

DESIGN ROUTES

CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT
DESIGNS, PRODUCTS &
PRACTICES

Design Routes case study: Here Today Here Tomorrow Handwoven collection

by Amy Twigger Holroyd, May 2015

Summary

Here Today Here Tomorrow is a fashion label and collaborative studio shop, producing and showcasing sustainable and ethical fashion and accessories.

In 2014 the label initiated a new project using a traditional Nepalese woven fabric, dhaka, which is believed to be in danger of dying out. A successful Kickstarter campaign funded the development of a range of garments and accessories made in Nepal using the cloth, in collaboration with a local fair trade organisation, the Association for Craft Producers (ACP).

This case study is based on interviews with two of the designers, Julia Crew and Anna-Maria Hesse. All images are courtesy of Here Today Here Tomorrow.



Here Today Here Tomorrow Handwoven collection

Background: Here Today Here Tomorrow and ACP

Here Today Here Tomorrow was founded by four fashion designers in East London in 2010. The membership of the group has since changed, with the current

collaboration comprising Anna-Maria Hesse, Katelyn Toth-Fejel and Julia Crew. Here Today Here Tomorrow explore various approaches to sustainability, including 'high quality handmade craftsmanship, fair trade, durability, locality, recycling, natural dye, organic materials, individuality, and transparency of production'.¹

The studio shop was initially set up as a space for the designers to make and sell their collections alongside the work of other sustainable fashion labels. In 2011 they decided to collaborate on a Here Today Here Tomorrow range, and – having travelled in Nepal and worked for other ethical brands that produce there – chose to investigate the country as a location for production.



Here Today Here Tomorrow studio shop

They established a relationship with ACP, a 'local, not for profit, fair trade organization providing design, marketing, management, and technical services to low-income Nepalese craft producers'.² ACP was established in 1984 and has been certified as a Fair Trade Association since 2003. The organisation supports around 1000 artisans (of whom 90% are female); it sells directly to consumers through a retail shop and exports to over 18 countries through a sister company.

Here Today Here Tomorrow work with a group of artisans, supported by ACP, to produce yearly collections of hand-knitted garments and accessories, which are sold through the studio shop and website and on a wholesale basis to other retailers in the UK and Europe. As the designers explain: 'It is important to us that our supply chain is transparent and all production is carried out under the principles of fair trade – thereby supporting (rather than exploiting) craft producers and communities in a developing country.'³

In 2013, while visiting the knitwear producer group in Nepal, Anna-Maria Hesse discovered the traditional dhaka fabric. Here Today Here Tomorrow were keen to develop a collection of woven garments and accessories to complement their knitwear range, and so started to investigate how they might go about using the dhaka cloth in a new collection.

Background: dhaka cloth

Here Today Here Tomorrow describe the handwoven dhaka cloth on their website as follows: 'Taking up to one day to weave just one metre of fabric, dhaka combines a unique and intricate weaving technique with striking geometric patterns and colour combinations, creating a distinctive and high quality textile.'⁴ As Ann Hecht explains in her book *The Art of the Loom*, the cloth was traditionally produced in the Koshi hills area in the east of Nepal, and was used 'in the making of topis (the traditional men's head-wear), blouses and shawls'.⁵ Hecht goes on to describe technical aspects of the dhaka weaving process and identifies the foundation of the dhaka cloth as 'a simple tabby weave, woven in fine mercerised sewing cotton'.⁶ The patterns are created by additional strands which are laid in with each row of the ground thread.⁷



Dhaka cloth

The current initiative by Here Today Here Tomorrow and ACP is just the latest in a series of attempts to revitalise this traditional craft; writing in 1989, Hecht explains that women weavers had recently been supported by a local development scheme to build on their traditions to develop the scope and variety of their weaving. This involved colour changes, with a dark ground being favoured over the traditional white. She reports that the fabric was being sold at prestigious London establishments including Liberty and the British Museum shop. In an academic article about Nepalese dress in 2000, Sharon Hepburn describes 'a brightly colored hand-woven cloth called dhaka, distinctive of Nepal, and now produced in colors in vogue in the West, for which export clothing and shawls are made, the shawls selling for about \$600 in London last year'.⁸

