Connected Communities

Woven Communities: Exploring the Dynamics of Socio-cultural Change through Material Culture

Special Case Study on Scottish Vernacular Basketry

Dr Stephanie Bunn
Background

Executive Summary

This scoping study began with the premise that material culture forms an invaluable starting point for the exploration of the socio-cultural history and interconnectedness of communities. The project has developed a special case study on Scottish vernacular basketry and, in collaboration with Scottish basket-makers, Scottish museum curators and other experts, situates itself within both regional and international concerns and research on this subject.

We approached the study through examining existing research on the interwoven domains of human action associated with Scottish vernacular basketry. In doing so, we aimed to explore how the material fabric of social change is enmeshed in human action, as communities develop and respond to socio-economic and technological shifts through time.

Researchers and Project Partners

Dr Stephanie Bunn  
University of St Andrews

Members of the Scottish Basket-makers Circle

Curatorial Advisors and Other Regional Experts

Lyndsay McGill  
National Museums of Scotland

Dorothy Kidd  
Scottish Life Archive, NMS

Linda Fitzpatrick  
Scottish Fisheries Museum

Dr Ian Tait  
Shetland Museums and Archives

Rachel Chisholme  
Highland Folk Museum

Ian Edwards  
Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh

Greg Kenicer  
Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh

Key words

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Process
This project is both an exploration of available research on different basket-making and using communities and also an exploration of the value of community engagement during a research project. It is thus both a scoping study of interwoven domains of community knowledge and 'research with the communities' themselves.

This review paper presents a summary of both the findings and the process.

Why basketry as a research focus?

Basket-work makes an excellent starting point for a study of the dynamics of socio-cultural change in Scotland because of its subtle, yet persistent, presence in daily life. It is often perceived as a rather mundane domestic craft, rendered almost obsolete following the industrial and petrochemical revolutions, and the introduction of plastic bags, cardboard boxes and shopping trolleys. However, while historically basket-work was used in fishing, farming, crofting, made by local practitioners and by Travellers, it continued to play a role through the Industrial Revolution and was also made into containers for carrying loads, measuring fish, for mill skips, hospital beds, chemical containers, and in transport, including air travel. In the latter cases, such baskets were supplied by basket-works and regional blind asylums. A study of the woven communities of basket-makers and users therefore has the potential to provide important insights into both the material fabric and the process of socio-cultural change.

Scottish basketry research, collecting, and documentation: an overview

Early reports on the ‘decline’ of Scottish basketry were made by the Scottish Home Industries Association, formed 1889. Its aims were largely liberal-philanthropic, aiming to promote an appreciation of ‘home-made’ fabrics, improve their quality, and stop them falling into disuse, along with ‘promoting thrift and adding to the comfort and self-respect of the poorer classes’ (Report 1912; Harrod 2000). The Association both reported on and promoted basketry in the Western Highlands, Caithness, Skye, Shetland and Orkney during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They noted that peat creels and other baskets continued to be made in these regions, while also promoting classes and exhibitions, and supporting local endeavours such as the establishment of a basketworks in Kilmuir, Skye (1909).

The first significant Scottish basket collectors, Evelyn Baxter and Leonora Rintoul, made a definitive collection of early 20th century Scottish vernacular basketry for the National Museums of Scotland. They also promoted the craft during the 1920s and 30s through basketry classes, the SWI, craft guilds, magazine articles, and supported basket displays at Highland Shows. Examples from their collection were displayed in the Living Traditions exhibition, Edinburgh 1951.

Isobel Grant, the great collector of ‘homely Highland things’ made an immense collection of baskets (over 100 artefacts) for the Highland Folk Museum from the 1930’s onwards.
In *Highland Folkways* (1961), she noted how wickerwork ‘was an important Highland craft’ (1988, 80) yet, perhaps due to its continued, yet tacit, presence as a craft which she herself still used, she did not include it in the ‘Crafts’ section of her book, and most prominently referred only to more unusual straw and bent grass basket artefacts in the ‘Common Tasks’ section (1961). Hope MacDougall (of the Hope MacDougall Collection) took a similar approach, collecting and documenting baskets which pertained to rural life, yet possessing a vast number of ‘house baskets’ for her own use which remains undocumented. This collecting was given texture through Alexander Fenton’s Scottish Life Archive, established in 1959 at the National Museums of Scotland. The Archive includes drawings, photos, newspaper cuttings, handwritten notes and old manuscripts of aspects of Scottish social history. Fenton chose ‘Creels and baskets’ as a defining category of his unique collection of facts on Scottish life. In parallel, the School of Scottish Studies holds significant collections of recorded oral history and photography, including the Werner Kissling Photo-archive (which is duplicated in Dumfries Museum). Kissling documented life in the Hebrides during the 1930s. He had a special interest in people’s use of straw, heather and other available materials to make necessities such as ropes, mats and bags, and also documented basket-making among Travellers and in basket-works in eastern Scotland.

