

TRANSITIONAL ITINERARY OF VERNACULAR BASKETRY IN EAST AFRICA

OMINDI SONIA OGEMBO EMAIL; omindisonia@gmail.com

SAMUEL MWITURIA MAINA PhD, EMAIL: smmaina@uonbi.ac.ke

University of Nairobi, School of the Arts and Design

ABSTRACT

Background: Basketry is the oldest and most varied plant-based crafts found around the world. The skill required in the production of these objects is often associated with factors such as people's perceptions of the environment, conceptions of the self and means of economic interaction, social hierarchy, and division of labour (Novellino, Ertu, 2019).

The sisal baskets produced in the Taita Taveta County of Kenya are regarded by many as regional treasures, a cultural expression and an economic enterprise. These unique baskets are produced according to the traditional art by local women who have passed down the skill from generation to generation. Apart from sisal, there are various trends in basketry coming up in East Africa. Not only do designers use the original design, they have also come up with their own 'signature' look in basketry. Problem: These artsy baskets however face eventual extinction due to competition from cheap imported lookalikes. **Objective:** This study looked at this creative enterprise from a cultural and creative perspective. Its objective was to identify, examine and document transitive trends and style delivering the art to contemporary utilitarianism. **Design:** Using a case study

methodology, data was collected through observation, interviews, focus group discussions and key informants.

Setting: *The study was conducted in Nairobi and Taita Taveta Counties. **Subjects:** Local traditional craftswomen, users, buyers and sellers and local administration. **Results:** the results showed enthusiastic female craftswomen, a robust design trend, increasing market and trendy new futuristic designs fulfilling contemporary market needs. **Conclusion:** A transition is surely happening, though subtly, taking the traditional basketry into the future. There is a great potential in commercialization and fulfilling of livelihoods for craftswomen, designers and artists in the basketry industry in Kenya.*

Keywords: *Basketry, Vernacular, East Africa, Design*

INTRODUCTION

It is of economic and cultural concern that an indigenous industry like basketry should be threatened with extinction in this era. Particularly so to world intellectual property organization (WIPO) who, in cooperation with the Japan Patent Office (JPO), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Kenya Industrial Property Institute (KIPI), under the One Village One Product Program (OVOP) Kenya, and the Taita Taveta County Government who have identified this great threat and the possible ruin to livelihoods.

Basket weaving is the process of weaving or sewing pliable materials into two or three dimensional artifacts such as mats or containers. Craftsmen who have specialized in the skill of basket making are known as basket makers or basket weavers (WIPO, 2019). Basketry is made from a variety of fibrous material that includes pine straws,