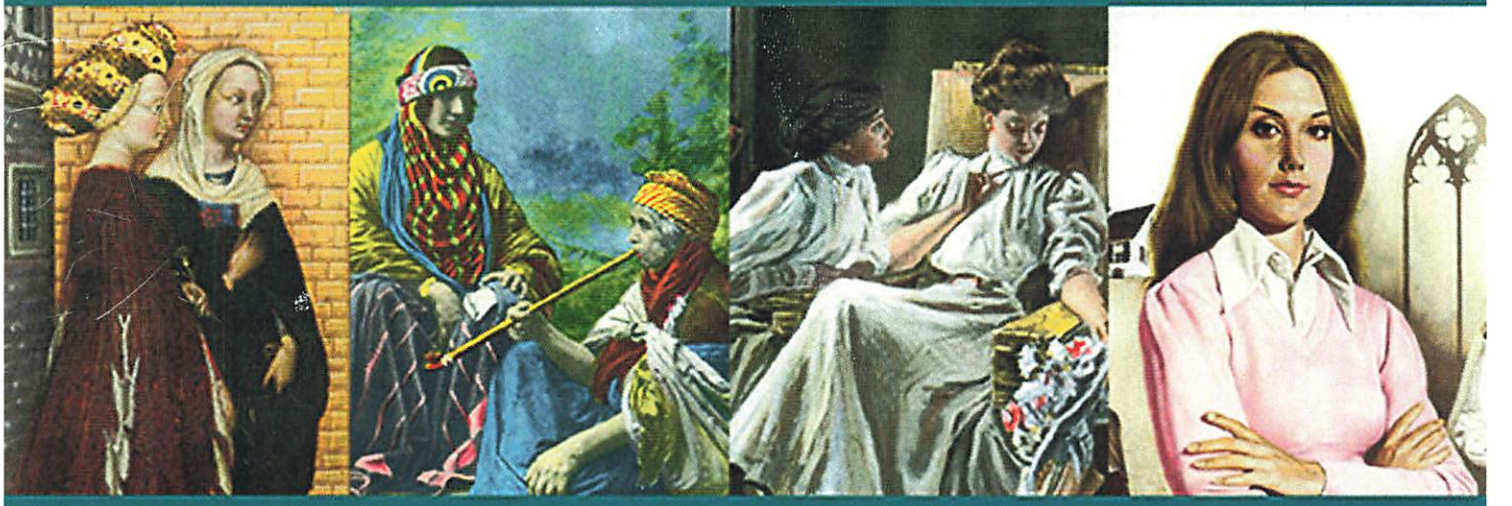
DAILY LIFE OF WOMEN

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT



Colleen Boyett, H. Micheal Tarver, and Mildred Diane Gleason, Editors

potter has an important role in supporting her family; she provides for the cost of living, the bride prices for her sons' marriages, and the cost of medical care. She also produces other types of pots, because *aksh* is easily broken during production. If she produces various types of pots, she can at least earn enough money for purchasing salt, which means she can prepare coffee leaf soup.

Most female potters tend to marry and become the sole breadwinners in their household economy. The number of potters has increased in the last twenty years, as the demand for pots remains high in the area. Learning the process of pottery making involves respect for the different pottery-making procedures, and the practice of pottery making as a means of livelihood necessitates producing a variety of pots. Like most aspects of African life, tradition continues to play a significant role. The potters briefly highlighted above illustrate the connection of the traditional craft to family relations, societal norms and tradition, women potters as economic actors, and the importance of the potters to the food-centered societies.

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THE ARTS

BASKET MAKERS

Sub-Saharan African basketry is a centuries-old artisanal craft that has had an enormous social, cultural, and utilitarian impact across the continent, especially in terms of how it has shaped social and spiritual traditions to become an essential part of communal life even in modern times. An ever-evolving and highly adaptable craft, sub-Saharan basket making has transformed across geographical regions to reflect the modern environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic imperatives of each particular region, including in some cases the replacement of natural fibers with recycled components as the materials of choice. Of particular importance is the socioeconomic impact basket making has had on the lives of sub-Saharan women, the primary practitioners of this artisanal genre. Indeed, the impact of the basket-making or basket-weaving tradition is of paramount importance among sub-Saharan women, whose social and economic status is greatly elevated by mastering the craft. Out of hundreds of female basket weavers, only a select few will ever go on to garner the status of master basket weaver, a designation that references a particular weaver's technical mastery not only of weaving but also of dyeing and preparing the necessary fibers and design elements. Ultimately, however, the entire community benefits from the basketry industry, especially through the establishment of cooperatives that aid in bringing much-needed funding for social projects in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa.

A variety of shapes, patterns, color combinations, and contrasts, as well as weaving textures (depending on the plaiting, twining, and coiling technique used) may be incorporated in the overall decorative design of sub-Saharan baskets. Traditionally, the shapes and weave patterns of sub-Saharan baskets have been dictated by the intended purpose for which these baskets were originally designed. Agricultural societies across rural Africa thus determined that the manufacture of baskets would primarily serve the practical purpose of aiding farmers in the fields in the process of collecting produce or threshing grain during the crop harvest, in the subsequent storage and transport of such agricultural products to market, and as tools for capturing animals or fishing. Similarly, baskets would also be used in the storage of food and spices in the home and, depending on the tightness of the weave, they may even be used in the filtering and fermenting of beverages. In sub-Saharan Africa, baskets have also served ceremonial purposes as divination or clairvoyance vessels of great complexity for use during funeral or spiritual rituals.

