



Tanning

Other names:

Leather Tanning

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Domain

Traditional Crafts

Hide Tanning

COMMUNITY GROUPS AND LOCATION

Community groups

All over Sudan, especially pastoralist communities.

Practitioners

Tanneries are usually run by Sudanese men and male youth.

The leather work is also dominated by men but some women have taken it as a craft as well.

Purpose / Use

Tanning is a source of livelihood and artisan work.

The leather from the tanneries is used for multiple purposes. Its used in making shoes, bags, and purses and anciently in the Nubian kingdom it was also used to wrap the bodies before burial.

Knowledge / Skills

- Leather tanning is the first step in the leather making process.
- Before tanning, hides are cleaned of dirt, blood, salt, and hair.

Legacy of leather

Working in traditional tanneries requires a fair deal of expertise – from cleaning the hide of impurities and removing air from the skin to polishing the leather till it becomes soft and shiny.

Processing of hide entails soaking the pieces in water for a day and then smearing it with firewood ash. “We apply potash, too, but since potassium is now expensive, its ash that we use more frequently,” explains Arzika.

Another ingredient called “jhir” is added to the soaked hide and left like that for two days, after which the skin falls off.

The skin is then soaked in a pit of water before being dipped in an acacia nilotica solution. Once dried, whatever remains of the meat is scraped off. A few more rounds of soaking in acacia nilotica solution follow before salt is applied to the hide.

Traditional tanning methods produce leather suitable for a variety of fashion accessories such as bags, shoes and belts crafted both within and outside Africa.

The business may be a money-spinner, but the war in Sudan has made it harder for those in the industry to import enough animal hide into the country to process and export.

Traditional tanneries have been hit the hardest by the conflict, leaving them clinging to hope that peace will soon return to the country and they can add to the value chain and continue to eke out a living from what is potentially still a roaring business worldwide.

Transmission

The tanning skill in Sudan is transmitted through oral tradition, apprenticeships, hands-on training, family inheritance, and community workshops, preserving cultural craftsmanship.

Tools, Equipment, Services

Materials And Methods

The sheep leathers, tanned using rural method were obtained from Soon Libya in Omdurman, Khartoum, Sudan. In this method, Sudanese utilized calcium hydroxide, Attron(sodium bicarbonate), pigeon manure, Garad, Salt, and local oil, in the pits to produce leathers.

HISTORY

Leather tanning in Sudan is a centuries-old craft, deeply rooted in rural and urban traditions. Historically, rural tanning has been practiced using manual techniques, with pits and pots serving as tanning equipment. The Turkish invasion and migration of West African Arabs influenced local methods, leading to the widespread use of Garad (Acacia Nilotica) as a natural tanning agent.

Rural tanneries developed in Omdurman, Sennar, Kordofan, and Darfur, adapting to population densities near the Nile. Unlike international practices that use weight-based systems, Sudanese rural tanners rely on the Al-Tariha system, emphasizing inherited expertise over standardized measurements. Over time, mechanized tanning emerged, incorporating mineral, vegetable, and chrome tanning methods to improve efficiency and leather quality.

The Nubian people historically made extensive use of leather and hides, often for clothing, burial rites, and accessories. Nubian graves contained leather garments, bracelets, pouches, and rawhide sandals, demonstrating a long tradition of leather craftsmanship. During the Meroitic period, Nubian leatherwork reached its peak, producing quivers, wrist guards, and shoes, reflecting advanced tanning techniques and artistic skill.

Despite industrialization, Sudanese artisans continue to preserve traditional tanning methods, keeping cultural heritage alive while adapting to modern market demands.

INTRODUCTION

The art of leather production has been known since ancient times, as revealed by archaeological findings in the historical sites of Musawarat and Bejrawiya. The history of leather shoe production in Sudan dates back to 5000 years in the Kingdom of Meroe. Leather industries are an integral part of Sudan's heritage and civilization, being one of the world's largest producers of animal wealth with around 140 million heads of cattle and sheep known for their high-quality leather. There is a high demand for Sudanese leather in the global market.

Cultural Value:

Source of livelihood, leather shoes such as the ‘markoob’ also represent cultural value and status, depending on the type of leather used, eg: Tiger markoobs show more wealth and higher status due to their rare availability and higher pricing. Its also part of the Nubian heritage

In Sudan, thousands who engaged in the traditional tannery business say they are gainfully employed because of the global demand for leather from Africa.

Associated Practices:

Hunting
animal herding
leather collection
Leather products, such as Markoob shoes, wallets, bags and other products.

Cultural Expressions

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VIABILITY

Threats:

A threat to the trade can be linked to low purchase power due to the people's ability to afford leather items.

There is also a threat to the availability of leather due to people consuming less meat for economic reasons.

Additionally, traditional technical skills can be lost if the younger generations are not interested in the artisanal use of leather and the right methods of tanning due to the low purchase power.

Traditional tanneries have been hit the hard by the conflict value added- exporting raw leather- better to be exported and processed into products to add value



Natural Resources used

Leather

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