

Beautification of Death: A Case Study of Green Oasis Coffins (Made) in Bangladesh

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Beautification of Death: A Case Study of Green Oasis Coffins (Made) in Bangladesh

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Abstract

- (a) **Situation faced:** This case presents the story of Oasis Coffins, a manufacturer of beautiful hand-crafted coffins and ash urns. This venture began its life in Bangladesh, paradoxically a Muslim majority country where the demand for coffin is limited.
- (b) **Action taken:** The founder of Oasis, David How, who is a Chartered Environmentalist, took advantage of the location and sustainably sourced natural products that are abundantly available in Bangladesh. Using these products, Oasis dedicatedly develops coffins and exploits the recent trend of ‘green’ death’ in the global funeral industry.
- (c) **Results achieved:** While both born global firms and sustainability have received significant academic attention in recent years, most studies are based on firms of developed economies. Addressing the research gap, the authors have selected Oasis Coffins, a small venture that successfully integrated the economic, social, and environmental sustainability dimensions while operating from a developing nation. The paper discusses how Oasis operates as a sustainable business in Bangladesh and successfully exporting funeral products in international markets such as UK, Holland and Germany. The authors provide an account of the financial challenges, the supply chain and promotional strategies of Oasis.
- (d) **Lessons learned:** While this study is a significant contribution to the SME, sustainability and born global literature, it broaches discussion on the founder’s capabilities surrounding opportunity recognition, exploitation and establishment of a born global firm in a developing nation.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Oasis Coffins, funerals, green death, eco-friendly, sustainability, born global

1. Introduction

*Death is one of two things...
Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything;
or, as we are told, it is really a change:
a migration of the soul from one place to another.*

Socrates, Greek Philosopher (c. 470 BCE–c. 399 BCE)

Although death is universal, the treatment of corpses and customs for funerals¹ vary across time, cultures, religions and countries. The church along with

the state supported by the business entities initially took responsibility of the funerals in the mid-19th century (Walter, 2005). This organized approach related with the historical and cultural factors created a specific industry or cultural solution to arrange the dead in a mobile, metropolitan and modern society of difference countries (Patel, 2017).

The concept of beautification of death, developed in the late 18th and 19th century mortuary practices (Bell, 1990), indicates a significant modification in the funeral services industry from “traditional, community-based provision to commercial operation” (Walsh, 2011, p. 169). The recent changes in funeral industry are driven by consumer-related inspirations. Consumers today expect a certain touch of personalization in the products and services offered to them. Thus comes funerals, cost-effective funerals (or more expensive funerals), and eco-friendly burial options, together with business-related motivations (Beard & Burger, 2017). As such, the trend of green or sustainable death has received increasing attention within the last two decades. This is a new form of burials that implies people’s changing attitudes to death, memorialization, nature and landscape (Yarwood et al., 2015).

Furthermore, increased social mobility and the improved transportation made families spread across the country. While this trend is the most popular in the United Kingdom (UK), Oasis Coffins, a small entrepreneurial venture from Bangladesh, has been pioneer to explore the opportunity by offering green or eco-friendly coffins and funeral products. The firm is solely export-oriented and driven by the goal of socio-economic benefits to the country.

How the economic, social and environmental dimensions integrate in the business model of Oasis Coffins, and, thus, make it a born-global firm? Why the export-based nature of Oasis’s operations make it a sustainable organization? In regards to this particular research, Oasis Coffins is a robust and unique business concept in Bangladesh.

Eco-Friendly or Green Burial

The section discusses the eco-friendly or green burial, born global firms, and its sustainability. The predominantly Christian funeral service industries are de-

scribed in details because of their relevance to the case study of Oasis Coffins.