In the early 2000s a UK-based organisation, HomeWorkers Worldwide, undertook research to map homebased work around the world, including the weaving of dhaka cloth in Nepal. This initiative found that most weavers did not own their own looms, but worked for traders and subcontractors, and the majority were producing narrow widths of cloth, suitable for topi hats, rather than wider fabric which could be

used for shawls and garments.⁹ A report produced by Home Based Worker Concern Society Nepal for the research summarised the problems faced by dhaka weavers as ‘unavailability of regular employment, low wages and no alternative work’; furthermore, ‘the respondents lack intensive training, which is required for making good designs from dhaka.’¹⁰



Weaving dhaka

As Julia Crew explained, Here Today Here Tomorrow have had trouble finding information about the tradition of dhaka weaving. Through word of mouth, they understand that the craft is currently in decline due to imports from China; Nepalese people no longer wish to wear this ‘old-fashioned’ fabric, except for special occasions.

Development

Anna-Maria Hesse became aware of dhaka fabric via an American academic and designer, Lin Hightower, who has extensive experience of developing markets for artisan crafts – ‘while preserving their indigenous art techniques and cultural heritage’ – in a number of contexts around the world.¹¹ Hightower was working with ACP in Nepal, and found dhaka fabrics hidden away in their cupboards; though the organisation was no longer producing the cloth, she felt it could find a market if a new group could be set up.

As Julia Crew described, the fabric immediately appealed to Here Today Here Tomorrow: ‘It’s very geometric, very contemporary to our eye, in fact ... which is, I think, why we really loved it – it really fits in with our design aesthetic.’ While in Nepal, Anna worked with ACP artisans to produce initial garment and accessory samples. After she returned to the UK, ACP and Lin Hightower worked with an experienced dhaka weaver to set up a new group, training additional weavers in the traditional skill.

In 2014 Here Today Here Tomorrow were ready to ‘push ahead’ with their dhaka collection, and ran a successful Kickstarter campaign to provide funding. The campaign was summarised as ‘a fair trade womenswear collection that revitalises

traditional artisanship through sophisticated and contemporary design'. As the campaign page explained, 'through this project, and with your support, we intend to help our producers revitalise this weaving technique, protecting their cultural heritage and creating desirable fashion products for a new audience ... With your help we can continue to work alongside these talented weavers, pattern cutters and sewers - growing our relationship with the wonderful artisans, empowering women to provide for their families, revitalising their traditional craft and promoting a fairer and more sustainable approach to fashion.'¹²

Here Today Here Tomorrow - Fair Trade Fashion



A fair trade womenswear collection that revitalises traditional artisanship through sophisticated and contemporary design.

Created by
Anna, Emma, Julia & Katelyn



149 backers pledged £7,759 to help bring this project to life.

Here Today Here Tomorrow Kickstarter campaign

The campaign was successful, with 149 people pledging a total of £7,759 in exchange for 'rewards' of accessories, tops or trousers made from the dhaka fabric.¹³ Here Today Here Tomorrow used some of this capital to send Anna and Julia to Nepal; on this trip they met the weaving group and worked towards production of the Kickstarter reward items plus the development of two additional garment styles.



Here Today Here Tomorrow Handwoven collection Kickstarter rewards

Challenges

Here Today Here Tomorrow have faced a number of challenges in the development of their dhaka collection. While specific to their particular context, many of these challenges resonate with issues experienced by other revitalisation initiatives involving the collaboration of designers and artisans in the development of luxury items for a foreign market.

One issue that Julia and Anna identified was the need to produce quality items with a refined finish, appropriate to Here Today Here Tomorrow's brand identity and market level. As Julia explained, 'we're a sustainable, ethical, eco brand – so the durability and the quality of the garments has to be really good.' The Nepalese suppliers were not always aware of the finish required for this distant market. The strength of the delicate handwoven cloth was a key challenge; when sampling, the designers found that the fabric had a tendency to pull apart at the seams. This issue varied according to the dhaka design, with some fabrics stronger than others. This presented a particular challenge for the garments; the problem was addressed by selecting stronger fabrics for specific items where necessary, and developing stronger seams. A similar problem was encountered with handbag handles; equipment was not available to skim Nepalese leather to the thickness and quality required, and so Here Today Here Tomorrow made the decision to add the handles when they received the bags at their studio.

