

KHOE BASKET REVIVAL / KEEPING TRADITIONS ALIVE

Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation is a Namibian NGO working in the East and West Caprivi. In 1995 an Enterprise Development Unit was established to build up enterprises based on the sustainable use of natural resources. Amongst the activities of the Unit was an effort to develop the craft industry further in the Caprivi, in particular in the West Caprivi, a region that formerly had little input in this area. Over the next two years, working closely with groups of people, in particularly women, establishing a good rapport and trusting relationship with the Khoe a cottage craft industry grew. Women attended basket making courses and bead workshops, and men carving courses held in Namibia and Botswana. Initially more common place flour or open baskets such as those made by the Tsubia, Mayei and the Mbukush and found for sale at the Caprivi Arts Centre in Katima and in Windhoek.

In 1997 a new type of fruit and berry collecting basket appeared from the group at Dwarspan in the West Caprivi, and was presented to Annie Symonds who was working with the craft groups in the West Caprivi. It was immediately recognised as something 'new' and different, and was nurtured and developed. Clearly, by the sudden numbers in which they began to appear, this was a traditional basket that was undergoing a revival. Many of the older women knew how to construct these, whereas fewer knew the more open basket style. The method of weaving one strand of palm in and out of vertical stakes of palm is totally different from the technique used to construct the flour baskets from the East Caprivi, Kavango and Owambo regions.

On 8th July 1997 a collection of Namibian stamps was issued entitled Namibian Basketry, that depicted a variety of baskets made in Namibia. These collectors stamps show a collecting bag from the Khoe, a group of San people who live in the western part of Caprivi, north-east Namibia and southern Zambia, on the 50c stamp, a powder basket from the Mbukushu on the 90c stamp, a fruit basket from the Kwanyama on the N\$1.20 stamp and a grain basket from the Nyemba people on the N\$2.00 stamp. Each basket has a description of how it is made and used with it. The Museum of Namibia describes the Khoe basket as being made from palm leaves using a vertical coil method ornamented with brown strips, probably dyed using the bark of *Phyllogeiton discolour* (now renamed as *Berchemia discolour*).

A year later up to one hundred baskets were produced on a monthly basis, and more women joined the group of craft producers every month as they realised the potential income they could derive from making their traditional baskets. Older 'master crafts makers' taught the younger women how to make the baskets. The Khoe baskets remain very popular items and are in constant demand. The Gya xai khoeji craft group was formalised to keep up with the orders. There are few other opportunities to earn a living in the remote villages located within Bwabwata National Park.

In order to ensure that no damage is being done to the natural sources of *Hyphaene petersiana* palm craft groups now beginning to plant and nurture palms closer to their villages in palm plots. Community Resource Monitors in the area monitor how palm is collected to ensure that sufficient new shoots are left for the plant to survive and that no damage is done to the palm when it is harvested. In addition *Berchemia discolor* trees, one of the primary sources of dye material, that were planted and are nurtured by craft groups. The basket women use a number of trees bark and roots for dyes, such as *Pterocarpus angloensis*, *Guibortia coleosperma*, *Baikiaea plurijuga* and *Peltophorum africanum*, *Diospyros chamaethamnus* and *Diospyros lycioides* in addition to rusty tin cans, clay soil and dung.

Efforts to reward the basket makers for quality, and for the particularly artistic and original examples of their work is enabled through a pricing system that is linked to a grading system. The basket makers have become more imaginative and creative with their designs and colours in their work over the years. Some are real collectors items.

The National Museum of Namibia states that the example of the Khoe basket it has on display was made in 1932 and these types of baskets are no longer made. Fortunately the skills were not lost and the craftsmanship has been revived through an interest shown in traditional crafts and once again they are now made, and used in good numbers. They can be seen on display at the National Art Gallery of Namibia in Windhoek, they have been exhibited at the National Art Gallery Independence exhibition and Namibia Today exhibition and at the annual Namibia Craft Centre basket exhibition. They have won prizes at several of these competitions in Namibia and are now sold internationally.

Annie Symonds 1998

Former-Craft Consultant to IRDNC (Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation)

