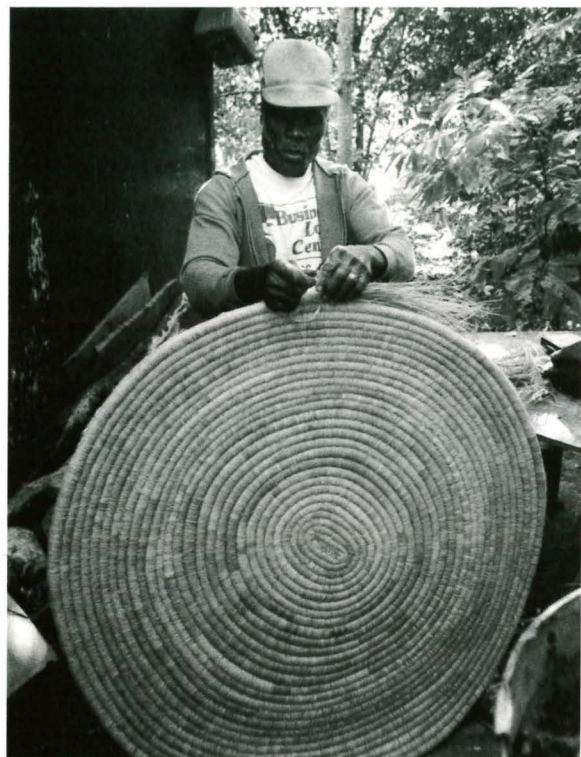


Straw Work:

A Case Study of Continuity & Change



by Kim Outten & Grace Turner

“The more things change, the more they remain the same.” This saying very much applies to straw work in The Bahamas.

Ever since the arrival in the islands of enslaved Africans, straw articles have been made – and with the same raw materials, in the same weaving style, and basically put to the same uses. The changes that have occurred mainly have affected the products created – traditional styles are now used for modern items, for example – and the way they are sold. Straw work in The Bahamas has woven its way from its origins to incorporate the techniques of the Black Seminoles of Red Bays, Andros, and European-Bahamian influences from people like Ivy Simms of Long Island, Bahamas. All have come together to create what is a uniquely Bahamian craft.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Evidence of the sources and practice of straw work in The Bahamas comes from plantation statistics, historical documents, archaeological research, and surviving traditional weaving styles.

“Scrap Iron” Colebrooke displays one of his enormous straw mats. “Scrap Iron” lives in Red Bays, Andros, the only Bahamian settlement of the descendants of Black Seminoles, who escaped to The Bahamas during the Seminole Wars in Florida. Photo by Kim Outten

Many of the African slaves in The Bahamas came from the Carolinas with their Loyalist masters during the period 1783–89. According to Leland Ferguson (1992), crafts of the slave population of the Carolinas included basketry and coiled fanners (fanners are round, shallow baskets Africans still use to “riddle” or clean and separate whole or ground grains). These kinds of straw work persist not only in The Bahamas but in South Carolina and the Gullah Islands, notably St. Helena Island, as well.

One contemporary coiled weaving style has been traced to the arrival of the Black Seminoles, who settled in Red Bays, Andros, between 1817 and 1821. The style of knot work found at Current Island, Eleuthera, and in southern Long Island was brought by African settlers.

Marketing of straw work began early as well, with the wife of George Phenny, governor of The Bahamas from 1721 to 1728, involved in the wholesale export of straw goods from Nassau to Bermuda. The earliest tourists to The Bahamas were interested in straw work: an 1860s issue of Frank Leslie’s *London Illustrated News* shows the portico of the Royal Victoria Hotel in Nassau, where local vendors were selling straw work and other wares to guests.

WORKING RAW MATERIALS INTO STRAW GOODS

Throughout The Bahamas the raw materials used in all types of straw crafts are palm leaves and sisal. The palms include the silver top, the pond top or sabal palmetto, and the coconut palm, popular in southern Andros. Straw from the pond top, because it is not very durable, is used for soft hats, linings, and larger, hamper-type domestic baskets rather than by the commercial straw industry. Silk sisal grows wild in The Bahamas; a commercial variety used today was introduced from the Yucatan in 1845. Each of these plants is processed in a different way, but when their leaves are dried and stripped, they are ready for weaving or plaiting into fathoms. (A fathom, still used as a measurement

because of its practicality, is simply the distance between both outstretched arms).

Plaiting has been the foundation of the straw industry in The Bahamas. The plaiter weaves the straw most commonly using from three to 15 strings, but in any event always an uneven number. The plait is sold in balls, in lengths of 12 to 15 fathoms. An average ball of 11-string plait can be sold in Nassau or Freeport for \$10.

Plaiting is done throughout The Bahamas, but especially on Long Island, Cat Island, Eleuthera, Exuma, and Ragged Island, where it remains a major source of income for many of the women. It has always been an “equal-opportunity” occupation in Bahamian communities, though, and some men continue to plait, particularly where the demand is great.

A division of labor between the plaiter and the basketmaker has endured since the days of slavery. A plaiter may only plait, but a basketmaker, in addition to plaiting, may use any of the basic techniques – stitching the plait, knot work, or coiling – to produce finished products. Still very much in use throughout The Bahamas are utilitarian straw craft items, which are generally not decorated. They include field baskets, horse baskets, knapsacks, goat rope, kitchen floor mats, and fanners for riddling (winnowing) grits and cleaning pigeon peas. The straw is tightly woven, and the articles are hand stitched using the silver top as thread for durability. These utilitarian straw goods are now also in vogue with the “back-to-nature” crowd.

Decorative straw work for a tourist market has retained much of its original form and also incorporated plaiting styles that have evolved from the utilitarian mode: for example, the lace used around the rim of field hats now adorns clutch bags and sisal hats. The older styles of raffia work and straw weaves – called peas and rice, centipede, pearl, Jacob’s ladder, shingles, hole-in-the-wall, and pineapple – are very prevalent today as well.