Another key issue relates to the capabilities of the producer group Here Today Here Tomorrow were working with; they were able to sew accessories, but had no experience of producing garments. While the designers initially tried to encourage the group to develop their skills in this area, it was ultimately agreed that the challenge was too great. The label fortunately came across a small Nepalese clothing manufacturer – set up by another fashion brand – who were looking for other clients, and subsequently took on the production of the garments. Anna reflected that in future she would give greater consideration to the group's capabilities and develop the designs accordingly.

An obvious problem, surely experienced by all designers working with artisans based in other countries, is that of distance and speed; progress on samples and production was good while the designers were in Nepal, but slowed dramatically when they were back in the UK. This issue exacerbated problems related to finish and fit encountered during the sampling process. Another issue relates to the network involved in producing the dhaka collection in Nepal. The designers are aware that key contacts, with whom they have built up good working relationships, may soon move on, which could affect the efficiency of future production.

Here Today Here Tomorrow's dhaka initiative is also affected by other, broader, challenges, such as the reception of the handwoven products in the outside world. They are aiming to showcase the dhaka collection to wholesale buyers in future; however, the ethical fashion trade fairs they might apply to have stringent requirements, particularly around the use of organic materials. As Anna pointed out, these regulations present a challenge for brands working with small producers in

countries such as Nepal. There are many practical problems which make it impossible for Here Today Here Tomorrow to stipulate the use of organic cotton in the dhaka fabric they use at present, although they hope to pursue this idea in the future.

The designers also had concerns about the way in which wholesale buyers might respond to irregularities in the handwoven fabric. As Julia commented, 'they're never going to be perfectly symmetrical, which we all think is part of the beauty of it, and that handmade quality, and what adds value. But whether customers, or wholesale buyers in particular, agree – we're going to have to find out.'



Handwoven collection Fair Trade Tote Bag

2015 earthquakes

A much more fundamental challenge arose on 25 April 2015 when a massive earthquake hit Nepal, killing thousands and causing widespread devastation. Here Today Here Tomorrow reported in a newsletter soon after the disaster: 'We have been able to be in touch with some of our friends and artisan groups in Nepal. Although conditions are more than difficult and very frightening, they have not suffered any fatalities or serious injuries, but it is difficult to get through all the information, especially from those who live in the surrounding villages ... Anna is due to head out to Kathmandu soon and whilst we hope to be able to work on our collection and see things get back to normal, we know there will surely be the overwhelming atmosphere of a country dealing with this huge disaster.'¹⁴ The label joined together with other fashion brands manufacturing in Nepal to raise money to help those in need. Sadly, the April disaster was followed by another destructive

earthquake on 12 May 2015, which caused further damage and casualties, and – Anna reported – shook the confidence of the producer groups as they attempted to gradually return to work.

Future plans

In May 2015, Here Today Here Tomorrow's dhaka accessories have been delivered to the Kickstarter funders and are on sale in the studio shop; the garments are in production. Once these have been received, the designers aim to focus on promoting the collection, in order to communicate the rich narrative behind the pieces to customers. The aim is then to merge the dhaka pieces with the label's knitwear offer to create a year-round collection, and to add garments made from plain handwoven fabrics to extend the range. As previously mentioned, Here Today Here Tomorrow plan to showcase this collection at trade fairs in order to build up their stockist list and place the initiative on a more sustainable footing.

A key element of merging the collections will be to establish a coherent colour palette; at present, the designers are limited to the colours offered by the weavers. As Julia explained: 'Ultimately, we want to be in a position where we can be collaborating more with the weavers, and using our own colour combinations. So it's still their craft, but fitting in with our colour palette for the season.' If this could be achieved, Here Today Here Tomorrow would have their own exclusive dhaka fabrics, and need not be concerned about other labels using the same cloth in their own designs. While orders from other brands would help the weavers to grow their enterprise, at present it would present problems for the label in terms of creating a distinctive and unique offer.

Reflections

This project represents a widespread strategy for revitalising a 'culturally significant' craft: maintaining the making practice and the traditional patterns associated with it, but creating new products appropriate to a distant market. Variations on this basic strategy can be identified in countless contemporary and historical examples from around the world; it is commonly used in situations where local demand has dwindled and there is a need for economic development as well as cultural revitalisation. This example incorporates the recent innovation of online crowdfunding, which enables small-scale initiatives to gain support directly from individuals.

