

Panos Tingidos, a New West African Brand: Adding Cultural Value to the Textile Industry of Guinea Bissau

By the 1960s, the district of Ponte Nova was considered the largest centre for fabric dye in West Africa, however, activity began to decline at the beginning of the 1990s. In 2013 the “Tchossan Soninké” project was launched with the goal of revitalizing the dyeing manufacturing business. The result of the work so far has been the creation of a new brand:

Panos Tingidos.

by Laura Soriano and Samuel Silveira Martins

Guinea Bissau is a country with a diverse ethnic and cultural mosaic. Dyeing fabrics through Batik is a traditional cultural activity that has been carried out for centuries in the country, and that is closely linked to the Soninké (or Saraculés) people of Guinea Bissau.

The Crisis of Dyeing Fabrics in Guinea Bissau

Historical estimates indicate that the traditional method of dyeing was practiced in Guinea Bissau by 600 families in the East (Bafatá and Gabu regions) and North (Oio region). However the district of Ponte Nova, in the city of Bafatá is where more than half of the fabric dyers in the country had been concentrated (Expertise SARL 2015).

By the 1960s, the district of Ponte Nova was considered the largest center for fabric dyeing in West Africa, supplying the markets of Senegal, the Gambia and Guinea-Conakry. However, activity began to decline at the beginning of the 1990s as the major suppliers of the raw material used for dyeing fabrics went out of business. This came as a result of the weak investment capacity of the government of Guinea Bissau, together with the cyclical political and military conflicts that contributed to the decapitalization of the private sector (Lopes da Cruz 2007).

The impact of this process resulted in high rates of food insecurity (32% of the population, UNICEF 2015), a growth in the informal sector of the economy and caused the discontinuity of certain cultural activities, thus, catalyzing economic performance.

This erosion of the private sector caused the main suppliers of the raw materials used for dyeing fabrics to cease trading and, consequently, the Soninkés of Ponte Nova «underwent a

process of temporary migration to the neighboring countries» (François Manchuelle 1996) «including Gambia (83%), Senegal (12%) and Guinea (5%)» (Unimos and Divutec 2011).

Despite this and the lack of profitability, the tradition of fabric dyeing remained a core element of cultural identity and the main source of income for the Soninkés. The main reason for this being that traditional dyeing is one of the main cultural vehicles of the Soninké ethnic group in terms of initiation and socio-economic and cultural education of the adolescents and young people, being a predominantly feminine activity that generates cultural strengthening and sorority (Mendiguren 2009).

Dyed fabrics are made mainly by young women with the support of their mothers, and thereby constitute the main economic activity and source of income of the Soninkés women whose livelihood depends on the economic success of this activity (Acin 2016). In terms of the fabric dyeing production chain, the acquisition

of raw material is principally needed: textiles such as Bazan fabric for instance (traditional in West Africa) but also threads, needles, and candles. Secondly, manual production of models is required, including ancestral

drawings consisting of manual sewing, knots and bending techniques that allow the creation of the stamp in patterns of standard drawings. The last essential step is fabric dyeing which includes heating the dye and applying it to the selected areas of the fabrics and subsequently leaving these fabrics to dry in the sun, washing them and ironing them.

Despite the fact that the traditional fabric dye is undoubtedly an element of cultural identity and the main source of income for the Soninkés of Ponte Nova, there are many problems that threaten their development and consequently the

—————*—————
The tradition of fabric dyeing remained a core element of cultural identity and the main source of income for the Soninkés.
 —————*—————



Ponte Nova Women's Association who returned from Gambia.
© Laura Soriano/European Union Delegation to Guinea Bissau

household income of this area on different levels (Unimos and Divutec 2011). Widespread illiteracy, very low-income level, and gender-based violence put women in the Bafata region in an extreme situation of defeat. In theory it is the husband who rules, yet in practice the women also have to contribute to household life and the extremely low development leaves them desperately seeking other sources of income to pay for resources to ensure education for children so that they do not have to work and can attend school.

The “Tchossan Soninké” Project

With this in mind, two non-governmental organisations, the Guinea-Bissauan DIVUTEC and the Spanish UNIMOS, started an initiative with European funds to preserve the cultural and economic heritage of the traditional dyed fabrics and structure a sustainable economic process. In 2013 the “Tchossan Soninké” project was launched with the goal of revitalizing the local industry in Ponte Nova and thus enabling those who had emigrated to return. The work has been carried out firstly by Bafata women: an association, the Women's Association in Ponte Nova (Associação de Mulheres de Ponte Nova in Portuguese) has been involved in all phases of the project. Soninkés women are *par excellence* textile dyers. This activity is an intrinsic part of the culture of the Soninké ethnic group, since, from childhood these people begin to learn the techniques of traditional dyeing as well as about how to commercialise these products.