There is no specific agreed upon definition of green burial or eco-friendly burial. However, the motivators for a green burial usually is the least impact on planet and very few resources to be expended that impacts the planet itself (Sonya, 2018). Although, the concept of eco-friendly or eco-friendly or green products and services are available in the market, however it is a relatively new trend in the death industry. Often one of the motivation behind an eco-friendly burial is the less cost associated with these burials than the traditional funeral, but cost is less important than the sustainability principle for this type of consumers (Beard & Burger, 2017). The UK is leading the trend of green death (Yarwood et al., 2015). A recent research by Funeralcare shows that, out of every 20 coffins sold one is now affected by requests for alternative materials. Green burials eliminate waste like wood, embalming fluids, reinforced concrete, etc. by leaving out almost all these materials. When the more ecologically conscious baby boomers generation would age and die, the environment friendly disposal methods are expected to be business instead of one off instances (Chumsky, 2014). Although cremation is often considered as another eco-friendly option, it tends to have more carbon footprint than green burials. Furthermore, green death movement is at the introductory stage in other countries of Europe, New Zealand and Australia (Jeong, 2018; Yarwood et al., 2015).

The eco-friendly trend in green burials is reflected in two ways. First, the burial has minimum environmental impacts, for example, by using coffins made from bio-degradable materials. Next, the grave itself contributes to the conservation of the environment, for instance, by supporting trees and fauna. With its environmental impacts, the green burial sites also benefit people in the nearby community. Therefore, adopting eco-friendly is no longer only a choice for life but rather a choice for death (Mei Ling, 2009).

This brings us to the case of Oasis Transformation Limited, the entity that owns Oasis Coffins. Oasis produces beautiful hand-crafted ash urns and coffins made from Willow, Seagrass or Bamboo. There are several challenges associated with industries relevant to post-death services. Oasis Transformation is ad-

addressing and providing a sustainable solution to the coffins by utilizing eco-friendly alternatives. The initiatives also touch specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as it operates in an emerging economy like Bangladesh, currently operates in the United Kingdom, Holland, and other parts of Europe, and even has a market in the United States. The organization alleviates the living standards of the remote village in Bangladesh by providing employment opportunities and a fair work policy. Besides creating income opportunities for rural Bangladeshi villagers, eco-friendly materials are sourced locally as well. Driven by the core value to do good for the society, Oasis not only improves the lives of the close to hundred workers from marginalised backgrounds, but also aspires to operate towards sustainability.

2. Oasis Coffins: An Overview

Oasis Coffins was founded by David How in 2006. The organization began its journey with a simple idea. The idea was based on sustainable sourcing of abundant natural resources in rural Bangladesh, making coffins and then shipping them abroad. By doing so they were also improving the standard of lives of those 100 workers in working for Oasis Transformation. The idea is based on leaving positive footprint on the planet and the society. The production facility of Oasis has been set up in Nilphamari district, 400 kilometer north of the capital city, Dhaka (Oasis Coffins, 2019a). One of the major hurdles confronted by the organization was shortage of financial capital. As a result, Tindercapital established by Jerry Nicolson and Fiona Elizabeth Nicolson, and Panahpur, a UK based impact investor, came forwardⁱⁱ to supply Oasis Coffins with the necessary funding (Tindercapital, 2019). Jerry Nicolson visited Bangladesh for the first time and toured its cities, towns and rural villages in 2004. He was convinced that Bangladesh is a land full of opportunities. His view was further reinforced when he befriended a fellow country man, How, who was then working in Bangladesh. In 2010, Nicolson came back to Bangladesh with the sole purpose of setting up a business. With the integrated assistance from Tindercapital and Panahpur, and work of the underprivi-

leged women, Oasis Coffins has started growing since 2011. Later, the firm has become profitable, developed relationships with a coffin distributor to enter into the UK market, employed 40 per cent more workers, and researched to implement living wages from factory floor to management. The biggest opportunity came in 2012, when Oasis Coffins made a deal with JC Atkinson, a renowned firm in the funeral industry of the UK. Ever since the market has expanded to the United Kingdom and Ireland, Holland, several other European nations and orders have even reached as far as the United States.

