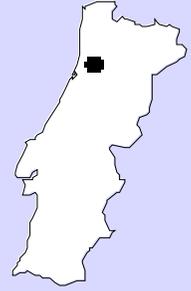


ALTO CAVADO (Nord, Portugal)

Professionalising a tradition: the “Aliança Artesanal” cooperative



The action

A cooperative of rural craftswomen has been created around several elderly women who still possess the know-how of linen and old embroidery work. It gradually grew in size and, thanks to a series of vocational training actions aimed at young women, asserted diversification in production and promotion. This project enabled a new boost to be given to embroidery and linen weaving by adapting the products to market requirements.

Key elements

- > Reintroduction of traditional craft techniques through vocational training.
- > Decoration of utilitarian objects with traditional drawings of value in terms of identity.
- > Support for female crafts through joint organisation and private/public partnership.
- > Promotion and marketing of this craft through presence at fairs and the establishment of a permanent exhibition area.

Context

Linen weaving and embroidery were very widespread female activities in the traditional societies of rural Portugal. This was a way of occupying one's free time and, from a very young age, girls produced items which, apart from the utilitarian value, had a social and semiological value. In the Alto Cavado (Northern Portugal), for example, the “lovers' scarves” were finely-embroidered items of linen with decorative motifs and poetic verses that the young girls wrote and offered to the love of their life. To mark their agreement, the chosen one would then wear the scarf around his neck for the next few days and couples and marriages were thus formed. This old tradition (17th century) is still a symbol of the region's cultural identity.

Traditional embroidery was therefore the medium for the production of a multitude of decorative motifs invented by women. However, these have mostly disappeared, victims of competition from industrial products.

In the context of its “family redevelopment” policy, the Salazar authoritarian regime (1932-1974) encouraged traditional female activities (linen weaving, embroidery, sewing), organising “Mothers' Works” in each of the municipalities in the country. Inspired from paternalistic and corporatist ideologies, these associations nevertheless enabled a certain craft know-how, which was in the process of disappearing, to be kept alive.

Starting point

With the 1974 revolution and the advent of democracy in Portugal, the Mothers' Works disappeared or were gradually transformed into cooperatives or associations. This led to two structures being set up that have taken up some of the activities of the old Works that certain women continued to practice:

- > the “Aliança Artesanal” (Craft Alliance) cooperative, created in Vila Verde in 1988, comprises craftswomen oriented in particular towards embroidery;
- > the “Covide Social and Crafts Centre”, which later became the “White Stones” association, is more involved in the rediscovery of traditional linen processing and weaving techniques.

Implementation

These two structures, which were initially very fragile because they were comprised of only two or three women who were already elderly, benefit from several public aid schemes which have enabled them to develop.

In 1988, two training courses financed by the ESF were organised, which enabled the number of craftswomen to considerably increase. The tutors were women from the cooperative and Social Centre. The main activity of the Craft Alliance was therefore the recovery of designs and the manufacture of “lovers' scarves”. However, these decorative scarves had a limited market and a high production cost which did not guarantee a full time income for the craftswomen.

With the launch of LEADER I came the chance to define a strategy to relaunch the craft, encompassing training and the diversification and promotion of the products. Thus, in 1993, the training actions for young women were increased, whilst others were organised for already experienced crafts-women. The idea was to help the women design "modern" linen clothes by incorporating motifs taken from the lovers' scarves.

Since then, the cooperative has broadly diversified its market niches and its marketing methods, thus guaranteeing the viability of its members' activities.

An operation to recover old drawings has been systematically carried out, in particular from photographs taken from ethnographic works. These motifs have been reworked and diversified, particularly in terms of colour.

New clothes and other articles of everyday use (curtains, tablecloths, carpets, etc.) are designed, integrating the traditional motifs of the "lovers' scarves". All of these products are presented in a permanent exhibition area within the cooperative.

The Craft Alliance has become renowned among distributors and consumers, in particular thanks to its involvement in many fairs and various events, or at fashion shows. Six shows were thus organised in 1994.

Two designers regularly order linen cloth that they then decorate with traditional embroidery. More recently, a crafts-woman originally from Caldas da Rainha, a region specialising in ceramics, has come up with the idea of decorating pottery with motifs taken from the "lovers' scarves". The cooperative has integrated this new production method, thereby diversifying its supply around the same original idea.

Budget and sources of funding

The Craft Alliance cooperative has benefited from three types of LEADER financing:

- > the vocational training of the craftswomen accounted for ECU 12 800 in 1993 (ECU 8 320 of which was financed by LEADER) and ECU 22 500 in 1994 (ECU 14 462 financed by LEADER);

- > the introduction of the motifs was the subject of an initial action costing ECU 1 460 (ECU 950 financed by LEADER), then a second action carried out in conjunction with the "Pedras Brancas" (White Stones) association costing ECU 15 000 (ECU 9 750 financed by LEADER);
- > finally, promotion costs have totalled ECU 29 340, ECU 19 070 financed by LEADER.

Innovative elements for the area

Economic competitiveness

Although it proved impossible to make the production of "lovers' scarves" profitable, its integration in objects of everyday use (clothes, tablecloths, curtains and now terracotta ware) is proving to be a success: the approach is enabling financial constraints to be overcome while developing the interest of consumers in a tradition linked to make-believe. The LEADER programme has played an essential role in this evolution by defining a global strategy to relaunch female crafts.

Creating activities and employment

In 1998, the cooperative had around 80 members. 10 are employed full-time in the company's workshops, with a further 20 working from home. The latter receive the raw material from the cooperative and are committed to delivering their entire production to it.

Furthermore, the creation of the craft cooperative has significantly helped to relaunch regional embroidery. Many women today practise this activity while keeping animals, for example, which enables them to put their time to better use.

Area identity

With this renewal of traditional embroidery, an essential characteristic of the area's identity has been revived and has found a place in a market logic suited to the new consumer trends. Furthermore, this revival of area identity is opening up new prospects, particularly for rural tourism.

THE ALTO CAVADO

The Alto Cavado LEADER area, in Northern Portugal, covers an area of 705 km², 250 km² of which is part of the Gêres National Nature Reserve. With 92 500 inhabitants (131 inhabitants/km²), the Alto Cavado is split into three geo-economic areas: a densely-populated plain due to the proximity of the towns of Braga (100 000 inhabitants) and Oporto (town and suburbs: 1 700 000 inhabitants); a middle area dominated by mixed farming and rearing (to produce milk, meat, local "green" wines); a sparsely-populated mountain area where extensive farming is practised. The Gêres Nature Reserve, the water courses, the many stretches of water (large artificial lakes), the traditions which are still very much alive, the cuisine and the architectural and archaeological heritage are all important assets for tourism.

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