

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

The Story of a Namibian Basket

The Okavango River starts in the central highlands of Angola, working its way in a south-easterly direction, along Namibia's northern border towards the famous Okavango Delta in Botswana. There the waters eventually drain away into the Kalahari Desert basin. The second most populous region in Namibia, located between the two countries, is known as the Kavango.

The people who settled here from the great lakes in the late 1700s tend small herds of cattle, fish the waters of the river and grow mahango (pearl millet). The thatch and timber traditional homestead encircled by fences of reed and wooden stakes is at the heart of village life here. Daily chores are dictated by the seasons: young men tend the cattle or plough the fields with oxen; women weed fields and pound the mahango in hand-made wooden pestles. Young children fetch water from the river or a nearby well whilst grandmothers look after the very young. Older men sit in the shade, discussing important issues of the day.

When the mahango has been harvested, threshed and stored and the household chores completed, the women assemble their basket-weaving materials. Finding shade, they sit on their myaye (a cloth wrapped around their lower body) and start to weave their baskets.

In the early 1990s, UNESCO celebrated basket-making world-wide as part of the organisation's dedication to supporting Intangible Cultural Heritage. This 'Year of the Baskets' was the impetus for the transformation of the large harvesting baskets used in the mahango fields of the Kavango to finely-woven contemporary baskets that decorate interiors around the world today. Research in the four basket-weaving areas was followed by basket competitions, culminating in the first basket exhibition in the National Gallery of Namibia in 1992.

A request from a local headman to support the women from his community was the perfect opportunity to start a basket-making project in earnest, and Omba Arts Trust was created as a Namibian social enterprise to promote and develop sustainable livelihoods and resilience of rural artisans. Basket-weavers from the surrounding homesteads were eager to hear about Omba's plans and more importantly, welcomed the opportunity for a new livelihood using a skill that was largely taken for granted in their rural lives.

Weavers spend much time gathering and preparing the materials they need

to make a basket. Riverine grass, the supple young fronds of the *Hyphaene petersiana*, known locally as the Makalani palm, as well as roots, bark and leaves of various plants, are assembled, pounded, boiled and sometimes traded with other villagers, where the resource is scarce. Some weavers harvest their palm-fronds from the community palm tree gardens that Omba Arts Trust helped establish to protect these resources.

Two techniques are used for the letateko (the Gciriku word for 'start'). The basket begins with a simple coil in which the trimmed palm is wrapped around the riverine grass, or with a double chequer square in which two broader strips of palm are folded. The traditional baskets used for harvesting Mahango are very large with thick robust coils. These functional baskets make welcome wedding gifts locally or items to be traded between villagers, but it soon became evident that the better-quality baskets earned a higher price, especially among urban customers.

Training workshops began focusing on improving the quality and shape of the basket, to ensure that each ntondo, or coil, is even in thickness and the palm is wrapped and woven carefully around the inner core of grass, using an awl, creating a sturdy and high quality structure. Sometimes the palm is wrapped around two coils in sequence resulting in a textured pattern quite unique to these Kavango baskets.

In time, with guidance from master weavers, the quality of the weave improved and the intricacy of the patterns increased. The baskets became finer and smaller in appearance with bold new patterns and colours. Dimuntje is the one Gciriku word that is known to everyone in the supply chain; the weavers, the graders and Omba. A basket is evaluated on the quality of the weave, the shape and most importantly, the pattern.

The large traditional harvesting and winnowing functional baskets reveal some attempts at pattern-making, usually in the form of an over-weave stitch from palm that has been dyed in a single colour, most often brown or black, using the pounded bark of the *berchemia discolor*. These traditional patterns are often simple concentric designs, 'leaf-outline' shapes and almost always with the double coil over-weave producing a textural configuration to the basket so typical of the region. In one of the earliest workshops in the 1990s, it was suggested that the weavers try reversing the colour: an over-weave pattern using the natural palm on a dark brown coil base from the more common



Berchemia discolor dye. This tonal reverse combination opened up a range of possibilities in pattern-making and transformed Kavango baskets forever. Through further workshops and more experimentation by the weavers themselves a new palette of colours evolved, using various plants from the region such as *Acacia nigrescens*, *Diospyros Lyciodes*, *Pterocarpus angloensis* to name but a few - producing shades of pink, mustard, light and dark brown whilst clay and rusty tins produce greys and blacks.

With the new range of colours and financial rewards for excellence, a world of pattern-making flourished and over the years basket designs have become complex and more intricate. More importantly, Omba's approach has been to recognise and celebrate the individual creativity of each weaver and the uniqueness of each basket.

Templates for mass produced designs, whilst more practical for marketing, have never been encouraged. Variations of certain basket themes are repeated and some weavers have developed a very distinctive and recognisable style. Asymmetrical patterns are an unusual feature that grew over time and have been encouraged, resulting in organic and unusual designs that are unique to Omba's Kavango range of baskets.

Noting interior trends in black and white, the trust helped weavers explore new concentric designs taking elements from their baskets whilst looking at contrasts in pattern and tone. These very graphic and modern baskets have

had broad appeal in modern interiors.

Basket weavers are reminded that the Mughaya, or ending of the last coil, should taper off gently before the last stitch completes the basket. The size of the basket and the pattern between the letatiko and the mughaya remain the domain of the weaver's individual preference and creativity. 'We never knew that our baskets would have value and be appreciated outside of our villages,' the late Hompa Angelina Matumbo Ribebe, queen of the Shamyu, observed in 1991. Today, over 100 weavers in the region produce baskets throughout the year, supplying Omba Arts who markets them locally and internationally.

In the early years, weavers were mostly older women who had learned the skill from their mothers and grandmothers. Today many young single mothers and young women have joined the groups to support themselves and their young families from the income they receive from their baskets.

The finely woven baskets with their contrasting complex and sometimes simple patterns add a unique hand-made sensibility to modern interiors around the world. A single basket on a coffee table brings the hand-made element inside whilst an arrangement of five or more against a wall adds

a graphic touch to any interior. *** **Karin le Roux,**
Omba Arts will be participating in the 2021 Selvedge World Fair.
Please visit www.selvedge.org for details www.ombarts.org

