

By Carole Collins & Steve Askin

NAIROBI, KENYA

ONE OF THE MORE PECULIAR spin-offs from America's gradually rising awareness of Africa is a sudden boom in U.S. sales of African hand-

crafts.

Kenyan handbags, West African carvings and other handcrafts previously available only in a handful of specialty shops have found their way into mass market retail chains like J.C. Penney's and such upscale department stores as New York's Bloomingdale's. Kenya, one of the leading exporters, has at least quadrupled its handcraft sales to the U.S. since 1983.

American importers say the most popular items are colorful, flexible, hand-woven baskets known as *kiondos*, now widely sold in the U.S. as women's handbags. Making these bags is part of the daily rhythm of life for many of Kenya's hardworking rural women. To earn a little cash, they somehow find space—in a 16-hour workday of farming, herding, cooking, water carrying and childcare—to weave long strands of sisal into intricate and sturdy carry-alls.

Now that crafts are big business, a new question arises: who will reap the profits? In Kenya, an East African nation much praised by the U.S. because its government has chosen the capitalist road to development, the answer is clear. Most of the money will flow to export entrepreneurs and their U.S. clients, leaving a pittance for the craftswomen themselves.

Ironically, it was a meeting designed to advance the condition of Third World women—the UN Women's Decade conference in Nairobi last July—that built the mass market for *kiondos* in the U.S. and Western Europe. Women from around the world were introduced to the intricate designs and rugged construction of the baskets traditionally used to carry goods to and from market. Those who took them home as purses or gifts provided unparalleled free advertising. Within months after the conference, U.S. importers descended on Nairobi in force.

Handcrafts remain a small element—little more than 1 percent—in the Kenyan export economy, but they are by far its fastest growing segment. And they are the only part readily accessible to village women.

The word *kiondo* comes from the language of Kenya's largest tribe, the Kikuyu. But most Kenyans and foreign buyers agree that Kamba women, from Kenya's fourth largest tribe, make the bulk of *kiondos*—and the best. The *kiondo* makers are women like retired prison warden Freda Kaviti Mutiambai, the 53-year-old widow of a Kamba chief. "Making *kiondos* is a traditional skill," she said. "It's almost a qualification for marriage."

A preference for plastic

Kiondo making is rarely a full-time occupation. "My real job is looking after my family and working in the *mashamba* [garden]," said Mutiambai. Because weaving must be squeezed in between other daily tasks, it takes her a week to make one sisal bag. "If I didn't have to do all this other work I could make three big *kiondos* a day," she estimates.

Other than time, *kiondos* don't cost a lot to make. The most important raw material, sisal handspun into strands for weaving, was planted to mark land boundaries during colonial times. It now grows wild throughout Kenya and can be harvested for free. Coloring comes from natural sources: bright wild flowers, charcoal black and various roots, all carefully boiled to extract a rainbow of shades and colors.

While natural materials are most popular with tourists and foreign buyers, many Kenyans prefer modern synthetics. "Those we make for sale in Nairobi have different colors" than the *kiondos* used at home, Mutiambai said. "We like *kiondos* made with artificial materials, like plastic, because they are bright." But the "shouting colors" preferred by Kenyans don't sell well

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CRAFTY CAPITALISM



Kenyan handbags became a hot export item after the Nairobi women's conference. But who gets the profits?