

Cherokee/Clay County
Senior Games & Silvers Arts
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Literary

Essay

The Kazuri Bead

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The Kazuri Bead

A small piece of clay is delicately worked by the brown hands of a young Kenyan woman, a factory worker. At first the clay is resistant but her patience wins out as she forms a sphere that is rolled around in her hands until it feels just right before she pierces it with a wire to form a bead.

Many women are employed there and labor at other tables molding different shapes by hand and piercing them into beads. At the end of their day all the beads are strung on a wire and placed in the kiln for the initial bisque firing, an overnight process that prepares the beads for glazing.

The rich colored glazes that will be used denote the blues of the African skies; the red, gold and yellow of the sun from rise to set; and the greens, aquas and purples of the birds and vegetation, as well as the color variants of the variety and plentitude of the protected animals found in the Maasai Mara and surrounding Conservancies.

Roughly 3 million years ago Mt. Kenya rose from the plains of equatorial Africa in Kenya. The last eruption was a million or so years ago and although the volcano is now dormant, the soil around it carries new life.

Thus begins the creation story of the “small and beautiful” bead known in Swahili as the Kazuri bead.

From the rich earth at the base of the mount a particular type of clay is dug by hand and transported in large sacks to Kazuri Beads Limited, a factory located on the outskirts of Nairobi that was begun in the 1970s to provide employment for single mothers in Kenya struggling to support their families.

The clay must go through multiple purification processes, which are carried out by the few young men employed there, to remove impurities and pass a quality inspection before it is formed into long rolls that are more easily handled by the women as they begin creating the beads.

While some of the beads might seem to look exactly alike, each one is individually handcrafted by a Kenyan mother following a size, pattern and color scheme styled by a designer – small or large, round or flat, oval or little squares or chunky rectangles.

The day after the glazed beads have been fired and cooled they are unloaded from the kiln and sent to another department where other women string the colorful necklaces and bracelets into life. Even in the dimly lit workshop the Kazuri bead necklaces seem to light up the dark. From there they are transported and placed on display in the retail shop.

For those who enjoy vibrant color and design, entering the Kazuri shop is a sensory overload rendering it difficult to immediately decide exactly which one or ones will be enhancing your or your friend's wrist or neck. Each one comes with a card denoting the name and creator of the design. How easy can it be to choose between “Baby Zebra,” “Gold Polka Dot” and “Mystical Giraffe?” Round, flat, oval, tubular, rectangular, tribal, contemporary, traditional in small, medium and large in every color and combination make it hard to choose.

Even the beads that are rejected are beautiful in their imperfect way and are sometimes given as small tokens to touring visitors who stop to chat on their way through the workshop.

However, the life of the Kazuri bead doesn't stop at its purchase from the shop. After the beads have been worn to church, out to dinner or on an outing with friends and are removed from around the neck or wrist they are

warm to the touch. The clay that was dug from the Kenyan earth, worked by the gentle hands of a Kenyan mother, fired, glazed, fired again and strung for beauty has absorbed the body heat of the wearer and lives on every time they are worn.