A subsequent, more fallow documentary period coincided with the final decline of vernacular basket-making throughout Scotland in the 1950s and 60s, which paralleled the mass-introduction of plastic and the use of motorised transport in farming and crofting. Subsequent research, since the 1980s has been mainly carried out by basket-makers, in particular, the Scottish Basketmakers Circle. The SBC was established 25 years ago. Members come together, linked by a common concern to cooperate and pursue a creative interest. Early members researched and travelled across Scotland meeting older practitioners, learning about local skills, techniques and materials, as well establishing regional groups, running courses, and visiting museum collections. The SBC have an exceptional slide collection and library, as well as a very informed membership, some of whom have published or produced films on the subject (Wilkinson 2001; SBC 2002).

Across Scotland, we found that locations where basket-makers live have provided rich sources of data, where local collections and practices are best known, where local social history and its use of baskets is best researched, and where local plant resources have been explored by makers themselves. (This is evident on the developing pin map on our website.) Furthermore, the practice of basketry acts as a kind of ‘provocation’ to other local people who frequently may be compelled by witnessing the practice to communicate memories about local and family historical basketry practices.

### Scoping tour

Throughout the project, we combined textual and archival research with a ‘scoping tour’ of museum collections and archives. This tour was almost universally appreciated by curators who benefitted from the knowledge of the basketmakers in regard to materials, techniques and social history of their collections. By combining frequent meetings with the National Museums of Scotland throughout the
project with one-off visits to local and regional museums, we built up a picture of the pattern of use across Scotland with samples of more focused, in-depth, studies of regional variation.

East coast museums and archives are extensive, and very representational of east Scottish fishing history between the early 1800s and the 1950s. They contained the line baskets, sculls, rips, creels, bait baskets and quarter crans which were required for line-fishing, herring drifting and fish-wife travel and selling in the region. They reveal remarkable local variation, both in the refinements to which baskets could be developed for this trade, and in style and terminology.

Southern Scottish museums of rural life are fewer, and their collections illustrate less variation. ‘Tattie sculls’ (for potatoes) predominated, made from willow, cane or spale (wooden slats). Such baskets were treated hard and did not last, but were made in profusion, often by Travellers. Fruit baskets, bee skeps and straw ropes were common, as were estate and sporting baskets for riverine fishing (quite separate from marine fishing), curling baskets and horse panniers for grouse shooting.

In the north, both Orkney and Shetland museums have extensive collections. Baskets include regional variation of the creel or pannier (the caisie or kishie), smaller baskets (budies or bødies), and ropes, all made from different combinations of black oat straw, bent (marram) grass, heather and to a degree, imported cane. All revealed a life style which had until recently been based on crofting, where baskets were needed for tasks such as peat gathering and the kelp industry, and crofting-fishing, and where ‘conventional’ basketry materials such as willow were largely absent. The extent and range of material in museum collections and archives in the Northern Isles is probably due to the strong sense of regional identity of these two areas, and increased availability of finance following the development of the oil industry.

Western Scotland and Highland museums had fewer, smaller collections. The Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie, based on the Grant Collection is the exception. The majority of this collection was drawn from the Outer Hebrides, rather than the west coast or Highlands. The collection reveals the use of willow and hazel for the distinctive western Scottish creel, and similar use of bent grass, oat straw and heather to the Northern Isles for smaller containers and ropes.

There are several possible explanations for these regional variations. Grant argues that mid-19th century economic history, including the Highland clearances and migration, accounts for part of the minimal material evidence of the past (including baskets) from the Highlands and west coast (2007, 100). In her view, however, differences are also linked to the greater fertility of the eastern soil, and varying influence of Norse invaders east to west (2007, 100). The introduction of late 19th century herring drifters also concentrated the majority of herring fishing in the east coast ports (1961, 250-77). Thus, agriculture and fishing were both more restricted in the west, and there was also less money in general to ‘conserve’ local heritage.

Scoping through website construction

The interactive website was intended to both encourage viewers to send in information, gathering knowledge, and to act as a resource, becoming a compendium for future publication. We used WordPress to build the site, which enabled us to maintain an on-going
blog, and to be responsive as the site emerged. I would strongly advocate this as both a method of research and of ordering data. The site has enabled us to build up a dynamic visual representation of the interwoven nature of communities that we have been scoping. The blog also acts as a ‘field-work diary’ of our scoping tours and other events.

The site is producing an on-going and expanding response. In the past two months alone we have been sent over 300 images and texts to upload (which we are still in the process of doing as I write this), and material is coming in all the time. We see this interactive, growing aspect of the site as a sign of the success of the project.

