

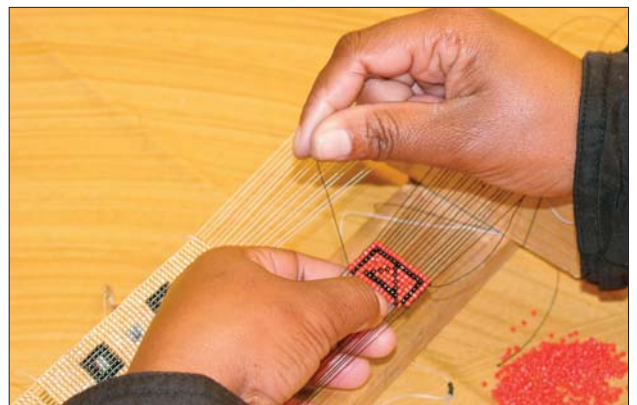
# African Originals

**At the Cape Town manufacturer Poly(nation), underprivileged women from poor townships create handcrafts for the textile industry**

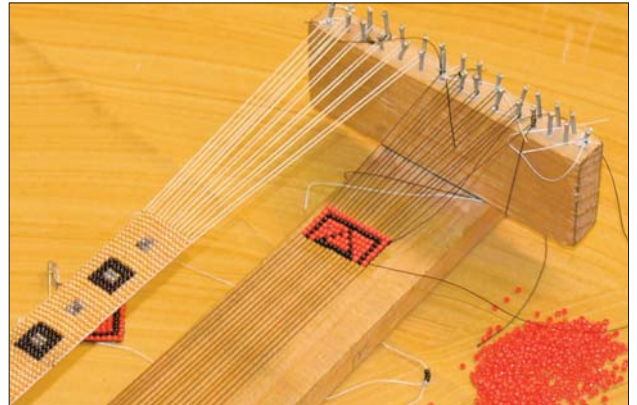
**T**he women sit at tables strewn with thousands of tiny beads in red and black. Even tinier are the eyelets to which they affix the beads, one by one, with a needle and thread. Fifteen beads in a row, ten rows to a label, each row in a different and precisely predetermined sequence of red and black. Their patient application results in rectangular tags that consist entirely of beads. Inspired by a traditional design associated with the Ndebele tribe, the tags – destined for an African textile manufacturer – depict a black arrowhead pointing down against a red background framed in black. Poly(nation)'s factory is a good example of how traditional handcrafts with an updated spin are reentering the value-added chain in Africa. It could also serve as a model of how commerce can contribute to the continent's development.

It takes one of Poly(nation)'s workers nearly 25 minutes to produce a single logo. Over 40 women have steady jobs here that utilize time-honored skills. The order that the beaded logo fills is only one of many, just as the logo itself is only one product among many. Without the aid of automation, African cotton, among other materials, is worked into tablecloths, placemats, dish towels, aprons, shopping bags, and a variety of other textiles.

Manufacturing by hand has long been regarded with skepticism: uneconomical and overdue for replacement by technologically advanced equipment. "But that makes no sense in an environment with growing unemployment like South Africa," Poly(nation)'s founder and manager Alfonso de Chaud explains. "That's why we decided to turn our thinking around and



## African Originals



make artisanship our key selling point and the foundation for our success.” The main idea behind the founding of Poly(nation) in 1995 was to create jobs for disadvantaged, undereducated people from the townships around Cape Town. So the women stringing beads at Poly(nation) were recruited from townships such as Langa, Gugulethu, and Imizamo Yethu where unemployment is especially high. A single township inhabitant who finds remunerative work often supports as many as six people back home.

Poly(nation) creates the designs, then produces and sells the women’s handicrafts to niche markets. The company has a set of principles in mind. “We support the further development of South African design, and we give our preference to manufacturing processes that require working by hand rather than with machines,” de Chaud says. He is certain that the cultural diversity of the Poly(nation) workforce enhances the company’s creativity. Last but not least, “We focus on consistent quality and professionalism.” But nonetheless, each item in the company’s product line remains an African original. Poly(nation) is a successful example of how the Business-and-Development approach that inspires Cotton Made in Africa can be put to work in innovative ways to generate profits for all involved.