The selection of natural fibers to be used in the manufacture of sub-Saharan baskets has traditionally been dictated by the environmental conditions in any given region and the abundance of specific fibers, including elephant (Napier) grass, sweet grass, sisal, raffia, a variety of palm (such as the lala) leaves, tree bark, plant roots (from plants such as the makenge bush), as well as vines. Consequently, while the wetter, tropical climate of sub-Saharan

communities forces basket weavers to use plaiting (weaving) techniques better suited to the larger palm leaves available in those areas, the more subtropical communities of the sub-Saharan savanna force basket weavers to make use of different plaiting techniques better suited to the dry, tall grasses that are so abundant in the area. Naturally sourced pigments are used to dye the fibers used to make these baskets, some achieving extremely complex levels of decorative intricacy. These pigments may be obtained from fruits, berries, soil varieties, plant roots, or tree bark.

While sub-Saharan basketry has been used primarily for purposes of storage and transportation of foodstuffs, it has also been applied to a wide variety of uses, including the production of articles of clothing (such as skirts), ritual articles (such as masks and ornamental headdresses), and

Bolgatanga Market Baskets

Ghanaian Basket Maker. (Cael Chappell for Baskets of Africa, https://basketsofafrica.com. Used by permission.)

Bolga baskets are exclusively woven by the indigenous Gurune people living in the area around the town of Bolgatanga, in northern Ghana. Many companies, such as Baskets of Africa, engage in fair trade practices that are designed to assist the rural people of northern Ghana in earning good incomes in order to care of their children. According to the Basket of Africa's website, weaving has been a traditional skill of the Gurune people, as the soil around Bolgatanga is not fertile enough for extensive agricultural activities. The region has an erratic rainfall pattern and generally harsh weather conditions. As a result, handicraft activities such as basket weaving, leatherwork, and pottery are undertaken mostly by women to supplement their incomes, since they are primarily subsistence farmers.

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the manufacture of helmets and shields. Ultimately, the abundance or lack of natural fibers will determine the extent or importance of basket making in any given community or culture across sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, areas such as Chad and Cameroon make use of basketry techniques for nearly every practical purpose imaginable and put a premium on the utilitarian applications of the craft, while other sub-Saharan regions have developed more aesthetically sophisticated technical interpretations (as evidenced by the basket-making traditions of the Congo or Eastern Sudan).

Among the most popular and internationally renowned sub-Saharan baskets being produced today are the pot-shaped (*ukhamba*) baskets—known for their watertight weaves—produced by the Zulu people of South Africa (basket weavers in Chad, Ethiopia, and Rwanda are also known for their watertight plaiting techniques) and the elephant grass baskets produced by the Gurune people in Bolgatanga (Ghana). These two examples are proof positive of the aesthetic longevity and historical mystique of ancient sub-Saharan basketry traditions and techniques even in our own time.

With the changing economic variables imposed on modern sub-Saharan societies, artisanal basket-making traditions have increasingly come to include a variety of recycled or repurposed materials such as wire, tin metal, aluminum, and even plastic. In particular, the use of telephone wire in modern basketmaking represents one of the most successful artistic and practical adaptations of a recycled product into the manufacturing process of a traditional craft anywhere in the world. Referred to as *imbenge* baskets and made by the female basket weavers of South Africa's Zulu community, these recycled telephone wire baskets have gained increasing popularity and renown internationally, not just as utilitarian objects, but as artistically aesthetic and highly collectible art objects in their own right.

The tradition of basket making is an ancient one in sub-Saharan Africa, and the pivotal artisanal role women basket weavers have played in the craft cannot be overstated, especially with regard to their ability to update and adapt old traditions to modern economic considerations and aesthetic sensibilities. In addition, not only has the artisanal craft of sub-Saharan basket making been primarily preserved through generational propagation from mothers to daughters, but the important role played by sub-Saharan women in community rituals and rites of passage across sub-Saharan communities has ensured the meaningful and lofty cultural status this artisanal craft still retains and enjoys across the continent.

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BEADWORKERS

One of the oldest and most complex artisanal and artistic sub-Saharan traditions is that of beadwork. Going back thousands of years, beadwork techniques make use of a multitude of decorative applications as well as myriad ways of sourcing materials to use as beads, from submarine shells and coral to animal teeth. As the primary managers of the domestic domain and the primary responsibilities that entails, namely, child care and food preparation, sub-Saharan women have been largely confined to their homes and thus have been forced to adapt their artisanal production to the home space and to such artisanal pursuits as might be best suited to such an environment, with beadwork being one such pursuit. Consequently, as the primary practitioners of this artisanal art form, sub-Saharan women have inherited a breathtaking complexity of skill and design from their ancestors and continue to add their ingenuity to the evolving design techniques of this ancestral tradition, particularly in southern Africa and West Africa.

Southern Africa's modern artisanal beadwork industry remains one of the best known in the entire continent. After being originally introduced to East Africa by Arab traders in the Middle Ages and then by the Portuguese starting in the 1500s, glass beads were disseminated through internal trade to the southern areas of the African continent. The use of glass beadwork to decorate special objects—decorative accessories that are designed to be worn during special ceremonies and to add an additional

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