2.1 Vision, Mission and Values

Oasis's vision is to create a well-managed business that will generate fulfilling, up-skilling and well-paid employment for people from the lower margins of the society, who, in turn, own the values of the business and influences their communities and society at large (Oasis Coffins, 2019b). It accomplishes the vision through designing, manufacturing and selling life enhancing products that are made from renewable materials and sourced from traceable supply chains. The mission of the organization is to create a safe working environment for its employees, so they are able to provide higher quality service and enjoy a better life. Its goal is to improve the experience of its suppliers and consumers, too. Furthermore, it has also made commitments to the ten principles of fair trade and initiative has since been approved by Traidcraft in the United Kingdom. Through good performance, it aims to seek opportunities to further fulfill its potentials. Therefore, Oasis Coffins is a pioneer, holistic and value based businessⁱⁱⁱ. The five core values of Oasis as stated by them are social justice, transparent demonstration, natural beauty, servant leadership and honest relationship. This core values uniquely puts Oasis in a different league altogether due to the culture that it thrives to create and uplift for the organization.

3. Background of the market

Bangladesh is a developing country in South Asia, located on the Bay of Bengal, between Myanmar and India. In addition, the country has a huge population, 162.7

million (July 2020 estimate), that is growing at an annual rate of .98 percent (2020 estimate) (The World Factbook, 2020). However, regardless of being a Muslim majority country, the Bangladeshi culture and way of life is impacted by subcontinental culture and deviates from the orthodox Islamic practices and beliefs (Hamadani & Tofail, 2014). As for the market, there is no other producer and distributor of traditional coffins in Bangladesh as the majority of the population is Muslim, and thus, the coffin is not a requirement during funerals. However, for the very few percentage populations of the Christian and Buddhist population who opt for coffins and there are also close to 40 different indigenous communities who prefer the same. There are locally produced low-priced and low-quality alternatives. There is absolutely no competition. However, there is a small but local demand for these products for affluent local non-muslims and immigrant families. Oasis can look into this niche in Bangladesh and also consider exporting to neighboring India, where there is regional demand for coffins in specific locations.

4. Environmental operations of the company

a. Supply Chain

Oasis currently has a plant in Nilphamari district of Bangladesh. It is approximately 400 kilometers from the capital Dhaka and the base of development and production of Oasis. The unit employs approximately 70 workers, 50 percent of whom are women (Oasis Coffins, 2019e).

“We make beautiful, high quality products in an environment that gives people reliable employment and good working conditions. Our products are in demand from people who are becoming increasingly conscious of their impact on the environment and others. It is encouraging to know that in bereavement, we can give life into people and a community in Bangladesh. We want people to know where their products are coming from, and to know that what they buy can benefit people elsewhere.”

David How, Managing Director, Oasis Transformations.

Oasis Transformation has a partnership with another local NGO in Bangladesh named Supoth. With Supoth's involvement it works directly with 40 producers from the rural community (Murray, 2013). The organization entered into an agreement with Supoth that it would train Oasis's production team in financial management skills, as well as in adult education. In addition, the structure of its coffins is made from bamboo instead of wood. Both bamboo and seagrass grow in Noakhali in abundance, and, thus, they are cost effective. Oasis Transformation in Bangladesh has the resources and capability required to source sustainably. Many natural materials such as banana leaf, rattan, and water hyacinth are available here and helps Oasis develop new products as well. The products are exported to the UK, Ireland, Germany, Netherlands and other international markets.

