

origins

Cooperative beading:
the Dupoto Women's Group

Katie Jang

Colorfully dressed members of the Dupoto Women's Group greet visitors with a welcoming dance. All photos by Wendy Ellsworth.

by Wendy Ellsworth

In the remote village of Isinya, Kenya, located about 60 miles south of the capital city of Nairobi, a group of women meet regularly at a small shop to bead. For these women, beading isn't primarily a social activity, it's their livelihood. The women sell their work in the local market and at the much larger Maasai Market in Nairobi. They also sell on the Internet at www.beadsforeducation.org, the website of the nonprofit BEADS for Education Project that sponsors their beading cooperative.

The women comprise the Dupoto Women's Group, which was founded in 1993. *Dupoto* is a word in the Maa language that isn't easily translated into English. According to one source, it means long lasting or enduring, another said it means growth and success, and a third translated it as something good that grows from a source. While there may be some uncertainty regarding the name, what is certain is that a

small group of Maasai women benefit from belonging to an innovative beading cooperative that allows them to pool their income to help one another in times of financial need.

The Dupoto women make beaded items that include dog collars, coasters, baskets, key chains, belts, traditional Maasai collars, cuffs, and clothing. They work with seed beads, wire, thread, and leather, punching holes with sharp awls as they fashion their designs into functional items for sale. Their traditional color palette ranges from opaque red, orange, and yellow to white, blue, black, and green. Each color has cultural significance – red represents the earth and blood, green represents prosperity, and blue represents generosity. Black not only signifies the skin color of the Maasai people, it also symbolizes wealth.

On the morning I visited Isinya, the women greeted me with songs and dances. Wearing colorful dresses, cloaks, and multiple strands of traditional beadwork, they sang and chanted, clapping their hands and leaping high into the air. A

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shrug of their shoulders made their beadwork dance as well. Escorting me into their showroom, I was treated to a visual feast of beaded crafts in a riot of vibrant, primary colors. I was particularly attracted to traditional Maasai collars (see "Ethnic Inspirations," p. 38). These are stunning and come in many sizes, colors, and designs. Their nesting baskets, made of wire and beads in contemporary colors, are also very clever.

The women travel to Nairobi to purchase supplies from Indian merchants. The beads are imported from the Czech Republic. Like many artisans around the world, they adapt common resources to use in their collars and bracelets, such as plastic strips cut from margarine containers.

The Dupoto women rely on the cooperative as their primary source of income to support their children, so it is essential that each gets paid an equal, ethical wage. The BEADS for Education Project finds sponsors who subsidize



Dupoto Women's Group member Jane Maina in traditional Maasai clothing and beadwork.

private school education for one daughter of each of the members; other sponsors donate items such as reading glasses and dung-burning stoves. They also organize workshops on business topics, environmental issues, and AIDS prevention. Through the BEADS project, daughters of the Dupoto Women's Group can learn traditional Maasai beading skills.

Today, the group has about 25 participants, a constitution, and a chairperson. Their financial success has attracted additional funding, and they have been selected as a role model for other women's groups in Kenya. They are also part of an outreach program that trains newly formed women's beading cooperatives in other Maasai regions, a way for others to benefit from their knowledge and skills.

As the Dupoto name implies, the women's efforts will have long lasting and enduring effects on future generations of Maasai girls. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, the ripples will spread, and the creative energy coming from the Dupoto Women's Group will be the source of continued growth and success. ●

Wendy traveled to Kenya on a fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in November 2003. Contact her at www.ellsworthstudios.com.

The BEADS for Education Project, founded by Debby Rooney, is a project of the International Women's Democracy Center, located in Washington, D.C. To sponsor a girl or purchase beaded handicrafts, please visit their website, www.beadsforeducation.org.

Items for sale at the beading cooperative in Isinya, Kenya.

