

Kamba Beadwork

Alan Donovan

The Kamba live in a sparse, mountainous region between the coast of Kenya and Nairobi in central Kenya. According to early Kamba legends, they migrated from the area around Mt. Kilimanjaro; many beer gourds and other Kamba artifacts collected by Frobenius or other early European explorers have scenes depicting ancestral creatures and the mountain. They supposedly chose the hills and mountains near the present capital of Machakos (once the proposed capital of Kenya) to ward off their rivals, the Maasai.

Famous as hunters and craftspeople, the Kamba live in small villages composed of family groups under an elected chief. Animals are the main source of wealth, but Kambas are also agriculturalists who grow maize, millet, sorghum, yams and beans. In the last century there were major migrations of Kamba to Kangundo and Yatta because of plentiful rainfall and fine grazing for their cattle. Other Kamba settled along Kenya's coast, mostly at Mariakani and Kikambala. Due to this early movement, as well as their skill with handicrafts, they became proficient traders. Chains, handmade of brass or copper in clay molds, were traded as far away as Zaire and present day Zimbabwe.

The Kamba are most noted for three particular skills: twining sisal or baobab fiber bags (called *chiondos* or Kenya bags), wood carving and elaborate beadwork. Their famous wood carvings have been traded and exported for half a century. Reportedly, early Kamba traders learnt carving skills from the Makonde of Tanzania; however, there are very old examples of their carvings in the British Museum and the Nairobi National Museum, especially the ornate and unique three-legged stools, carved flywhisk handles and other household articles.

In former times, almost every Kamba wore charms or fetishes. Medicine men and women were very powerful, settling feuds and disputes or providing charms or herbs to win favors, prevent disease or bring good fortune. One type of medicine man acted for spiritual guidance and counseling, the other was a

more commercial doctor who provided charms or potions mixed in ghee, milk, or blood in exchange for goods, ornaments or money. Some of the charms or ornaments consisted of beadwork whose designs, color and patterns were chosen after consulting the medicine man.

White, worn as the color of fertility, is the background for almost all beadwork. Since white beads were valued in neighboring Uganda by the Buganda and other tribes, this probably explains why vast quantities of them passed through Kamba lands via Arab and Indian traders.

The most common beadwork patterns are variations of triangles, diamonds, arrows, double triangles or double arrows, with emphasis on the arrow and spear as patterns—the spear gained importance because it represented wealth as well as peace for the tribe, and hunting was a major occupation of the men.

For the thread used to string beadwork, women beat the pulp of the baobab tree or sisal plant, scrape off the excess and dry the leftover fibers; it is then spun by rolling two of its yarns against the thigh.

During periodic dances and celebrations, women wear beadwork costumes, including *mushiondo* or coiled belts, bracelets, necklaces, flat belts, armlets and loincloths. Early loincloths were beaded onto leather, but later black cotton cloth, brought in by Arab traders was favored. The cloth, was heavily decorated with beadwork and with ordinary buttons—called *batani* from the English word button.

Beadwork worn during dances denotes status and age; older women wear beaded flat collars and necklaces with beads dangling front and back, and sometimes highly prized necklaces of fragrant wood cut into small chips and strung together with baobab string and beads. This type of necklace, as well as aluminum collars and complicated aluminum wire coiled belts may be presented to older women by men seeking the attention of younger girls.

Certain armbands or loincloths are worn

only by circumcised or married women. Sometimes these loincloths are hidden under the black beaded cotton skirt and shown only to the woman's husband; if he should suspect her of having a lover, he might quiz the suspect as to the patterns on his wife's loincloth.

