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## Using Culture to Enhance Ambience: Artistic Inspiration from Leather Crafts

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### ABSTRACT

The choice of a theme and concept in any design work is fundamental to driving the success of a project. In this paper, the author draws attention to the use of material culture of the Maasai, Swahili and the Luo of Kenya as sources of inspiration for deriving designs to be applied on leather. The culturally inspired leather crafts have enabled the promotion of the Kenyan identity and the richness of Kenya's artifacts. Grounded on the results of a study, and with a focus on the various techniques of leather decoration employed independently or in combination, the paper exploits the use of leather by the three cultures upon which the execution of the project was done. In the study, the author adopted use of other materials alongside leather to enhance its aesthetic value as a piece of art work or as a decorative upholster. The study being experimental in nature, data was mainly collected via various observations made in curio shops, guest houses and markets dealing with leather crafts in the industry. To demonstrate that material culture of the Luo, Swahili and Maasai (and by extension those of other ethnic groups in Africa) form an important, rich and largely untapped source of artistic inspiration for leather crafts and other art areas, the author displays photographic data indicating the culture in which each artistic work is embraced.

**Keywords:** Culture, Leather, Ambience, Art, Inspiration, Kenya.

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### 1. Introduction

Leather has been in widespread use since its first introduction in 3000 BC by the Egyptians. They are credited with discovering leather as an excellent material for use in battle and household furniture. It was utilized for tents and weapon carriers as well as body armour. As early as 4000 years ago, Egyptian women prized leather for fashion. Goatskins were used to make maps, and hand-stitched pigskins were filled to carry drinking water (Galal, 2017).

Mouet (1999) has observed that during the Roman Empire (50 BC), Caesar's troops sailed across the seas with their ships using sails made of leather. In the same vein, Douglas (2015) and Grömer, Ruß-Popa, & Saliari (2017) aver that during the Industrial Revolution (18th century), sailing ships used leather jackets and patches to protect the rope rigging from mechanical wear. The ship's sail

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maker was expected to be an expert leatherworker as well as a sail maker of canvas. In the Industrial Age (1750-1850), stagecoaches were upholstered in leather, and oil-finished leather springs cushioned the carriage body. Industry used leather washers in pumps and leather belts in machine drives. Men shaved with straight razors, stropped against leather straps; shop-keepers and factory workers wore leather aprons. The Moors' conquest of Spain (AD 711 - AD 1491) introduced decorated leather to the region. The richness and splendour of their leather appealed to the Spaniards who, with their colourful costumes, took to leatherwork and turned out many beautiful articles such as saddles, boots, wide belts and ornaments that commanded fabulous prices in the world markets (<http://www.qis.net/~rka.html>, n.d)

According to Mouet (1999), early in the 15th century, the Spaniards followed Cortez Hernando (1485-1547), a Spanish explorer who conquered Mexico to the New World (Aztec Empire of Mexico) and brought their knowledge and tools with them. These pioneers, inspired by the tropical flowers and lush vegetation they saw in the new world, forsook the hard and fast geometric rule and portrayed on leather the beautiful floral patterns suggestive of the newly discovered plant life (Galal, 2017).

In the 17th century, leather wallpaper became fashionable in artistically progressive cities such as Florence and Venice in Italy. The Dutch instructed workmen in the installation of embossed leather as wall covering. In the pubs, people drank out of handmade leather mugs while leather hats and tunics became popular (Price, 2014). Native Americans used leather for their tepees, coats and footwear. Beaded leather moccasins were worn and all great warriors had clothes decorated with beads or fringe. Leather was also used for saddles and chaps, holsters and harnesses. Sword sheaths, ropes, rugs, bottles, bags and boxes were of leather. Glass bottles were so expensive that leather was used to protect them (Harris, 2014).

