

MAASAI PERSONAL ADORNMENT

A variety of materials are used in the making of Maasai jewellery --- the intrinsic value and relevance of which vary with the age of the girl/woman or boy/man. A girl's/woman's necklaces and ornaments will reflect her status in society --- a young unmarried woman cannot wear the necklaces or arm ornamentations or ear-rings of a married woman or a widow. Therefore one glance at a woman's ornaments makes her status obvious to others in her community.

Metal: Utilized in the arm and leg bands and bracelets and anklet bangles. These twisted armbands of red-copper, brass and more recently aluminium from melted-down cooking pots would be made by a smith --- usually among the Maasai who had no knowledge of metalwork --- a Ndorobo, Okiek or Wata tribesman who would use primitive goat skin bellows and sand in which to cast the items. These smiths had a symbiotic relationship with their Maasai masters, were traditionally paid in small stock (goats and sheep) but were considered unclean and manipulative and could not participate in the true Maasai ceremonies nor marry a Maasai girl. The arm and leg bracelets were many ringlets of metal and so heavy that in the old days the arms or legs of the women who wore them would be constricted and narrowed. Bracelets, anklets, ear-rings of metal, and often of several metals together were also made and traded in local markets.

Wood: Ebony, Oleshua etc. Ebony is favoured for the *olrinka* clubs every Maasai man will carry as a sign of his status in the community but the knurled and knobbed roots of the oleshua tree found across wide areas of east Maasailand is the more likely wood to be used by herdsmen for the handy and utility *olrinka* they carry and use --- to throw at and deter an attacking cheetah or hyena or herd the flock through a gateway.

Seeds: Various seeds are used, especially but not exclusively for the necklaces, bracelets and anklets young girls make. Modern jewellery designers are making dramatic use of large seeds in necklaces and ear-rings both for the tourist trade and also for up-market clients.

Ivory, Bone & Horn. Bone and horn made be found incorporated into Maasai jewellery, especially valued personal effects such as tobacco containers, ear-rings or bracelets. Ivory and bone are both used to decorate the more elaborate *olrinka* clubs, to fashion walking sticks and today tourist artefacts and animal carvings in horn are common in all outlets.

Ostrich Shell: Occasionally found incorporated into personal items such as bracelets and ear-rings. The Turkana women craft fine and consistent ostrich shell beads to a higher quality than the Maasai and some trade takes place in the commodity.

Leather & Feathers.: Ear-rings, necklaces, belts, often have a leather backing for the beads and cowries used. The leather may be kid, goat, sheep skins or cattle hides cured and softened by the women themselves, and all the sewing and bead designs would reflect the ethnic. Young girls and women once wore treated kid skin cloaks and skirts, which would be decorated with cowries and

beads. An ox-hide laid over soft branches would serve as a bed. Straps for tethering livestock were also made out of leather and the string for a bow from gut. Lion and occasionally leopard skins would be used as ceremonial cloaks to be worn only on important occasions although the moran warriors would incorporate ostrich feathers and the mask of a lion into their headdresses to indicate prowess and bravery.

Fibre. Formerly fibre from the aloe plant or strings of gut were used to string beads together, then sisal or today a synthetic fibre (nylon).

Beads. Arab traders, sailing down the East African coast in dhows (sailboats), introduced a variety of goods in exchange for ivory and other treasures. The earliest known Maasai and Samburu beaded jewellery items, dating from around 1850, were assembled from large red beads originally made in Holland. But the specific look of jewellery in East Africa, particularly among these two peoples, was transformed about one hundred years ago. Traders introduced tiny, colourful glass beads--uniform in size and hue--that had been imported from what is now the Czech Republic. Patterns and the colours of beads used are traditional, but each woman will give her own 'signature'

The Maasai are renowned in Kenya for their beadwork, and over generations have used ceramic and glass trade beads for earrings and collars. The earliest beads found in sites along the Coast go back many, many hundreds of years and reflect Phoenician and Chinese contacts. Later Portuguese, Indian, Arab and then American traders introduced glass beads, in the last 10 years or so mostly sourced from Eastern Europe (Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, Rumania???) although today the market is saturated with beads from many sources. So beadwork is a rich tradition in African culture but one with fairly recent origins. Curiously, it is a tradition dependent on imported European beads, trinkets brought to Africa as objects of trade.

Beads have become powerful elements in African life. Their use offers insight into hundreds of cultures. The jewellery worn by East Africa's Maasai and Samburu people incorporates specific and different patterns, forms, and shapes. But both use the same basic building blocks: tiny glass or porcelain beads. The Zulu, Ndebele, and Xhosa of South Africa also use these small beads to create culturally distinctive forms of jewellery. Ornament literally is used to delineate the unique identity of each culture, and most of the beadwork found in eastern and southern Africa is worn by all members of society. But in West Africa, in the Yoruba culture of Nigeria and Cameroon, beadwork is reserved for members of royalty.

On first encounter, outsiders might think that traditionally garbed people--such as the Maasai, Samburu, and Ndebele--have dressed up for some special occasion. This is not the case. Although some jewellery is made so that it can be donned at particular moments--such as for marriage or circumcision ceremonies--most pieces are worn throughout an entire stage of life. For example, indicating her increasing wealth and her place in life, a married woman amasses beaded necklaces as she grows older. Each piece of jewellery, in its shape, patterns, and colours, speaks of the wearer's culture. People within that culture can read a woman's exact status--her age-set, marital status, even whether she has given birth to a son--by observing her beaded jewellery.

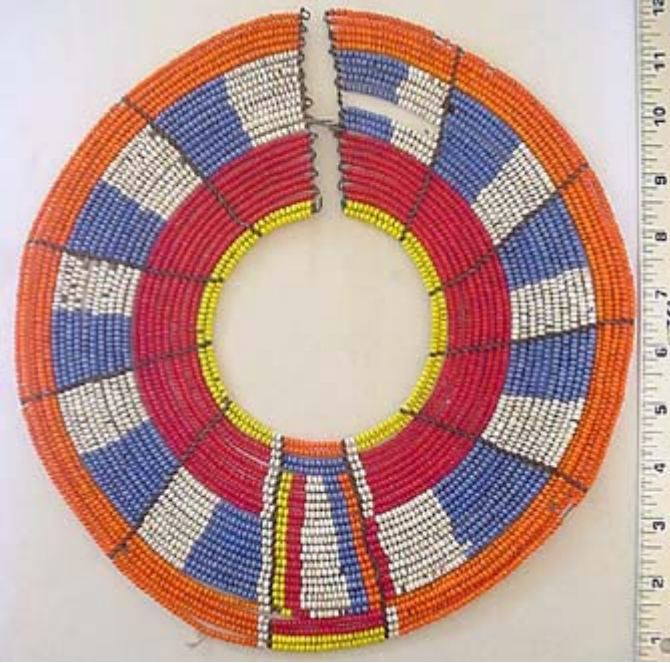
Cowries shells Maasai o-sikirai, pl. i-sikira (Cypraea annulus L., and C. moneta L.) valued for their shape symbolising female fertility have been found in African burial sites dating back to 8000 BC. Cowries shells, collected loose in bags or strung into strands, were the earliest forms of currency used in many countries. The Chinese were probably the first people to use cowries as currency; in its heyday the most widely used currency in the world. The Portuguese traded textiles, copperware, cowries, and horses for gold, ivory, slaves, and locally made cotton cloth. Cowries were the 'currency' of the hinterland and widely used in ornamentation displaying wealth and prestige. Cowries shells are still used by the Maasai on leather belts, milk containers, ear-rings and necklaces. The cowrie shell is also symbolical of special events and occasions. A mother twins wears the i-sikira beaded-leather belt, an ornament of religio-social status.

Trading on the East Coast of Africa: Trade and commerce played an important part in the life of the coastal peoples. Trade became possible because of the monsoon winds that brought people from as far as Arabia, Egypt and the Roman Empire. From the 4th to the 7th century, trade with the Roman Empire replaced trade with Persia. Arab trade with East Africa continued from the 1st to the 15th Century. Traders came in dhows, mainly from Arabia, Persia and India. Coastal communities acted as middlemen for inland trade. No foreign traders went inland for fear of diseases, hostility and because the dry zone of land behind the coast prevented contact. All inland goods were brought to the coast and were exchanged under the barter system; cowries shells and coins were also used as currency. East African trade with other lands flourished between 1300-1500 A.D. For example Kilwa rose mainly due to its gold trade.



Gourds: were and continue to be used to store milk and blood, once the staple food of the Maasai herdsman. Treasured, mended when broken, and used for years. The interior is sterilized by washing out with cow's urine then shaking hot charcoal around inside. Another Maasai item is the **decorated calabash**. A gourd is dried out by burning grass in it. The Maasai use these gourds for keeping milk and blood, and they add soot to aid in the fermentation of milk. The gourds are decorated by carving figures and geometric designs on the outside.

Porcelain, Glass. Sources of porcelain and silk were China; hardware, cloth and beads came from India; cowries shells from the Maldives Islands; rugs from Persia; spices from the East Indies; stone jars and pots from Burma; pottery, glassware, timber, weapons and ironware from Arabia.







Red Ochre/White Clay & Charcoal: Natural red soil/ochre is found in some areas of Maasailand and widely used after mixing with sheep fat for body decoration and adornment, to colour the braided hair locks of the Maasai moran or warriors and to give hides and skins used for aprons (young girls) and toga-like dresses of the warriors the brown colouring that has become associated (and feared!) with our people. Other colours used in our society are black (made from charcoal and fat) and white (natural white clay is found at many sites throughout our land).

This 26 inch strand of old blue African glass probably came to Africa via the Dutch at least 200 years ago. Averaging about 20 mm in diameter, the beads range from excellent condition to ones that really show their age, with more cracks and pock marks. They have large holes which make it possible to string them on a very large cord or rope.



Approximately 26 inches long, this strand is a mixture of old African beads from the early to late 19th century and the early 20th. This one has quite a few Vaseline beads, as well as old hand faceted glass, and several old trades -- a few of which really do show their age. There are quite a few old Czech glass, and also an especially pretty old eighteenth century yellowish-gold trade bead with green trailed designs and stripes.



African White Glass

Slightly larger white glass seed beads, traded in Africa. Necklaces measures 22 inches long, with a couple extra inches of raffia. Individual beads measure about 5-6 mm in diameter.



Vintage White Heart Strand

We have a few of these nice vintage strands of White heart beads. Whitehearts have a white glass core covered with a translucent red glass -- depending on the age and wear of the bead; they can appear a deep red or a light pink colour. Each strand varies slightly in size, colour, and the shape of the beads on the strand.

The strands measure approximately 20 - 24 inches long. Some are better strung than others -- let us know if you intend to wear it as-is or to cut up and we will try to accommodate your needs. But do keep in mind that they are a little short to fit over larger heads.

African Oval White Hearts

These Venetian oval white hearts -- also called Cornaline d'Aleppo --



Czech 8 - 9 mm Round Red Glass

These 24 inch strands of red glass beads, originally from Czechoslovakia, measure 8 - 9 mm in diameter. They are probably 30 to 50 years old.



Mixed African Trade Bead Strand

strand of mixed African trade, fancy glass and old Czech glass, is a pretty mix of the various beads. Included are striped melon beads, chevrons, and many kinds of Czech glass, to name a few.

The journey starts with the first bead found in Africa in about 10,000 BC which was chipped from the thick shell of the ostrich egg in what is now the Kalahari Desert. Other such beads were also found in present day Libya and Sudan. For centuries, similar beads were chipped of eggshell by Kenya's Turkana women and used as dowry, or akarim. However, they have now been prohibited to wear the beads because of laws to protect Kenyan wildlife.

The first bead made in Africa was created of a special soft clay called faience, which is usually vivid blue or dusky green. Faience tubes and beads were woven into elaborate collars for deceased royalty and millions of beads were buried with kings in Egyptian tombs. The ancient Egyptians worshipped the scarab beetle, believing that the insects were reincarnations of their ancestors. They fashioned

faience - which they believed to be magical - into beetle shapes and used them as royal seals on the tombs of pharaohs. Faience beads are still being made using the same age-old techniques in Egypt.

By the fourth century, caravans of glass and stone beads from European, Indian and Middle Eastern traders were arriving across the Sahara. Beads were a focal point of the empires which developed out of these trade markets.