



SELF-SUFFICIENCY



From left, Joyce Kiplagat helps Rebecca Lolosoli, an artist from Kenya, take a pricing workshop from Betsy Walker at Santa Fe Prep on Thursday. Lolosoli will show traditional women's beadwork at this weekend's Santa Fe International Folk Art Market.

Sales Fight Abuse

Kenyan Women Create, Sell Beaded Jewelry

By KATHALEEN ROBERTS
Journal Staff Writer

If Samburu means "butterfly," then Rebecca Lolosoli boasts wings of steel.

The northern Kenya native of this pastoral and semi-nomadic tribe founded the women's organization Umoja ("unity" in Swahili) to help combat the marginalization and abuse of Samburu women.

In the 1980s and '90s, about 1,400 Samburu women were raped by British soldiers from local training bases. Today, an ongoing investigation is under way to bring the cases to trial. Many of the victims' husbands kicked them out, penniless, to support themselves and their children with no education or skills. In 1990, Lolosoli and 14 women formed Umoja in this remote pocket of Kenya to sell their traditional beadwork to provide food, clothing and health care.

"There were little children," said Lolosoli, an imposing figure with the dignity of an oak, her neck circled by



Rebecca Lolosoli of Kenya will be showing beadwork at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market this weekend.

rings of beads, a constellation of color and dizzying pattern. "There were hyenas, lions, elephants. Many children were eaten by hyenas." The women began by selling their jewelry on the roads to tourists.

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If you go

WHAT: Santa Fe International Folk Art Market

WHEN: 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday; 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: Milner Plaza, Museum Hill

PREVIEW AND BENEFIT 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. tonight, \$250 admits two; includes one early bird ticket for Saturday.

EARLY BIRD TICKET: \$50, 7:30-9 a.m. Saturday.

GENERAL ADMISSION: \$10/advance; \$15/market day Saturday; \$5 Sunday.

CONTACT: 476-1189 or folkartmarket.org.

TRANSPORTATION

BUSES: Saturday starting at 7 a.m. from the PERA parking lots. Sunday starting at 8 a.m. from the PERA parking lots.

Sales Fight Abuse of Women

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Threatened by men jealous of their success, they formed their own village to protect themselves, building dung-roof huts made of sticks and mud. There is no electricity or running water. Lolosoli received death threats.

"The men were laughing at us," she said. "They think we were stupid. Our lifestyle started to become better because (tourists) buy our things and we get food. Some of the women were walking around naked. They wouldn't come out of their homes."

"The men became jealous; they started attacking our village," she continued. "The police were not doing anything."

Once treated as livestock, today the women enjoy the protection of their sons. Before, they couldn't sleep because someone always had to be on the lookout, she explained. This marks Lolosoli's first year at this weekend's Sixth Annual Santa Fe International Folk Art Market. She'll be selling the jewelry — rings, bracelets, belts, necklaces and headpieces — of the 48 women living in her village. All proceeds will return to Kenya with her. The women will use the money to buy food and health care and to support a school

for 120 children.

Lolosoli's is one of 36 artists' co-ops and organizations representing more than 8,000 artists at the festivities. This year's roster represents 47 nations, including first-timers like Burkina Faso, Indonesia and the Palestinian Territories.

Samburu girls learn beading from the time they are old enough to thread a needle. Lolosoli learned from her own mother at age 6. Girls must be proficient by the age of 15 in order to attract a husband. The people wear the elaborate jewelry every day.

"This is the beadwork of the Samburu," Lolosoli said. "It's part of our country. If you don't have it, it is as if you are naked."

Years ago, women strung seeds instead of beads. Today they use beads carved from seashells, stringing them on metal wire. Then they add accents of metal discs and buttons. Different designs denote a person's age; different colors reflect specific meanings. White symbolizes women's milk, red represents blood. Green reflects blessings and prayers.

Since 1990, Umoja has multiplied into more than 60 local support groups addressing human rights issues encompassing HIV/AIDS, forced female genital muti-

lation and abuse. Samburu women are among the most marginalized in Kenya.

"We can't even eat food before our husbands," Lolosoli said. "And we are polygamous so you never know when he comes. That's why women are very skinny. We have no rights to land."

When the market ends, Lolosoli will return home to her own five children and the six she has adopted because they were orphaned by AIDS.

"We just share what we have," she said. "Women, they were looking old because of their problems. When they got fed, they started looking their age."

A traditional Samburu wife wears only the necklaces her husband gives her as a sign of her worth to him. These women adorn themselves with as many as they want.

In 2008, Oprah Winfrey commissioned a specially designed Umoja bracelet sold through Macy's. No one is making a profit except the women.

Today Lolosoli wears a headband sprouting a multi-pointed metal medallion that dangles on her forehead. The ornament serves as a reminder of her true worth.

"This means we are from the star, that we are connected to God," she explained.