The benefits of this strategy are readily apparent: artisans are supported to maintain their traditional crafts, which are admired and appreciated by distant consumers. This enables an important local tradition to continue, and also provides a valuable source of income in – in this case – one of the poorest countries in the world. As Here Today Here Tomorrow explain: 'These women earn a fair wage from their craft, making a substantial contribution to their household income and enabling them to work from home, meaning they remain an integral part of their family life.'

Apart from being economically self-sufficient, working in this way brings other transformations to the producers' lives as ACP provides medical service, educational support for their children, maternity and paternity leave and retirement funds. What's more, these women gain more self-confidence and are able to command a greater degree of respect from other members of their family.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, there are potential dangers associated with this strategy, which are well documented in accounts of comparable initiatives. For example, a balance must be struck between heritage-related and commercial concerns; the need to adapt to the aesthetic preferences of distant customers can alter traditional designs beyond recognition, while downward pressure on prices can lead to crafts becoming cruder and more simplified. Meanwhile, the longer the distance between artisan and customer, the more dependent the producers are on any 'middlemen' – such as, in this case, the London-based designers – both to provide knowledge of the market and to generate repeat orders. Furthermore, even in projects guided by an ethos of open and equal collaboration, many would argue that there is an inherent imbalance of power within initiatives involving designers and artisans, meaning that the benefits of the project for the artisans can be difficult to objectively assess. Here Today Here Tomorrow have sought to address these challenges through careful positioning of their range and collaboration with the experienced fair trade organisation, ACP.

¹ Here Today Here Tomorrow (2015). *About us – our approach to sustainable fashion* [online]. Available: <http://www.heretoday-heretomorrow.com/pages/about-us> (accessed 12 May 2015)

² Association for Craft Producers (2009). *Homepage* [online]. Available: <http://www.acp.org.np> (accessed 12 May 2015)

³ Here Today Here Tomorrow (2015). *FAQs* [online]. Available: <http://www.heretoday-heretomorrow.com/pages/faqs> (accessed 12 May 2015)

⁴ Here Today Here Tomorrow (2015). *Fair Trade Tote Bag* [online]. Available: <http://www.heretoday-heretomorrow.com/collections/here-today-here-tomorrow/products/fair-trade-tote-bag> (accessed 12 May 2015)

⁵ Hecht, A. (1989). *The Art of the Loom: weaving, spinning and dyeing across the world*, London: The British Museum Press, p. 142.

⁶ *ibid*, p. 157.

⁷ A video of 'dhaka weaving in motion', made by Here Today Here Tomorrow, is available at <https://vimeo.com/122984732>

⁸ Hepburn, S. (2000). The Cloth of Barbaric Pagans: Tourism, Identity, and Modernity in Nepal. *Fashion Theory*, 4(3), p. 289.

⁹ Tate, J. (2004). *Report on Visits to Nepal in October 2003 and January 2004*. HomeWorkers Worldwide (unpublished).

¹⁰ Home Based Worker Concern Society Nepal (c. 2004). Report for HomeWorkers Worldwide mapping programme (unpublished).

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- ¹¹ Hightower, L.A. (undated). *Welcome* [online]. Available: <http://www.linhightower.com> (accessed 12 May 2015)
- ¹² Anna, Emma, Julia & Katelyn (2014). *Here Today Here Tomorrow – Fair Trade Fashion* [online]. Available: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/868506610/here-today-here-tomorrow-fair-trade-fashion/description> (accessed 12 May 2015)
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Here Today Here Tomorrow (2015). *Brand Aid for Nepal* [online]. Available: <http://us2.campaign-archive2.com/?u=2c597a76263888e33332bd4ef&id=d268a9ba2d&e=3ce76a4fd0> (accessed 12 May 2015)
- ¹⁵ Anna, Emma, Julia & Katelyn (2014). *Here Today Here Tomorrow – Fair Trade Fashion* [online]. Available: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/868506610/here-today-here-tomorrow-fair-trade-fashion/description> (accessed 12 May 2015)