Hundreds of people throughout the Family Islands make a steady income from locally made straw items. A range of styles and techniques has developed on various islands, many of them making outstanding new uses of traditional household articles.

Straw crafts people of Andros use the fanner weaving technique almost exclusively. Although the islanders are no longer dependent on the small-scale farming that requires the use of fanner baskets, the fanner remains as a household decorator

item. Baskets and mats of all shapes and sizes are woven using the fanner technique.

The north and central parts of Andros have generated different styles. The north Andros style is dominated by Red Bays, where straw work is displayed everywhere, on porches, along the roadside, and even hanging in trees. Old “Scrap Iron” Colebrooke still coils hampers large enough to hold a man and tight enough to hold water, while young Peggy



A worker in Ivy Simm’s straw factory in Long Island sews together strips of plait, circa 1950-60. Miss Simms, a European Bahamian, was able to combine African Bahamian plaiting techniques with her hand-bag patterns. Photo courtesy Department of Archives, The Bahamas

Colebrooke uses raffia to neatly decorate her baskets.

In the north the straw is peeled (separated) and only the soft, outer layer is used to wrap the coils. The straw is sewn tightly with a heavy-duty, stainless-steel needle. In central Andros, however, the straw is not peeled, and any narrow metal object (such as an ice pick) can serve as a needle. That is why the central Andros baskets, although also made in the fanner weave, look quite different.

The straw style that Long Island has become best known for uses decorative straw plait in a new way. Named the Ivy Simms style for the Euro-Bahamian seamstress who patterned it in the 1940s, it is used mainly for handbags, place mats, and other souvenir items.

Miss Simms, now 81, began using decorative plait to make handbags in creative new patterns she

designed and hired local women to sew. Decorative plait, always in the repertoire of Bahamian plaiters, was traditionally used only on hats. Miss Simms began using the local plain straw plait as a base onto which the delicate, open-weave, decorative plaits were stitched.

A number of Miss Simms's former workers have opened their own businesses. Mrs. Lula Pratt, one of Miss Simms's first workers, won the first-prize blue ribbon at the 1988 Commonwealth Fair. Mrs. Elsie Knowles, also of Long Island, is an instructor at the Industrial Training Center in Nassau.

Another outstanding straw design is a knotted, open-weave pattern used for shoulder bags, covered picnic baskets, and hats. Variations of this style are seen from island to island, but the community best known for this weaving technique is tiny Current Island off north Eleuthera. Current Island products are sold throughout Eleuthera; some are also sent to the straw markets in Nassau and Freeport. The workers suffered a setback in 1993 when Hurricane Andrew destroyed the palm trees which produce the straw.

CHALLENGES TO STRAW CRAFTS TODAY

The accelerated development of the Bahamian tourism industry over the past 40 years has posed challenges to the country's straw-work industry.

Over 500 vendors rent stalls in the Nassau straw market alone; many others operate in Freeport. With so many vendors and tourists to serve, the supply of straw plait from the Family Islands became insufficient. A contributing factor was the substantial number of people who left the Family Islands to become straw vendors in Nassau and Freeport. Although they all know how to plait, as well as stitch bags and decorate them with raffia and shells, they turned their attention to selling instead. To fill the gap between supply and demand, vendors began importing more and more Asian straw goods from Florida. Vendors would join an *asue* (an

African borrowing system) to enable them to buy thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise from Florida wholesalers. Some vendors decorate foreign goods with raffia to "Bahamianize" them.

In their hustle for the tourist dollar, vendors have had to rely more heavily on their marketing than on their production skills. The only stage of production usually seen in the market is the final one, the decoration with raffia. Nevertheless, with the need to be creative and adapt to changing trends and styles, straw vendors are never short of new ideas. Mr. George Huyler, who became involved in straw work when his wife stopped to have each of their five children, now incorporates leatherette on his straw bags. Figures on bags are often dressed in colorful outfits of Androsia (a Bahamian batik) or African print fabrics. For a more three-dimensional look, miniature hats and slippers are also sometimes added!

CONCLUSION

The most encouraging result of the popularity of Bahamian straw work among foreign visitors is that Bahamians have begun to show a greater appreciation for this long-standing local tradition. In many instances Bahamian straw work had been cast aside as not being "refined" enough; it also was too much of a reminder of harsh economic times, when there were no alternatives to articles made of straw. However, after seeing our straw products in a fresh, new light, more and more Bahamians are coming to accept their true value. Mrs. Olga Major, who does knotted straw work at home in Long Island, receives work orders through her children who live in Nassau. Mrs. Lula Pratt was commissioned to provide briefcases for all the inspectors of the country's National Insurance Board. Meanwhile, the straw workers at Red Bays, Andros, are constantly bartering with the residents of the United States' Autec (Atlantic Underwater Testing and Evaluation Center) base on that island for their craft.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Ferguson, Leland. 1992. *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Outten, Kim. 1989. A Brief Historical Review of Straw Work in The Bahamas. *The Nassau Guardian*, 23 March.
- Wood, David E. 1988. *A Guide to Selected Sources for the History of the Seminole Settlements at Red Bays, Andros 1817-1980*. Nassau: Department of Archives.

Kim Outten is a museologist at the Pompey Museum of Slavery and Emancipation at Vendue House in Nassau. She has an M.A. in museum studies from University of London and an M.A. in African studies from the State University of New York in Albany.

Grace Turner is Curator at the Pompey Museum of Slavery and Emancipation at Vendue House in Nassau. She has an M.A. in anthropology from Rutgers University and an M.A. in history and museum studies from Ohio State University.