b. Distribution and Promotion

A wide variety of urns, coffins and other relevant products of Oasis Transformation are available nationally in the UK through local funeral directors. The sole partner in UK is JC Atkinson. JC Atkinson is a green family business, which makes 75,000 coffins a year, that is around fifteen percent of the coffins used in the UK (Funeralzone, 2017). In addition, Oasis products are available in Holland through its local partner Seker (Oasis Coffins, 2019f). Oasis Transformation is a member of the Funeral Furnishing Manufacturer's Association (FFMA)^{iv}, as well as a part of its new coffin certification scheme (Oasis Coffins, 2016b). Also, it has been a member of the renowned Fair Trade community and a provisional member of World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO)^v(Oasis Coffins, 2016a). The WFTO label is a one of a kind symbol that assures consumers of the complete fair practices along the whole supply chain from producer to retailers. This helps consumers to easily identify products in the whose purchase intention is dependent upon fair and sustainable practices inside the organization. This unique Fair Trade label is an added advantage for them. The official website of Oasis presents a detailed description of the organization, its products, raw material sourcing, distribution methods and environmental concerns.

c. Products and Raw Materials Sustainability

Sustainable business is an approach of doing business where creating long term shareholder value is associated with exploiting the opportunities and managing challenges derived from profit, planet and people aspect of development (Dow Jones Sustainability Index, 2005). Therefore, the concept of sustainability is associated with an integrated outcome with social, economic, and environmental elements. Sustainability is based on Triple Bottom Lines (TBL) (Elkington, 1998), three discrete but interrelated dimensions, namely economic, social and environmental (Christofi et al., 2012)

Oasis Coffins is the manufacturer of natural hand-crafted coffins and urns. Its coffins are made of willow, paulownia, seagrass and bamboo. The willow wood is imported from the well-known “willow town” of Linyi, China. The willow is locally produced in Bangladesh by hand. It is piece-by-piece fit onto a frame made from locally sourced bamboo. The brown color of the willow is produced by either steaming the willow to draw out the natural brown color, or through the use of locally sourced, traditional and environmental-friendly vegetable based natural dyes. According to James A. Khan, the director of Oasis Coffins, approximately 75 percent of all raw materials used in the coffins are sourced locally. The bamboo is sourced from locally grown plants in Noakhali district. In addition, seagrass which is a freshwater plant, also known locally as “*Hogla*”. *Hogla* is usually found along the banks of freshwater rivers and flood-prone land. In Noakhali the local producers harvest the grass twice a year and by drying, spinning it into long pieces of log of around 20 meters in length (Oasis Coffins, 2019c). As the *Hogla* dries, it changes its color. The color transforms into an attractive red or brown from the green color. Bangladesh has a rich tradition of making woven products from this material. Oasis also offers traditional style coffin made from renewable Paulownia timber, a material which is very strong but light weight (FFMA, 2019a). After an elaborate study of the market and product, the firm offers a variety of coffins. The coffins are thoroughly tested to carry up to 160 kilograms (Oasis Coffins, 2019d). All types of coffins are available in 8 adult sizes and 2 child sizes, and can be ordered both in traditional and round shapes.

The robust design of Oasis Coffins means that they can be folded flat for transport, and, thereby, easily constructed to form a sturdy, secure unit. Also, these can be interwoven with flowers and foliage to have a unique personal presentation. Similarly, natural styled ash caskets in bamboo, willow and seagrass are designed to complement the coffins. Also, it makes other products such as urns, picnic baskets and Christmas baskets on a small scale.

5. Social and Environmental Performance

Oasis Coffins aims to respect and value everyone regardless of their social identity. The organization helps to support Nilphamari, one of the most poverty-stricken districts in Bangladesh. As Oasis Transformation abides by the policies of fair trade and applies their principles to Oasis employees, they make a better workplace. Their fair practices are visible in terms of benefits, compensations, rewards, and even a healthcare cover (COOP News, 2013). The employees receive 30 per cent additional payment than that is expected for garment workers in the country. It deliberately chose an area in rural Bangladesh that suffers from poverty and lack of secure employment. The local residents get several benefits from Oasis as their quality of life is improved in several different ways. Not only are the workers treated well, paid fair wages for their work but also the suppliers who sources several different raw materials for the coffins are treated fairly and paid a fair price for their efforts, this further impacts the lives of the locals (COOP News, 2013).