In Kenya, the dearth of studies on the leather industry is an indication that decorated leather is still under-utilized in interior design and that products lack variety and creativity (Kigen, 2012; Akama&Kieti, 2007). In this paper, the author seeks to design and produce leather objects which can compete with those imported and give an alternative to Kenyan consumers based on different cultures. There has been a growing interest among the residents in various parts of the country and outside to visit different scenic regions in Kenya. While it may not be cheap to access what different cultures have to offer in one location, exploring and experimenting the various ambient spaces that echo these cultures may serve such interests without having to incur the travel expenses. It is upon this necessity that the author opts to draw attention to the Maasai, Swahili and Luo cultural artifacts in enhancing ambience and interior design.

### **1.1 Leather in Traditional Africa**

In Africa there exists evidence of the use of leather both for household and outdoor items. Information gathered from the Ethnography Section of the Kenya National Museum (Nairobi) indicates that leather has had various uses amongst the ethnic communities in Kenya. Leather has been used for making household items, musical instruments, clothing and body ornaments among others. Leather was used by the Bantu tribes of East Africa most importantly as sleeping mats. The treatment of the skin was done with fats and ghee from livestock. Sleeping mats were not decorated (Kipkulei, 2001).

According to Suleiman (1998), there is a lot of evidence in the African homestead of use of decorated leather. Ritual paraphernalia like horns that were meant for appeasement of the spirits were finished using leather. The chiefs and headmen also enjoyed a good share of leather decorated items such as royal gowns, shields, stools and scepters (fly whisks, clubs and walking sticks). Arthur, Diabour and Kofi (2018) further note that musical instruments utilized leather as primary material in most tribes in East Africa. Leather was used to resonate/amplify sound in musical instruments like drums, nyatiti and orutu (stringed instruments, mainly used by the river-lake Nilotes).

Amongst the Akamba, Tharaka and the Samburu of Kenya, leather has been used to make aprons. These are decorated using beads, cowry shells and metals such as copper. Straps and covers of containers have also been made using leather especially by the Maasai and Samburu. The Turkana of northern Kenya use elephant hide softened in cow dung to make sandals, while the Njemps of Kenya decorate their sandals by coiling leather. Amongst the Kuria and the Duruma of Kenya there is evidence that masks were made from moulded cowhide (Kamuiru, 2015; Mokhothu-Ogolla & Wanjau, 2013; World Bank, 2015).

## 1.2 Aesthetics

According to Spinoza (1933), beauty or the appreciation of it is a spontaneous endeavour of the emotional man to discern the product of his perception. The value of beauty has very many prongs namely natural beauty, cosmetics and jewellery. Leather plays a very important role in making of jewellery (Mokhothu-Ogolla & Wanjau, 2013). Songoro (2000) notes that the Maasai, Turkana, Samburu and Akamba of Kenya are famous for their leather work pertaining to jewellery. This is supported by evidence gathered from the National Museum (Nairobi) which reveals that these ethnic groups use cowhide decorated by stitching beads to make jewellery and belts. Keeping livestock was the main occupation of the Pokot of Kenya and as a result, they had sufficient supply of leather. Domestic accessories made out of leather amongst the Pokot include articles such as mats, clothing and sandals (Songoro, 2000). In “The Path of an Artist”, Sospeter (2001) notes that a Pokot household can only compare to a gallery with a wide range of master pieces.

## 1.3 Inspiration for Design

Although it is evident from literature that leather crafts have been practiced by a number of ethnic groups in Kenya, three ethnic groups namely Maasai, Luo and Swahili were selected for purposes of depth and focus in this research.

### 1.3.1 The Maasai

The Maasai are East African nomadic people speaking *maa*, an eastern Nilotic language. They are plain Nilotes who moved southwards from an area north of Lake Turkana in Ethiopia to occupy most plains from Central Kenya to northern Tanzania (Naikuni, 2018). Traditionally, the Maasai like any other nomadic tribe, have worn minimal dress such as simple cloth wrapped around the waist and elaborate body paint. Due to their nomadic lifestyle, the Maasai have minimum material possessions. Architecture and other artistic pursuits that demand a settled way of life such as metal casting and wood sculpture have had little chance to develop. Instead, their creativity has been directed towards beautifying and adorning themselves. They wear clothes but highlight their features with painting, wearing elaborate head dresses and jewellery. Body art serves as a detailed sign language conveying information about the wearer’s age, achievements and social standing in society (Riley, 2010). Young warriors wear short skirts made of hide or fur, beaded necklaces and earplugs with special hairstyle or head dresses (see figures 1 and 2).

Women and girls wear lots of colourful of jewellery with body wraps and skirts, respectively (see figures 3 and 4)



Figure 1. Maasai Warrior.  
Source: The Peoples of Kenya - Joy Adamson: p. 222

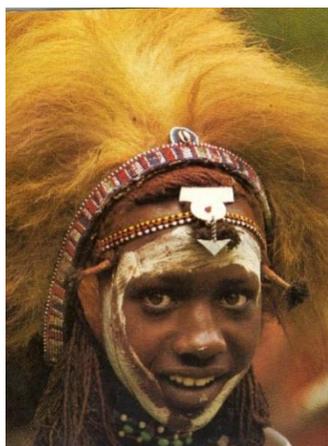


Figure 2. Maasai warrior, Kenya.  
Source: Africa adorned Angela Fisher: p. 12



Figure 3. Married woman (Maasai).  
Source: Africa Adorned Angela Fisher p. 26

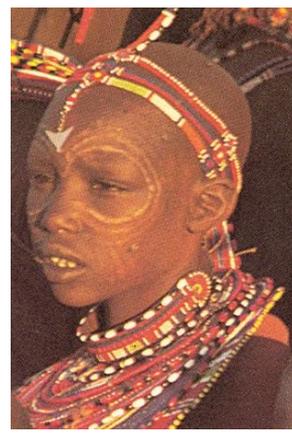


Figure 4. Young uncircumcised Maasai girl.  
Source: Africa adorned Angela Fisher, p. 29

### 1.3.2 The Swahili

The Swahili are a group of people living along the Kenyan coast. They emerged as a result of intermarriages between the Arabs and the local communities. Swahili culture has been influenced by Muslim religion and civilization. This has led to a profound effect on the Swahili, making them a distinct and separate community (Thompson, 2018). The hybrid origin of the Swahili civilization is clearly represented in various forms of art. The carving of wood is probably the most conspicuous form of artistic expression. Geometric designs are characteristic in decorating wooden implements of African origin (Muchika, 2017).

### 1.3.3 The Luo

The Luo are river- lake Nilotes who came to Kenya through a series of movements that saw them settle around the southern shores of Lake Victoria. The Luo point to Bahr el Ghazal region of southern Sudan as their original homeland from where they migrated to Pubungu in Uganda and later into Kenya. They are at times referred to as southern Luo to distinguish them from other river- lake Nilotes from Uganda and southern Sudan (Campbell, 2006; Hope, 2014). Though originally pastoralists, the Luo later took to agriculture and also became expert fishermen. Adamson (1971) has posited that the Luo, when dressed in their traditional ornaments, deserve their reputation as one of the most picturesque people in Kenya (See figures 5 and 6)

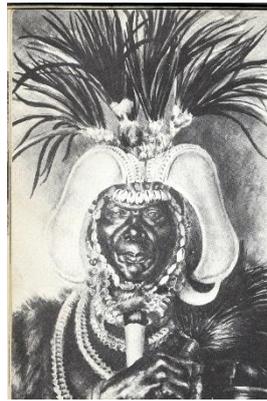


Figure 5. Luo elder in funeral head dress.  
Source: The Peoples of Kenya Joy Adamson. p. 58



Figure 6. Luo woman - witch doctor.  
Source: The peoples of Kenya Joy Adamson. p.169

## 2. Methodology

This section presents the actual process of preparation for the project through course work and execution of the project, right from the proposal stage to the eventual execution of respective specific projects. In anticipation for this project, the author selected specific first year units in multimedia crafts, as part of preparation for the task ahead. The first year course in the first semester which consisted of leather work and jewelry design contributed to the final project through: improvement of skills in handling of leather; creativity of design, especially for leather items, in that the design took a pragmatic direction (workable in leather); and leather decoration techniques were refined; and new techniques discovered that would be later used in the project. An example is drawing on leather using pen and ink.

In leather work unit in first year, leather items were designed, produced and exhibited at the end of the semester. The items were based on various themes and cultures. The project laid emphasis on techniques of handling leather in both design and decoration rather than thematic; hence the following units undertaken in second semester were useful: Drawing, Mosaic and Collage all of which were used in the study.

Before the start of the project, a background study was carried out to establish various types of leather articles in the market based on the three cultural themes. Information on material culture of various ethnic groups was collected followed by derivation of designs. Secondary data on relevant documented literature regarding historical and modern uses of decorated leather was obtained from the library. This provided insight on the current trends in the leather industry in Kenya. In addition, information from magazines, journals and periodicals were also found useful in improving design ideas of articles for the interior. Later a pilot field study was done to find out the available leather artifacts in the market and their uses as portrayed by different cultures.

The author visited Victoria Furnishers (Nairobi) in order to find out types of materials used to make furnishings and decorations employed on leather furnishings. Displays of furniture alongside soft

furnishings and materials used on these were observed. Among the visited areas were also the Maasai curio market (located off Kijabe Street, Nairobi) and Village market (Gigiri, Nairobi). Shops and Galleries such as African Heritage (Mombasa road, Nairobi) and Zanzibar Curio shop (Moi Avenue, Nairobi) were also visited - all of which portray the quality of finished leather products produced by and for different cultural uses. Finally, various stalls at Kariokor and City markets (both situated in Nairobi) were visited to see various decoration techniques employed on different types of leather, tools, motifs and the variety of items produced. The National Museum was chosen as a resources center due to the fact that information found here is authentic and artifacts are diverse. The sections visited include the Archives, Ethnography department and the main gallery.

### 3. Findings

Table 1 below shows the items produced and the number of techniques employed on each by various cultures.

Table 1

*Cultural artifacts and techniques used in producing them*

Item	Sources	Techniques								
		Moulding	Tooling	Stamping	Appliqué	Bead Work	Painting	Drawing	Incising	Weaving
Lampshade <sup>1</sup>	Luo, Maasai							Δ	Δ	
Lampshade <sup>2</sup>	Maasai								Δ	Δ
Wall hanging <sup>1</sup>	Maasai					Δ		Δ		
Wall hanging <sup>2</sup>	Maasai/Swahili	Δ			Δ	Δ				
Wall hanging <sup>3</sup>	Luo	Δ				Δ				
Wall hanging <sup>4</sup>	Luo	Δ				Δ				
Wall hanging <sup>5</sup>	Maasai					Δ	Δ			
Wall hanging <sup>6</sup>	Maasai/Swahili				Δ					
Wall hanging <sup>7</sup>	Luo					Δ		Δ		
Wall hanging <sup>8</sup>	Maasai/Luo					Δ	Δ			
Wall hanging <sup>9</sup>	Maasai/Swahili				Δ					
Wall hanging <sup>10</sup>	Luo/Maasai			Δ	Δ				Δ	
Place mat <sup>1</sup>	Maasai/Luo			Δ		Δ			Δ	
Place mat <sup>2</sup>	Swahili		Δ							
Place mat <sup>3</sup>	Luo/Maasai		Δ	Δ		Δ				
Place mat <sup>4</sup>	Maasai/Swahili		Δ							
Flower pot <sup>1</sup>	Maasai/Swahili	Δ								Δ
Flower pot <sup>2</sup>	Maasai/Swahili	Δ								Δ
Decorative gourd <sup>3</sup>	Maasai	Δ				Δ				
Wall clock <sup>1</sup>	Luo/Maasai		Δ		Δ				Δ	
Wall clock <sup>2</sup>	Luo/Maasai				Δ			Δ	Δ	
Wall clock <sup>3</sup>	Luo/Maasai					Δ			Δ	
Wall clock <sup>4</sup>	Maasai	Δ					Δ			
Seat Covers	Luo			Δ						

