

Parlez-vous français?

Until now I have aimed my guns mainly at the English-speaking world, but the leather industry neither starts nor finishes with English and there is a significant part that speaks French (and Spanish or Portuguese), and in this article I will try to give some insight into what happens in the Saharan and West African leather world.

Before I do so I'd like to express my disappointment in relation to two persons, to whom I provided drawings of the upgraded SFF, the Static Flaying Frame, which some of you may remember. A collector in Zambia contacted me via UNIDO and requested the drawings, which I gave to him after he pressed me week after week. Then someone who called me his "brother from another mother" in Zimbabwe also wanted the drawings, as he needed to sell his wet blue leathers as machine flayed. Both got the drawings and both disappeared. Neither sent pictures or videos, as I had requested. I don't want gratitude because the SFF aims to improve the quality of the hides, which, for the last 15 or so years, has been necessary. I always said that it was free as long as I was acknowledged as the copyright holder, but denying me pictures and videos, the simple satisfaction that

the system works, is beyond belief. I am curious as to whether the changes that I applied are useful so the least they could have done is give me that information.

Now that's off my back we can take a look at the French connection. French-speaking Africa is generally little known to the leather industry. Sure, Morocco has been making leather for centuries and its old tanneries are a UNESCO heritage site; Tunisia has industrial tanneries but is having political issues. Likewise, Algeria and Libya.

Then we head south and enter the Sahara desert with Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal. None of these countries has a big leather industry because of a rather limited population consuming small quantities of meat. The herds are nomadic and animals react to the seasons. In the dry season, the quality of meat and hide or skin are bad. Nevertheless, Chad is now setting up a professional slaughterhouse and tannery but these two connected projects have been hampered by corruption, as part of the money did not end up in machinery but as pocket lining and delays. Some suppliers simply agree to play the game because, apparently, a sale is a sale.

Niger has a functioning tannery producing wet blue and



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one non-functioning tannery that has ties with Tan-Aliz in Burkina Faso, but due to political reasons has not been allowed to operate.

Tan-Aliz was closely related to the presidency in Burkina Faso and was very much favoured for investments and licenses. It had no competition and was one of the best, if not the best, tanneries in the Saharan area, making excellent crust and it invested in finishing machines 10 years ago.

However, it has been affected by the political changes in the country, and this could mean the owners might be allowed to start their tannery in Niger.

Mali has five tanneries; the biggest, formerly Spanish-owned, tannery shut down. A Chinese tannery was set up but tried to get as much out of the country for as little possible money, generating pollution that is not allowed in China. However, the production is so small that they have found it difficult to secure buyers.

The Common Fund for Commodities (CFC), via UNIDO, ran in 2008 a development project in these four countries plus Senegal to improve the quality of raw materials and aid tannery development. The usual mantra; the project was called a huge success and it was ascertained that the quality of raw hides and skins had improved. However, the moment the project finished everything collapsed because the local people involved were incapable of building on the experience. In fact, I was recently told that Mali would need another hide and skin

quality improvement programme. This is mind boggling, because they already had such a programme in 2008! It starts all over again, proving so much money is wasted.

Another example is the Italian tannery machinery makers association, ASSOMAC, which donated (with help from the International Trade Centre in Geneva) a small shoe factory in Chad complete with equipment, training, modelling and market information. It took a couple of years to set up the factory and then it was only used for the training programme that was included in the deal. After the Italian trainer left the country, the machines stopped, and nothing has been produced since. Why? The artisans supposed to operate the machines don't have the money to buy finished leather! They wait for donations that will allow them to buy leather, make and sell shoes. But even if this happens, everything will stop again after the leather is consumed, because what is missing is the business acumen to set aside money to buy new raw materials. Everything is hand to mouth and when the hand is empty, the mouth does not eat. The problem is, however, not as much commercial as cultural.

One of the emails I received recently asked, "What can you do to save the leather industry in Saharan Africa?" but that is the wrong question. People in the Saharan countries must ask themselves, "What must we do to save our industry?" The solution is not to develop programmes by whatever non-governmental organisation (NGO) or UN agency, because

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these organisations absorb money like sponges. The solution is to set up guarantee funds to finance the purchase of equipment with the obligation to pay back over a period of time. Nothing must be free. That's too easy and it does not discourage the begging culture. The UN and NGOs are only worsening the situation, because they execute projects aimed at filling their pockets with outrageous salaries under the cover of helping the leather industry. Each of these projects contains an element that warrants a follow-up project to keep the money rolling and the jobs filled without ever obtaining anything. It's like in parliament where representatives are only interested in keeping their seat and privileges under the pretence of working for the country.

Tunisia is one of the exceptions, even if it is undergoing challenging times. Tunisia treats hides and skins as a valuable by-product of the meat industry. It is capable of transforming the raw materials into industrially produced, marketable products. That has two advantages: it earns hard currency by exporting a finished product and it blocks, at least partially, the import of leather products from Asia, which is a plague for local shoe industries all over Africa. Tunisia is said to have 450 leather-related companies employing some 40,000 in the industry and about 16,000 people in artisanal jobs, with a turnover of €486 million. As far as I know, the Tunisian leather industry is not holding out its hands for financing and if they do, they do this on a commercial basis with overseas partners

where both parties make their share of profit. No freebies!

Apparently, the secret is not generating development money but generating a commercially attractive environment by local governments that attracts foreign buyers to entrust African producers with their orders. Developed countries are reducing their consumption of red meat whereas in Africa the economy is slowly improving, allowing people to buy more meat, and hence where the availability of hides and skins is slightly decreasing in Europe, it will slowly increase in Africa. There is a need to transform these raw materials and this will create opportunities.

The trick is to find out how this can be enacted without feeding the NGOs or the bank accounts of officials. This movement must come from within a country and not from outside. Professional associations in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Indonesia, Italy and France are flooding their government ministries with demands for the development of their industries with practical proposals for incentives, tax rebates and affordable financing. And it works! Nobody bothers with NGOs, knowing that they are not the answer. If these local conditions are in place and local quality in the Saharan countries reaches the levels of the 2008 CFC project through local initiatives, this will automatically attract foreign buyers who will be willing to partner with local entrepreneurs. With such partnerships the leather industry will take a new turn. Work not charity, as designer Vivian Westwood says! ☺



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