and legislation to protect craft businesses
- Economic – more information should be acquired which clearly indicates supply and demand for



a programme funded by the European Union/
un programme financé par l'Union européenne/
برنامج معمول من الإتحاد الأوروبي

products and services as well as potential new areas for development

- Social status and recognition – much work needs to be done to improve the 'standing' of the traditional crafts sector and to harness the potential of the young as well as tapping into their personal aspirations (which may be out of synch with the expectations of the older generation). The highly artistic work of a young metalworker provides an illustrative example of the kind of difference in outlook that can emerge between generations.

And with regards to appropriation:

- Craft businesses to be adaptive to ensure continued evolution of the sector as a whole
- The current apprenticeship system needs to be systematically overhauled by focusing especially on how different types of training might be tailored to meet the needs of different business types as well as time factors and remuneration and the need to attract young people. However, this should be done simultaneously with the other aspects noted above.

iii. Recommendations – first phase development

It is important to recognise that the traditional craft sector can and must learn how to help itself. Central to this is identifying the key factors which are inhibiting its progress and formulating coherent strategies to tackle them.

It can only achieve this by dialogue - with a view to self-organisation and self-empowerment which breeds confidence and commitment and a greater sense of appropriation.

In this connection, the new promotional centre for traditional craftspeople and creativity (which is currently under renovation) might become a useful meeting place to help foster dialogue among artisans, stakeholders and other interested parties such as, those in education or even (hopefully) government.

By creating such a communicative context, it may be possible to identify 'craft champions' – i.e. people who can and are willing to represent the interests of the sector at a number of levels.

This might, in turn, lead to the formation of a small committee of dedicated leaders who can work to address some of the issues around knowledge transmission and appropriation and to establish a coherent strategy to develop the sector as a whole.

This might include a better understanding of the role of government and the relationship between government and the private sector and civil society.

For example, different forms of protective measures – political and/or economic – might help to sustain existing craft practices and lead to the establishment of new ones.

The industry also needs to consider its organisational structure to secure knowledge transmission and appropriation.

For example, it may be possible to establish a cooperative whereupon members contribute a small sum to the cost of developing various aspects of the sector. There may also be specialist agencies – both within and beyond Lebanon – which may be able to help in this connection.

Finally, a primary goal will be to reach a stage of formal dialogue with government and key agencies with a view to transforming the sector in an incremental way based on a medium-to-long term vision in what might be called the 'second phase' of development.

But all this must start by first identifying the needs of the sector itself as voiced by those who work in it.