#### 3.1 Photographic Presentations

The study established that culture can be a source of inspiration in the execution of any artistic work. The production of leather items by different cultures using different tools and techniques as shown in Table 1 is a demonstration of creating ambience in the Kenyan corridors. Ambience, as defined by Wakefield and Blodgett (1994), is the mood, character, tone, quality and atmosphere of a given place. Leather crafts can therefore serve to elevate the ambience of an environment raising the excitement levels the people using them.

The Kenyan coast which is a host for the Swahili culture is basically considered an attractive site for both local and international tourists. The leather work artifacts by the Swahili culture are therefore a symbol of touristic attraction. While many travel to the Kenyan coast for a change in scenery and weather, others do so to relax and have fun (Kigen, 2012).



Figure 7. Wall hanging: Inspired by Maasai neck ornament and gourd. Techniques: Bead work and painting



Figure 8. Wall hanging: Inspired by Luo dancer. Techniques: Beadwork and drawing



Figure9: Wall hanging: Inspired by Swahili comb and Maasai container. Technique: Appliqué



Figure 10: Wall hanging: Inspired by Swahili comb and Maasai ornament. Techniques: Tooling, moulding, Appliqué and beadwork.



Figure 11: Wall hanging: Inspired by Swahili comb and Maasai collar. Technique: Appliqué.



Figure 12: Wall hanging: Inspired by gourds. Technique: Moulding.

Of all the pieces studied at the National Museum, only one reveals evidence of use of leather for interior design. This is a wall hanging made of cowhide decorated with cowry shells and aluminium beads. It is hung above the bed as decoration by the Boran (Kenya National Museum).

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that material culture of the Luo, Swahili and Maasai (and by extension those of other ethnic groups in Africa) form an important, rich and largely untapped source of artistic inspiration for leather crafts and other art areas. Moreso, the study concludes that leather is a good alternative material for interior decoration.

Experiments with leather found that bead work is well taken by all types of leather. Moulding, tooling, stamping and dyeing were found as best suited for vegetable tanned leather like kips, while drawing and applique techniques worked best on suede. These findings provide ground for further experimentation with less used techniques such as leather carving and pyrography as way of increasing Kenya's competency in the leather accessories market.

The potential for growth in Kenya's leather Industry cannot be underrated. The Vision 2030, the Kenya Industrial Transformation Programme (KITP) and most recently Big 4 Agenda have all been designed by the Government to revamp the manufacturing sector with Leather being identified as among the priority sectors under the Big 4 manufacturing pillar. This research falls in the broad area of leather products design, which has been identified as a key technical skill required for the growth of the sector. With propositions being made to strengthen university leather design technology, the findings of this research provide a timely intervention that will enable Kenya to tap into the large market for leather goods in the COMESA region and beyond.

#### **Recommendations**

1. The study recommends adoption of a singular theme/cultural artifact for an establishment or household that resonates across its environment.
2. The use of paintings and artistic fittings to increase aesthetic quality is fundamental, hence designers can make use of such tools to improve on the leather crafts in creating ambience.
3. This research focused on Maasai, Luo and Swahili cultural artifacts. Researcher recommends studies and application of designs from other ethnic groups of Kenya and Africa as a whole. This is to widen variety and allow for comparison of designs.
4. The research recommends a survey of the Kenya leather craft sector to ascertain their uptake levels of new leather embellishment techniques aimed at improving product quality for the market.

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