Furthermore, as Oasis Transformations intends to use the WFTO label on their products they also engage to ensure several other components of their management is fair and just. Including transparency, creation of opportunity for underprivileged producers and suppliers, enhanced transparency in management, fair price, fair wage, diversity and inclusion, empowering women through inclusion and employment Oasis also ensures freedom of association, fair working condition in line with Fair Trade guidelines (Oasis Coffins, 2016a).

Table 1: Environmental Goals of Oasis Coffins

Low carbon emissions	Helps develop a “Life-Cycle Analysis” in order to understand and control the impact made to carbon released from all activities combined.
Natural raw materials	Attempting to source all the raw material from natural sources and involving people to establish a genuine relationship and treating them fairly.
Low usage of energy and other resources	Maximizing the utilization of natural materials through excellent product design, and lowering the consumption of energy, water and other utilization of natural dyes from plant instead of chemical ones.
Environment-friendly transport	Using smart design that ensures easier and safer yet lighter packing for sea transport and minimizing the movement of products by air as much as possible.

Source: Oasis Coffins (2019h)

Regarding Oasis Coffin’s environmental performance (as summarized in Table 1), all the natural materials it uses come through a sustainable way from reliable sources. The bamboo plants are sustainably managed and harvested according to best practice. Newer shoots grow each summer season as long as the plants are properly taken care of. In addition, Oasis perfects “branch cutting” methods to propagate new seedlings every year, which are distributed to local planters. Oasis coffins are carefully manufactured with the goal to maximize materials usage, as well as minimize waste and energy use (Oasis Coffins, 2019h). The bamboo also happens to be a renewable resource, it has also been proven that it effectively absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (Oasis Coffins, 2019h). In addition, all materials used in Oasis’s manufacturing are fully bio-degradable. Therefore, all Oasis coffins and urns are environment-friendly. Last of all, the organization has started to experiment and develop the cultivation of self-sources willow trees in their own land in Bangladesh.

6. Future Plans

Although Oasis Coffins is at an early stage, good quality products and strong customer relationships provide the organization a solid platform to grow. It looks

forward to achieving rapid growth and building a new factory (Tindercapital, 2019).

“Within the next 10-20 years we want to create job opportunities for thousands of people in this region and our work is going accordingly. Currently we are only importing the willow wood for our coffins. In the future we want to stop that import and use the wicker that is native to this part of Bangladesh. This will create more opportunities for the people of Nilphamari. In order to employ more people here, we are planning to enter the American market along with our existing European one. Very soon our coffins will be sold in the United States.”

David How, Managing Director, Oasis Coffins

Currently the biggest challenges ahead of Oasis is the pandemic. Although there has been increasing demand for their products in Europe and new orders are coming through, however, it has been very challenging to successfully transport their products as frequent closure took place in Bangladesh, the United Kingdom with travel restrictions and airport shutdowns to curb down the pandemic. For the same reason, they are unable to access and explore the opportunities in neighboring markets in India.

Oasis Coffins has fulfilled its economic goals by being profitable, ensuring fair price, and marking its presence in international markets. Furthermore, the membership of the Fair Trade and WFTO guarantees the quality of its products. Its socio-economic concerns are reflected through its location, vision, mission, and values, along with the work environment it has created and the demographic characteristics of its workers. Last of all, it has multi-facet environmental goals. In addition to being a sustainable firm, Oasis can be considered a born global business. First, the entrepreneur, David How, recognized the opportunity for exporting green or eco-friendly coffins to foreign countries, while others have not. As the pre-dominant Muslim population in Bangladesh does not use coffins in burials, the prospective markets for Oasis has to be identified from foreign Christian nations. As a result, the organization has started exporting soon after its inception. Nevertheless, being a small entrepreneurial venture, it has little financial resource that