Scoping through workshop and symposium

The Woven Communities Symposium was an extremely productive event, and feedback from all participants was entirely positive. I attribute this to the great breadth of experience and knowledge of the speakers and workshop leaders, and the strong support of the basket-makers from the SBC who supported the event, and also pushed me to include several practical elements, critical for such a project.

Contributors included international basket archaeologist Willeke Wendrich, art historian Victoria Mitchell, botanist Greg Kenicer, Australian material culture specialist Graeme Were, international fibre-artist Lois Walpole, Spanish basket-maker and researcher Carlos Fontales, the Heritage Craft Association and anthropological theorist Tim Ingold, alongside contributions from myself, Shetland curator Ian Tait, Anstruther curator Linda Fitzpatrick, Gaelic scholar Hugh Cheape, Scottish Life Archive director Dorothy Kidd, Skye heather artist Caroline Dear, CraftScotland director Emma Walker, and St Andrews ecologist Rehema White. Shetland kishie maker Ewen Balfour produced a straw kishie during the event, and basket-makers taught practical skills at the beginning of each morning and afternoon session.

The benefits of the symposium extended beyond the event itself. Its construction and inception helped develop our framework for situating this project within a wider theoretical and regional field. Once work on this study is complete, we will be looking for a publisher for this material. Every speaker was filmed and we will be linking podcasts of these speakers to the website. The event, and our ongoing involvement with the National Museums of Scotland have also resulted in the NMS putting together a proposal for a future exhibition linked to the project.

Outcomes

1. Interactive website which will form a compendium.
   http://scottishbasketmakerscircle.org/communities/
2. A selection of symposium papers to be edited and submitted for publication.
3. Videoed papers which will be linked to the website.
4. A proposal for an exhibition linked to the Woven Communities project submitted to the National Museums of Scotland by their museum curators.
5. Academic paper Making plants and growing baskets, to be published by T. Ingold and E. Hallam in their forthcoming volume Growing and Making, Ashgate.
This discussion paper which can inform policy in sustainable craft heritage.

A developing methodological framework, which could act as a model for future community research collaborations and knowledge exchange.

Executive Conclusion

Basket-work as a focus for insights into socio-cultural change. By focusing on an everyday artefact, the Scottish vernacular basket, and its presence in Scottish regional texts, museums, archives, and ethno-botanical sources, we have explored overlapping domains of knowledge and produced insights into the interwoven nature of Scottish communities in three areas.

- Interwoven domains of technical skill, local ethno-botanical knowledge and economic needs. This is evident firstly through engagement and collaboration with local groups. Secondly, following Ellen (2009), we see how socio-historical factors are manifest in basketry production and use, and how disruptions in specific domains of basketry knowledge can affect cultural change in other domains.

- Interwoven past (and present) communities, from fishing to crofting, from agriculture to industry. The dynamics between and within these groups has become increasingly visible during the scoping study, and especially in the website construction. Most specifically, we can see how the regional saying ‘Don’t mix farm and fish’ is more evident in the east, where livelihoods were more specialized, while in the west, where crofting-fishing prevailed, the opposite was the case. Here, the study reveals community intersections and also temporal dynamics.

- Interwoven contemporary communities of practitioners, academics, curators, ecologists, and craft entrepreneurs. The interconnections between the concerns of these communities was most evident in the outcomes of the symposium. The project reveals how intellectual and practical concerns about sustainable craft heritage are not restricted to one community as opposed to another. There is also an intergenerational concern about reproduction of skill and artefacts.

Studies about communities with communities

It may seem self-evident that communities can contribute in multiple ways to research about their own practices. This is certainly the case when studying skills or expertise. This project, I think, has shown the value of this approach.

Moving forward

The emergent and ephemeral nature of craft heritage makes the reproduction of such practices and their role in society both difficult to pin down, or foster. As Hallam and Ingold (2007) argue, these practices are communicated in the doing, in an improvisatory way, which makes advice to policy for the promotion of craft heritage doubly challenging.

It is clear that an aspect of basketry’s obsolescence in Scotland is due to economic factors and basketry’s replaceability by mechanically produced artefacts, and that this has had an impact on Scottish biodiversity.
and plant management, technical skills and community practices. During the symposium, however, following the final breakout session on heritage, sustainability and craft entrepreneurship, we came to the conclusion that marketability could never be the sole driving factor in the production of craft in a contemporary context, or indeed an historic one. Skill, learning and heritage are clearly also of value to contemporary (and past) practitioners, as this scoping study shows. These factors, along with economic necessity, would seem to play a significant role in the sustainability of its production.
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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly interconnected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx