

## *A little about how this helps:*

The sad part about this venture is that 2 out of 3 black South Africans in the rural communities have AIDS, and Hlabisa has the highest ratio in the world. It is always maddening and with sadness to lose a weaver and a friend as well as a human being, but it is the way of things and the reality for now in South Africa. One can only aspire to that the world community at large, as well as the South African government itself, acknowledge the epidemic and crisis, without which, little progress will follow. By purchasing a Zulu basket, you are helping to make a difference in these women's lives. Often women use the money they earn to pay for their children's education. The pricing structure for our baskets is based on the total costs of goods sold and these include the price that we pay the weaver (always a fair wage), the shipping costs, the warehousing costs, and the insurance costs. Tribal Home has a zero overhead budget currently (i.e. no payrolls, no stipends, no travel allowances and no bonuses). Essentially, everyone that works in Tribal Home is a volunteer. A variety of programs are in place to assist women and children of Zulu weavers. Your purchase of a Zulu basket helps to fund these programs.

## *A Personal Story: Tholi*

The photo below is of Tholi Mlotshwa, one of our very best master weavers. The basket she is holding is less than half finished - the final size was just over 7 feet tall by 19 feet around. The completed basket is probably the largest woven in Zulu basket history. Tholi is no longer with us. She died of AIDS in December of 2003. This huge basket took 16 months to weave and was completed in November 2002. Since it took more than a year, Tholi



had to move the basket to her hut to continue her progress and to keep it out of the elements, rain and sun (fading). But when completed, we couldn't get it out of the front door so we had to dismantle a portion of her thatch roof to get it out. There were a lot of supervisors that day providing countless suggestions and comments. Some suggestions even had merit like why did we not make a lean to hut if we knew we were going to make something that big. And of course, the typical comments such as we were crazy to make something this big. "Can't be use for anything...too tall, too wide and too heavy." Since it was a marriage pattern (i.e. a wedding basket), the number of cows requested as dowry for this basket was 160. Nobody gets that many cows now. And the list went on. Tholi will be missed. For more stories and photos, visit:

[www.ZanzibarTribalArt.com/zulu.htm](http://www.ZanzibarTribalArt.com/zulu.htm)

## **ZANZIBAR TRIBAL ART GALLERY**

1731 L Street Midtown Sacramento, CA 95814

[www.zanzibar-trading.com](http://www.zanzibar-trading.com) (916) 443-2057

## **African Zulu Baskets**



### ***Fair-Traded Zulu Baskets from South Africa***

Zanzibar Tribal Art, in conjunction with the non-profit group Tribal Home, is pleased to be able to offer our clients a range of Zulu baskets including the highest museum grade baskets crafted by Master Weavers.

*Among the rolling hills of South Africa in the northeastern coastal province of KwaZulu-Natal ("Place of Heaven"), Zulu women work at the art of basket weaving. With the advent of the men moving off to seek work in the cities, the women have taken over what was once a dying craft, and turned it into an art form of international acclaim, and a major source of income for many families. Zulu artistry has been somewhat overshadowed by their unprecedented proclivity in the creation of weaponry; shields, clubs and spears. Nevertheless, Zulu basketry is considered some of the most desirable and collectable baskets available and will soon rival Native American baskets for rarity and value.*

*The women work from their homes, where they can assimilate basket making into their normal routine - giving themselves time to raise their children, work in the fields, collect water and do other daily chores. Each basket will be unique in size, shape, pattern, weave and color and is a true collector's item. All basket colors are natural and obtained from boiling roots, leaves, berries and bark or other organic material of indigenous flora.*

## Benefitting the Weavers

Thank you for helping to support the Zulu women craftspeople and children of South Africa by purchasing this basket. You are helping the poor rural women of South Africa in earning decent incomes from the fruits of their labors, in order to care for their children.

## A Brief History of the Zulu

Descendants of the Nguni peoples of southeast Africa, the Zulu trace their history back to the 14th and 15th centuries when they migrated southward and settled into modern day South Africa. During the 1800's, under Chief Shaka, the Zulus established themselves as a very powerful people and were feared throughout southern Africa. During this time it was the men who wove baskets, however as the British took the men to work in the mines, women found it necessary to learn. Around the turn of the 20th century, traded tin and iron replaced the baskets and by the 1940's the skill of weaving was all but lost. Starting with a Missionary that wanted to convert the Zulus in the late 60's, a workshop was created and three very old zulu women were found that still remembered how to dye the materials and weave the baskets. From this the baskets refined through the 70's and 80's until we have the pinnacle of quality and refinement today. Regrettably, the techniques and skills may soon again be lost again due to migration to the cities and AIDS.



Today most of the Zulu population lives in a 10,000 square mile Zululand reserve along the Indian Ocean. Once self sufficient, many must now rely on employment outside of their reserve in nearby towns to survive. Members of the more than 300 Zulu-speaking peoples reside in KwaZulu ("Place of Heaven"), an area approximately the size of New Jersey. Their economy is based on the cultivation of crops, tended by the women, and the raising of cattle, for which the men and boys are responsible. Most still live in their traditional *Kraals*, an area fenced in by piles of sticks that contain their traditional huts.

The products of grass weaving and basketry are associated with the widest possible range of activities throughout a Zulu's lifetime, touching virtually every domestic, social, and religious function. These baskets are evidence of the expertise of these artisans and their ingenuity for using indigenous plants. Traditionally Zulu women weave the baskets using age-old, time-honored methods that are passed on from mother to child. The patterns, each with their own meaning, vary from decorative bands to intricate triangles, diamonds, zig-zags, and checkerboard motifs.

## Master Weavers

While there are approximately 2,000 Zulu women (and a very few men) weaving baskets, only about 100 are considered "Master Weavers" and of these, only about 30 are weaving currently. When first starting to learn, a weaver is an apprentice. Most experienced weavers are considered "Standard Weavers" and only a few become "Masters." A "Master Weaver" is recognized by the overall quality of the basket, especially the tightness of weave and the intricacy, as well as consistency of her pattern and design. Unfortunately, with the spread of HIV and AIDS and the tendency of Zulu youth to move to cities and seek work, there is a lack of interest of younger women in learning the traditional skills necessary to weave fine quality baskets and this unique art form may soon be lost. These baskets are an incredibly value and a solid investment.

***Although baskets are being replaced with plastic containers in many Zulu homes now, these woven baskets continue to hold great cultural significance for the Zulu people.***

## Meet our weavers

Zanzibar and the non-profit group Tribal Home support the rural Zulu Weavers of KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. Although Tribal Home is non-profit organization, the purpose is a joint venture with the Zulu weavers in the rural communities for economic empowerment. We currently help support approximately 200 weavers. In recent years we have grown from sourcing baskets



from 5 to 15 villages, spread out over a very large area with Hlabisa (pronounced SH-la-bi-sa) being the major location. The Hlabisa district encompass 552 square miles alone. The 15 villages are sprawled out over this area, with the furthest being 6 hours drive by 4 wheel drive each way, and the nearest 1 hour from the main highway that goes up to the north to Mozambique. Many of our weavers are "Master Weavers" and we regularly source from these women, buying finished baskets as well as commissioning baskets.

**Photos: John from TribalHome with some of our weavers (above) and Mary Sibaya (left) holding a basket**

## Creating a Zulu Basket

Every basket is made by hand, using indigenous raw materials. The fronds of the Ilala Palm (*Hyphaene Coriacea*), which grows along the North-Eastern Coast of Kwa-Zulu Natal Province is commonly used to weave the fine, watertight baskets. It's natural color when dried is cream, and all basket colors are natural and obtained from boiling roots, leaves, berries and bark of indigenous flora.

Following in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers, young Zulu girls are taught to weave using scraps left over from their mother's or grandmother's basketry work. They entertain themselves and play, learning the various designs and methods of basket making. By the time they reach their teens, they are fully conversant in the age-old art of Zulu Basket weaving. Many children are able to pay for school (not free or provided by the government as in the USA), supported solely on the proceeds of their mother's and their own basket sales.

*Zulu baskets can hold liquid because of the tightness of the coil/weave and the material used. When liquids (traditionally home brewed beer) are kept in the baskets, the material swells, making the basket watertight, while the outside sweats. This keeps the liquid cool by means of evaporation.*

## Types of Zulu Baskets

The form and function of Zulu basketry are closely related. There are five basic shapes of woven artifacts that are constructed for domestic utilitarian purposes:

**Ukhamba** - A rigid bulb-shaped container rendered watertight by the tightness of the coil-weave, and the material used (Ilala Palm). Generally used to serve sorghum Beer on ceremonial occasions. They are often given as treasured wedding presents.

**Isichumo** - A rigid, bottle-shaped basket used for carrying liquids (usually water), it has a lid, which fits over the neck like a cap. One of the more difficult designs to create, because of the narrow neck.

**Imbenge** - A small, saucer-shaped bowl, used to cover clay Ukhamba in order to keep the beer insect and dust-free. Decoration appears on the convex side. Also historically commonly made of telephone wire.

**Isisquabetho** - This is a large flat bowl made for carrying and storing grain. Smaller flat baskets are also used for serving food.

**Iqutu (Herb Baskets)** - The smallest of the Zulu baskets, these are not woven to be watertight as they are used for the storage of dried herbs, for both culinary and medicinal use. Typically woven by older master weavers called "grandmothers."

*Buying a Basket is more than merely buying a handicraft, but acquiring for yourself an artistic interpretation of African culture while helping a woman gain independence. Our weavers thank you!*

## Designs on Zulu Baskets

The Zulu craftspeople favor symmetry, precision and organization in the designs of their baskets — the qualities that seem to appear in their social patterns. Each design has a specific meaning: **Triangle** - A masculine symbol, also represented on wedding baskets as the number of steers/cows paid for a brideprice payment. **Diamond** - A feminine symbol. **Double Triangle** - Marriage, man. **Double Diamond** - Marriage, woman. **Zig-Zag** - Masculine, represents the spear of Shaka. **Series of Diamonds** - Feminine, represents the shields of Shaka. **Checkerboards, Whirls or Circles** - Good news, new baby, good rains, plentiful harvest. **Points Around the Outside** - Shows the number of cattle paid as bridewealth for a wedding.

## Materials & Dyes

A variety of sustainably harvested plant materials are used to create different types of Zulu baskets. These include: Ilala (pronounced EYE-LA-LA) palm fronds, Isikonko (a grass), Noebe (the bark of the wild banana tress) and Imizi (a water grass). Ilala palm fronds are collected, pulled into strips, naturally dyed and then hung to dry as the traditional Zulu women prepare their other materials for basket-weaving. The palm fronds have a waxy coating which makes them ideal for the weaving of watertight baskets.

All the colors used in traditional Zulu baskets are natural dyes, derived from organic sources. Different regions and weavers use different colors and even different color sources. The individual color's intensity and saturation depends on the length of time the raw material is soaked in the dye bath. Common colors and their source: **Brown/Black (isizimane)** - Roots of tree and or palm fronds crushed and boiled for up to 7 days. **Golden Brown & Pink/Lilac (mpheghmbetu)** - Leaves of a small bush. **Coral (mgweyna)** - Aloe root. **Purple/Blue (umdoni)** - Skin of ripe Umdoni berries or the root of certain plants including the indigo plant. **Burgundy/Maroon (isfixu)** - Bark of Marula tree or wild berries only available for a short time each year (rarest color). **Orange (xomisane)** - Roots of small hairy-leaved plant **Mustard Yellow (icena)** - Paste of wood-ash and water, soaked overnight, boiled for 5-7 hours. **Bright Yellow** - Saffron (*very expensive and rare*) **Grey (ijuba)** - Soaked in black mud for up to one week. **Khaki Green (mxuba)** - Fresh cow dung, soaked in water overnight and boiled with palm leaves for 4-5 hours. The green color is clearer in the spring due to the diet of the cows.

## The Process

A variety of stitches are used depending on the type of basket being produced. The most common is the figure-eight stitch. Today large needles are used, with each stitch being painstakingly placed, making sure that the free-hand design will line up properly and not be "squished" or distorted. A good master weaver's water tight basket can contain 180 to 300 stitches per square inch of a basket. Baskets can take weeks or months to finish.