Two non-governmental organisations, the Guinea-Bissauan DIVUTEC and the Spanish UNIMOS, started an initiative, with European Union, to preserve the cultural and economic heritage of the traditional dyed fabrics and structure a sustainable economic process.



Panos Tingidos, un nuovo brand dell’Africa Occidentale: un valore culturale aggiunto all’industria tessile della Guinea Bissau

La Guinea Bissau è un mosaico di diverse popolazioni e culture, dove tingere tessuti con la tecnica del Batik è un’attività tradizionale che viene praticata da secoli, in particolare dalla popolazione dei Soninké (o Saraculé).

La città di Bafatà (quartiere di Ponte Nova) è diventata nel tempo un punto di concentrazione di metà delle botteghe di tintura di tutto il Paese, tanto che negli anni '60 era considerato il più vasto centro di tintura di tessuti dell’Africa Occidentale, presso il quale si rifornivano i mercati di Senegal, Gambia e Guinea-Conakry. All’inizio degli anni '90, i maggiori fornitori di materia prima hanno abbandonato questo settore economico, di conseguenza, i Soninké di Ponte Nova hanno avuto difficoltà nel proseguire la loro attività di tintura e sono stati costretti a emigrare.

Ciò nonostante, e nonostante la scarsità dei profitti, la tradizione di tingere tessuti, essendo una competenza tipicamente trasmessa di generazione in generazione, è rimasta come elemento chiave dell’identità culturale, nonché la prima fonte di guadagno per i Soninké.

Dal 2011 l’iniziativa “Tchossan Soninke” cerca di rivitalizzare la produzione e commercializzazione locale di Ponte Nova, anche per dare la possibilità a chi è emigrato di ritornare. Il progetto ha supportato 300 artigiani locali della Associazione delle Donne di Ponte Nova, e attivato una *partnership* con il marchio locale d’abbigliamento BIBAS, per la produzione di capi con i tessuti prodotti dalle donne di Bafatà.

Sono stati così prodotti una collezione di vestiti e un campionario di tessuti per interni, che combinano un emozionante *mix* di cultura visuale soninké e *design* contemporaneo e che hanno come *target* il mercato europeo. Queste collezioni sono state presentate per la prima volta nel 2015, in una sfilata a Bissau. Contemporaneamente, sono anche state compiute ricerche di mercato e diversi contatti riguardo alla possibile vendita e distribuzione.

Il risultato del lavoro è la creazione di un nuovo marchio: Panos Tingidos, che combina responsabilità sociale ed etica, e apporta un importante valore culturale all’industria tessile della Guinea Bissau.



© Chiara Guidetti/European Union Delegation to Guinea Bissau

In order to improve these techniques and the quality of the fabrics, a specialized artisan provided training in coloring techniques and expert knowledge of dyeing techniques, drawing on ancestral designs from other territories, with the aim of improving the quality of the fabric and subsequent commercial acceptance, both internally and externally (Lovelie *et al.* 2016).

During the training process the female artisans received key information about the harmful health side-effects of the products used in fabric dyeing and the adoption of safety techniques, waste management techniques and, finally, the notions of production costs and marketing. An important issue has been a literacy alphabetization, because literacy skills are necessary not only for business management but also for family and personal management.

The training exercise included the ability to recognize and identify the demands of domestic and foreign markets for dyed fabrics in advance, according to age groups and cultural habits.

All these training activities resulted not only in strengthening AMPN's institutional capacity, but also in creating the entrepreneurial spirit within the institution. This allows its entrepreneurship and contribution to the sustainability of the AMPN itself and its artisan center for the production of dyed fabrics to be maintained, thereby improving the skills of managers, technicians and artisans. In the words of an interview:

«I started fabric tinting when I was young. Later I got married. When my second daughter was 2 months old, when the colonizers had left our country, Bafata tinting activity fell due to the lack of prime mater. Since cloth-tinting was the only economic activity for the Soninkés at that time, and since the conditions weren't the best to keep it going and I had to worry about how I would raise my children, I decided to abandon my family and emigrate to the Gambia. In the Gambia this activity had better prospects and would be profitable. The project has helped to improve our living conditions a lot; for instance through illiteracy courses or by being part of inter-institutional boards. The Tchossan Soninké project allowed me to go back to my country and live within my community with my family. Without this project I, like the rest of the women, would have to emigrate. Now I won't move from here; I have my husband and family and besides, I make enough money to be able to afford my children's education.»

(Interview realized in November, 2016).

For the women of AMPN who didn't have a suitable space to meet and work in, the NGOs built an artisan production center with management offices and technical rooms for literacy, exhibition, sales and marketing spaces, a garment manufacturing chain, a kitchen and a warehouse.

