

The Versatile Makalani palm

The Makalani palm (*Hyphaene petersiana*) is symbolic of the Central northern regions. It grows profusely and dots the horizons, casting its elegant shadows on the oshanas in the summer months. It is a source of food for both humans and cattle. The shiny, hard outer layer can be plucked off to reveal a biscuit like layer beneath. This edible husk of the palm nut is devoured by all. Once this is eaten away there is a hard shell that resembles a small coconut shell protecting the white vegetable ivory inside. This nut is often delicately carved with pictures of animals, scenes or your name whilst you fill up at some petrol stations in Damaraland. The sweet heart of the Makalani shrub is eaten with relish, though nowadays the plant is protected by laws as this practice causes the plant to die.

The central frond of the leaf of the shrub is often used as fencing material when timber is not available, and some pack it on top of rooves to make it more rainproof.

A variety of different products are made from palm leaves in the North-Central region. Wincrowing baskets, baskets with lids, flat mats, bags and bangles made from palm are all very popular.

The harvesting of the palm for basket weaving is done in a sustainable manner. Basket makers are in tune with their environment and understand the pressures put on the plant if it is over harvested, but how it benefits from some 'pruning'. The leaves are cut with a knife to reduce damage to surrounding leaves and sliced off as close to the base as possible. Leaves must be new and just open, however, basket makers in the Caprivi region prefer new unopened leaves which may explain why baskets from the central northern region are whiter in colour than those from Caprivi whose leaves are still a darker green. Once cut and transported home the leaves are separated and laid out to dry in the sun. The individual leaves are striped of their coarse outer edge. The spikey edge is discarded but the harder outer edge behind this is kept for the inner core of the basket.

The dried strips are then boiled for about an hour, some add maize meal to enhance its whiteness. They are again laid out in the sun to dry.

The dye materials are collected from a variety of trees and shrubs, the most popular being the Bird Plum or *Berchemia discolor*. The bark or leaves are taken and dried and pounded to form a powder which is added to the water in which the palm leaves are boiled. By adding coals to the boiling water the strength of the dye is improved. These turn the palm a number of different colours ranging from yellow and pink to various shades of brown. Sometimes new plants are experimented with to obtain a new range of colours and deeper shades.

Different stitches and weaves are becoming more popular. Designs are becoming more elaborate, though many still favour the traditional designs and shapes of baskets. Patterns and motifs often have a meaning though today some of these are forgotten or the original design has been embellished upon to make it more appealing to collectors. Pattern designing is an individual talent that, in general, is worked out in the head, but sometimes it is helpful to experiment on paper.

The weaving process can take anything from as few days to a month depending upon the complexity of the design and the tightness of the weave. The activity would normally be carried out at home under the trees with friends.

Rössing Foundation and other Non-Governmental Organisation's have held basket weaving workshops to ensure that new members of the community retain the skills and to enable them to reach the high standard of basket work that can be found today. Particular attention is paid to the closeness and evenness of the weaving, the neatness of the start and finish and the shape and pattern.

The baskets are functional and are used for winnowing flour, carrying husks and storing flour. They vary in shape and size according to their function, winnowing, gathering or storing.

In addition to these baskets that can be found in several community outlets in the North, including Tulongeni Craft market, Nakambale Museum, and Tsandi Royal Homestead there are many wooden items such as etangas, which are traditional beer mugs, eholos that are used for carrying milk and snuff containers used frequently still today. Fish traps, carved animals and wire products are also available. Some traditional jewellery may be found made from snail or ostrich shell, secured behind with a very collectable omba or ekipa.

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