

The production of textiles and clothing from sustainable materials has been happening amongst indigenous and marginalised people across the world for centuries. The archipelago of The Bahamas has a particularly unique history within the context of sustainable textiles that speak to this age-old practice that was developed from the memory retentions of abandoned enslaved Africans. Formerly enslaved populations dried and cultivated the use of the Silver Palm which grows abundantly all over The Bahamas and used it to create pliable material. Over 200 different patterns and styles of straw plaiting (Fig 1) have been recorded and retained in The Bahamas that have been passed down through the generations.¹

**** Fig 1 – A few of the 200 different plait styles and patterns****

During the seventeenth century the population of black people on the islands was a third of the population of white people and so large plantations with extensive populations of enslaved Africans were not a feature.² Enslaved Africans had escaped from the US to a few of the family islands in the Bahamas like Andros and established homes and settlements.³ However, the arrival of the Loyalists a century later, who were seeking political refuge after the American War of Independence, changed that as they brought their enslaved populations to The Bahamas which was still a British colony.⁴ The newly implemented plantations and enslaved populations (Fig 2) used their skills to recreate American plantations but the growing of cash crops like cotton eventually became difficult which meant harvests failed and plantation owners lost money. The failure of crops and plantations led to many plantation owners abandoning their plantations and moving to Britain or back to the United States, leaving not just their land but the enslaved communities who were left to tend their farms and cater for their own needs.⁵

**** Fig 2 – Enslaved Africans arrived in the Bahamas with plantation owners in the 18th Century****

By the end of the nineteenth century formerly enslaved communities were seeking any way they could to utilise their skills for survival. Many men and women were already making casual hats and aprons out of coconut palm fronds, straw plait, and sisal fibres to protect themselves from the sun as they tended to their crops, but it was the arrival of tourists and business people to the islands that highlighted the lucrative possibilities of straw work.⁶

Ines Major (Fig 3), a straw plaiter with over 70 years of experience was taught to plait by her grandmother and has built up incredible skill and speed when handling straw being able to produce a 20-yard roll of plait in 6 hours. Although Major has the ability to plait many different types of patterns and thicknesses, she prefers plain straw plait over the more popular dyed split string variety as she doesn't think it looks good.⁷

**** Fig 3 – Ines Major demonstrating straw plaiting****

The dried Silver Palm (straw) is stripped into lengths (strings) and these are sometimes stripped further (split strings) to make softer more pliable lengths to plait with. Split strings are often dyed to add a further dimension to the design and that is being plaited. The plaiting of the straw gives a very strong and durable quality to the material which can then be used in the production of hats, bags, shoes, cushions etc (Fig 4).

There are a number of techniques used in the production of straw plait depending on the purpose of the material. One of the techniques enables the straw to become watertight and so has the

possibility to be used for protection against rain. Straw plait is perhaps an unexpectedly versatile material which has a number of possibilities that can be achieved through further experimentation and research. Combining historically retained practices and modern innovations in textiles offers exciting opportunities for the next chapter of Bahamian straw plaiting.

** Fig 4 – Cushions and bags by Harl Taylor Bag**

Unfortunately, straw plaiting in the Bahamas has been on the decline in recent years due to a lack of interest by younger people, but also due to a wider lack of understanding as to how textiles from straw plait and sisal can provide the basis for innovations in sustainable textiles.⁸ Granted, much more work will be needed to mass produce textiles, but the ability exists to make this happen.

Currently the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora (CIAD) is in partnership Creative Nassau to develop a project to engage straw plaiters in the Bahamas with fashion and textiles students in the UK to execute some of these experimentations and develop further understanding of how straw can establish a foothold within sustainable textile futures (Fig 5). In so doing, we aim to re-engage Bahamian young people with their material culture whilst emphasising the possibilities of straw plaiting to the rest of the world.

** Fig 5 – The Classic Art of Sustainable Fashion, CIAD's upcoming straw project**

Endnotes

1. Arlene Nash Ferguson, Junkanoo Museum (Interview, Nassau, 2012).
2. Deans Peggs, A Short History of the Bahamas (Nassau: 1959), 15.
3. Pirate Museum information panel, (Nassau, 1998).
4. Deans Peggs, A Short History of the Bahamas (Nassau: 1959), 14 & 17.
5. Gail Saunders, Bahamian Loyalists and their Slaves (London: 1983) 44.
6. Katherine Hamilton, Straw! a short account of the straw craft industry in the Bahamas (Nassau, 2014) 15.
7. Ines Major, interview (Nassau, 2014).
8. Pamela Burnside, Creative Nassau, (interview, Nassau, 2014).

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