

BOLGA BASKETS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:



Internationally known as Bolga baskets, the baskets are exclusively woven by the indigenous people of a historical town in Northern Ghana called Bolgatanga. Bolgatanga literally means soft soil, rocky land.

Weaving has been a traditional skill of these people over the years. The geographical land area of Bolgatanga is not fertile enough for extensive agricultural activities. Coupled with an erratic rainfall pattern and generally harsh weather conditions, handicraft activities such as basket weaving, leatherwork, and pottery are undertaken mostly by the women to supplement their incomes from the subsistence farming activities.

The original Bolga basket was woven round, without any form of handle. The ends of the straw were left untrimmed. It was used basically as a sieve in the brewing of a local alcoholic beverage called pito. Pito was and it is still an

important drink during such occasions as funerals, marriage ceremonies, and festivals, naming ceremonies and at other important social gatherings.

With a population of about 225,000, only 10,000 people from 19 communities possess the basket weaving skill in Bolgatanga, which has been passed on from generation to generation in the community. Today, the Bolga basket has become an object of tourist attraction. With different forms, designs and colourful patterns, the basket is loved for its unique designs and colourful patterns. There have been several attempts particularly by some Asian countries to imitate the Bolga basket and called them African baskets. However, just like all other imitated products, the Bolga basket is differentiated from the non-authentic ones by its rigid body, the use of the straw of the “veta vera” grass locally called the elephant grass against the flabby imitated ones made from sea grass.

RAW MATERIALS USED:

THE STRAW:

The straw is the main raw material used. It is obtained from a tropical grass locally known as the elephant grass, with “veta vera” grass as the technical name. The grass grows along banks of rivers, streams and swampy areas. The grass grows, matures and tussles just like wheat. The straw then tussles with a broom-like flower at the top, matures by growing longer and bigger. To harvest the straw, each broom of straw is held with the left hand and pulled down from the husk that encloses the straw with the right hand. It breaks at the end leaving the husk on the grass for further tussles. A nib between the forefinger and the thumb cuts off the flower at the top of the straw. This is done to every single piece of straw. The straw is harvested wet. This is sun-dried and is ready to go through the weaving process. However, some baskets can be woven with the wet straw, but these do not have the quality that is associated with the baskets woven with the dried straw.

THE WEAVING PROCESS



SPLITTING

The straw is first split into two halves by biting every single piece in the middle at one end with the teeth to open it into two. The teeth hold the first half and other half is pulled down with one hand. About half an inch to the end of the straw, the process is ended. This is to make the next step easier. This process is done to every single piece of straw that is to be used in the weaving process.

TWISTING

The split straw is wrapped together in a wet sac to keep it wet and prevent it from breaking during the twisting process. The split piece of straw is then twisted by rolling the two halves together. Traditionally, this is done on the weaver's thigh. However, today, a piece of bathroom sandal is tied against the thigh for the rolling process.

UNTWISTING

The twisted straw is again untwisted and separated into two individual pieces. This is used for double weave baskets. However, for single weave baskets, the weaving is started with the initial twisted straw. The round baskets are mostly done in double weave while the oval shape and other shapes come in single weave.

SELECTION OF STRAW

Different lengths, thickness are best used for different parts of the basket. The weaver carefully selects the appropriate straw for the different parts of the basket. The ability of the weaver to select the most appropriate straw goes a long way to coming out with a good basket.

DYEING

Different methods are used in preparing the straw for dyeing. Some wrap small amounts of twisted or untwisted straw into rings while others tie together large bundles. A pot of water is brought to the boil and the dye is added. The straw is then submersed into the solution and pressed down by the weight of big stones. The straw is boiled for between 15 to 20 minutes. For bright coloured baskets, the straw is first dyed yellow, allowed to dry and then dyed again with the preferred colour. However, baskets, which do not need colour (natural colour baskets), the straw is not boiled.

STARTING THE BASE

The actual weaving process starts with the base of the basket. Several pieces of twisted straw are used in the first line-up, brought together by another straw, which looks like an octopus or spider with several legs. The leg-like strings form the vertical ribs of the basket. Passing the horizontally placed straw in and out, around the ribs does the weaving. For double weave baskets, the horizontal straw are two, which go through the same pattern.

Double weave baskets are much stronger and consume a lot of straw than single weave baskets.

THE RIM

Once the body of the basket is completed, the rim is added. First, the legs are tied into a knot at the top of the basket. Next, the remaining pieces of the ribs are laid flat around the rim. If the remaining pieces are too long, they are trimmed to size. A piece of straw is used to systematically tie the ribs down into a uniform ring around the mouth of the basket. The rims are usually in the natural colour of the straw. However, there are other forms of baskets where the rim is woven flat.

THE HANDLE

There are several styles of handles. For round baskets, the usual handle is two-legged at both ends across the mouth of the basket, and fusing into one in the middle, serving as the handgrip. For oval shape baskets, the handles are two, placed on opposite lengths of the basket.

TRIMMING

Trimming involves cutting off the remaining ends of the straw on the body of the basket (both in and outside of the basket).

If this process is not carefully done, the basket will be rough when the fingers are run on the body. Double weave baskets are easier to trim than single weave ones; hence they are nicer, stronger and more flexible and smooth.

LEATHER HANDGRIP

Weavers do not add leather to the handles of the basket. It is the option of the buyer to put leather handgrips to reinforce the handle to make it last longer, or as a form of decoration. The leather is obtained from the hide of animals from the slaughterhouses. The animals are not killed just for their hide. The hide is sold out to other artisans who put it to various uses.

It takes approximately three days to complete a standard Bolga basket.



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