was necessary to grow. The firm acquired the resources from external sources, namely Tindercapital and Panahpur. These characteristics closely match with the discussion about born global firms in section two. This case demonstrates empirical evidences that, how venture from Bangladesh has become successful in the international markets despite its small size. In addition, it offers valuable academic insights to understand a business model that has combined the features of a born global and sustainability. Lastly, the visionary entrepreneur of Oasis Coffins is one major factor for its success. This implies that more research is needed to investigate entrepreneur's capabilities with opportunity recognition and exploitation, as well as with performance of born global, from developing countries. This also implies that, SMEs need to look for external resources to overcome the liabilities of newness and smallness (Aldrich & Auster, 1986; Stinchcombe, 1965). Second, Oasis Coffins has obtained the financial resource through its network relationships, particularly with Timbercapital. This means the new ventures need to develop and maintain network relationships of personal (Oparaocha, 2015) and institutional nature (Dubini & Aldrich, 1991). In addition to networks in the foreign markets, the entrepreneur's vision is important to recognize and exploit an international opportunity. Last of all, the study demonstrates the necessity to support entrepreneurial activities by the government and society.

The case study focuses on Oasis Coffins by drawing arguments from the existing research on born global and business sustainability. While both born global firms and sustainability has received significant academic attention in recent years, most studies, however, are based on developed economies. Addressing the research gap and taking into account the important of such countries to global economic growth, the authors has selected Oasis Coffins, a small venture from Bangladesh. The discussion indicates that, Oasis has successfully integrated the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability. In addition, its export orientation and internationalization process confirms the born global nature of the firm. The current study is a significant contribution to the SME, sustainability and born global literature.

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Authors' Profile

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Endnotes

ⁱ The funeral customs vary significantly across religions. For example, the rituals of the Muslims (burial without the use of a casket or coffin) and the Hindus (burning of the corpse) are different from those followed by the Christians (discussed in earlier sections).

ⁱⁱ Tindercapital works with pro-poor entrepreneurs at an earlier stage. It started working with Oasis Coffins at the beginning of 2011. Its investment served as a catalyst for Panahpur’s involvement (Tindercapital, 2019). It started discussions to invest in Oasis Transformations in early August, 2010. Mr Jerry Nicolson who closely worked with Oasis evaluated the feasibility of the initiative and developed an investment plan. In the later part of 2010, Panahpur made the first investment and Tindercapital and panahpur made a contribution of 27,000 and 1,39,000 GBP by the end of 2012. Besides, Panahpur strongly contributed and participated in the organization, development of a board for the Oasis Transformation.

ⁱⁱⁱ The operations and relationships of the organization are governed by the set of following values (Oasis Coffins, 2019b).

- a) Social justice: The firm operates in an environmentally responsible and friendly manner.
- b) Transparent demonstration: To ensure visibility of the effectiveness of its solutions among the employers, suppliers, customers and other stake holders, Oasis Coffins has established transparent and meaningful indicators.
- c) Natural beauty: The organization aims to pursue beauty in their products, day-to-day work environment, processes and relationships.
- d) Servant leadership: By serving the internal community efficiently, it enhances its quality of products and services towards the external community.
- e) Honest relationships: It searches for mutual trust and respect in all its business relationships.

^{iv} FFMA was established in 1939 with the goal to ensure the goods produced are of good quality and high standards. As part of this role to promote quality and new scheme was developed to ensure all coffins produced and sold by FEMA members are as per need and quality (FFMA, 2019b).

^v The WFTO is the global community of Fair Trade Enterprises. Established in 1989, they currently have over 400 members across 70 nations. Their community includes 330 Fair Trade Enterprises and broader initiatives of 70 organizations and extended network to sustain their goals. The WFTO ensures the commitment of all their member towards Fair Trading by peer reviewing and independent audits. These entities can be social business, cooperatives and the family owned entities. All of the corporations adopted to a practices and structures that ensures due priority towards employees, farmers and artisans in their business decisions. They were born as alternative models of business in the struggle against inequality and injustice (WFTO, 2019).