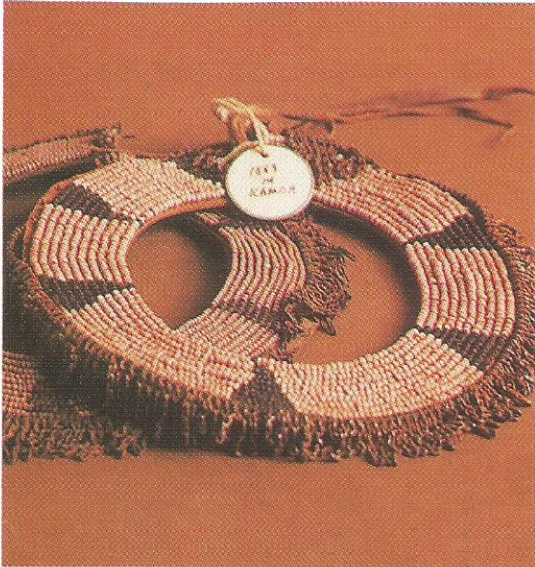
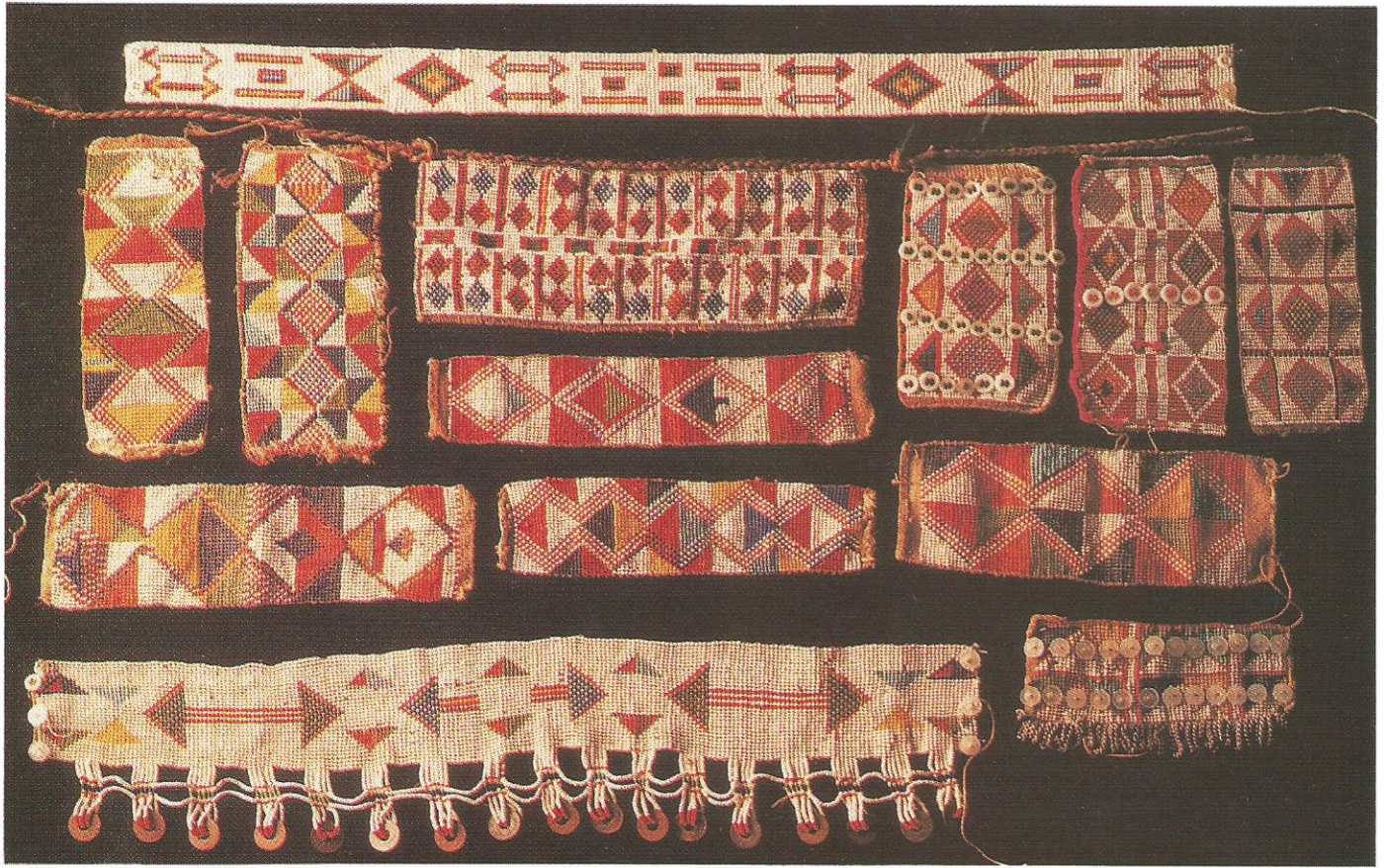
Women also wear beadwork to cleanse themselves and for protection from evil spirits. They seek the good spirit of *Kathembe* and when in total trance will dance accompanied by the tumultuous rhythmic jingles from many bells of all sizes and shapes which are attached to the cotton skirts, loincloths, collars or necklaces worn around the neck, wrist and ankles. Some bells are made from beer bottle tops, or tin cans, while others are melted from iron or aluminum pots and decorated with intricate patterns. Old one cent copper coins hung on chains are used extensively in dance costumes.

Other forms of body ornamentation include earrings; formerly, available females wore wooden earplugs carved from the wood of the blackwood tree, often inlaid with aluminum studs in elaborate patterns. Earplugs of aluminum were worn by older women who had removed their wooden earplugs after bearing their first child. Commissioned brass armbands and bracelets were often obtained from old bullet cartridges. Kamba ornaments are similar in design to the Ngiríama, often trade partners, who live between the primary Kamba area and the coast. The tiny aluminum circles used by the Kamba are exactly the same as the beads worn by Ngiríama women on their wedding day. Older women, especially near Kitui, may further decorate themselves with scarification patterns, or by filing their teeth. ■

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□ Alan Donovan is Managing Director of African Heritage, Ltd., Nairobi, Kenya.



Top: **KAMBA BEADWORK** with five or more colors used on white background; pieces predominate with triangle/diamond/arrow designs. Center: **WOMEN'S COLLARS** from nineteenth century when pink beads were popular, with typical triangle design in black beads, hung with handmade metal chains, beaded on heavy leather. Right: **AFRICAN HERITAGE BAND** shown wearing Kamba beadwork and *Khangas*, Kenya printed cotton. Photographs by Christopher Whiteman, and courtesy of the National Museums of Kenya. Copyright by the National Museums of Kenya.