This center allows 300 artisans to participate in the

production, exhibition and sale of their products. In terms of exposure and sales, the management committee created a system of registration and control of production which facilitated the sustainability of production and the acquisition of raw material.

European markets ask for cotton products, while African markets demand other types of typical textile products, the Bazan. Within the region, in the market areas of Senegal or even Guinea-Bissau clients have different preferences about colors, designs, or type of dresses. The project has begun to diversify, adding an interior design and a clothing collection to its portfolio, which combine a mixture of Soninké and contemporary designs, targeted at the European market.

These collections were presented for the first time in Bissau in 2015 when a fashion event with local and international authorities was held to present the dress collection made in collaboration with the local brand BIBAS. An opening party presented the house clothing collection; the events and products presented were met with an extremely positive response from all those attending, including the State Secretary of Culture and the Ambassador of the European Union in Guinea Bissau.

This first phase of the work ended with the creation of a new brand: *Panos Tingidos*, a brand that combines social and ethical responsibility and adds significant cultural value to the textile industry of Guinea Bissau.¹

The second phase tackles the issue of commercializing *Panos Tingidos* brand products, that can strengthen the economic reality of the households of the artisans of the AMPN because the profits of the sales are a crucial part of the family income. As a matter of fact, those earnings contribute significantly to the household income, more so than the agricultural crops of the families; they represent the most important fraction of the products marketed by women and finally they ensure the transmission and continuity of this cultural practice, as well reducing the migration of artisans. Currently, the Women's Association of Ponte Nova sells traditional Soninké and ethnic textiles for interior decoration and fashion where colors, the mixture of patterns, textures and fabrics abound. A selling committee is organizing a diversified marketing system. An agreement with BIBAS allows on-demand dress production; local "agents-vendors" ensure commercialization in local markets in almost every region in Guinea Bissau; local joint handcrafts and the stores of handmade products in the Bissau ensure distribution in the capital city.

The sustainability of the project faces a double challenge. The first is to ensure the empowerment of the association, the daily management of the association, and eventually the seeing of its evolution into a cooperative model. This also touches upon training and basic education of women whose growing self-esteem and financial autonomy visibly improve the lives of families and the community. The second challenge is to expand and ensure trade routes and their management by the association; thus being able both to respond to production requests and to deal with international partners. This also touches upon a stronger local commercialization strategy in Guinea Bissau, in the region and internationally.

This article is the result of the document analysis and participant observation carried out between 2014 and 2016. The data used here is the result of the information gathered with the AMPN artisans and the technicians of UNIMOS and DIVUTEC, to whom we extend our gratitude and thanks. For further information visit www.panostingidos.org.

NOTES

1 - The *Panos Tingidos* brand is a creation of the Women's Association of Ponte Nova and is supported by the European Union Delegation in Guinea Bissau.

REFERENCES

- R. Acin, *Estudio de diagnóstico de línea de base: "Tchossan Soninké - Proyecto de Consolidação da Cultura de Tintura Tradicional de Panos em Ponte-Nova -- Fase II"*, Bissau 2016
- Expertise SARL, *Estudo socioeconómico sobre o impacto da emigração temporária das tintureiras de panos de Ponte Nova para os países vizinhos e sua qualificação*, Bissau 2015
- J. Lopes da Cruz, *O programa de ajustamento estrutural na República da Guiné-Bissau: uma avaliação política e ética*, ISCTE, 2007
- X. Lovelle et al., *Avaliação final do projeto "Tchossan Soninké. Projeto de lançamento da cultura da tintura tradicional de panos em Ponte-Nova" na Guiné-Bissau*, Bissau 2016
- F. Manchuelle, *Willing migrants: Soninke labor diasporas, 1848-1960*, James Currey Publishers, Athens/London 1997
- B. Mendiguren, *Beyond time and space: solidarity like secular and transnational spindle of Soninké's family and social reproduction*, História: Questões & Debates, Curitiba 2009, pp. 121-149
- UNICEF, *Estado mundial da infância*, NY, 2015
- Unimos and Divutec, *Relatório de linha de base: "Tchossan Soninké" - Projeto relançamento da cultura de tintura tradicional de Panos em Ponte-Nova - Bafatá*, Bissau 2014
- Unimos and Divutec, *Encuesta de identificación realizada en colaboración con AMPN*, Bissau 2011

Laura Soriano Ruiz

is a Gender and Development Expert, UNIMOS International Association Project Manager and PhD Candidate in the program of Gender Interdisciplinary Studies at the Jaume I University, Spain.

Samuel Silveira Martins

is an Associate Professor at the International University of Ecuador, School of Diplomacy and International Relations.