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Crafting Traditions: Maasai Beadwork

Background:

The Maasai are a Nilotic ethnic group that live in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. They are pastoralists who live a nomadic lifestyle that has been upheld for many centuries. One practice is the Maasai beadworks, which expresses their identity and values.

Maasai traditionally work with materials that are locally sourced including colourful glass beads, seeds, shells, and natural elements like bone and clay. Not only is crafting a good way to relax but as a gift, these beadworks can create feelings of happiness and strengthen social bonds.

FUN FACT

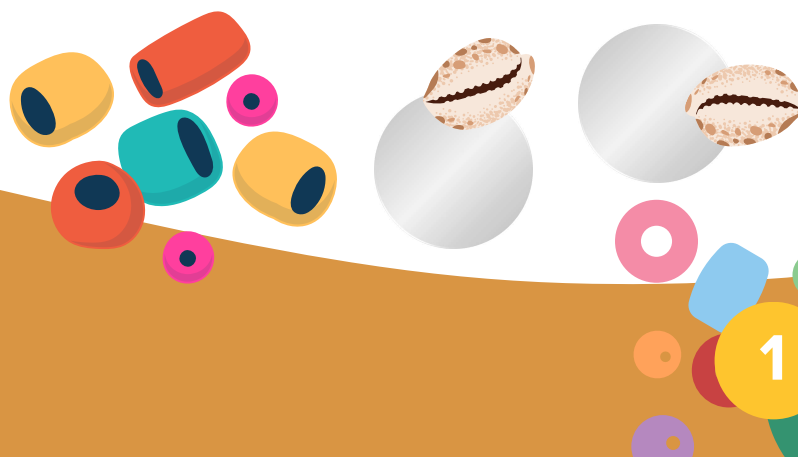
Did you know that archaeologists have dated Maasai bead-making as part of Maasai culture from at least the 7th century?!

Activity: Design a Necklace!

Here's a picture of Samiha's (the activity creator) own Maasai jewellery that she was gifted by a relative.

Age: 8+
Time: 30 minutes

This necklace is made using seed beads, leather, small silver discs, cowrie shells, wire, string, and recycled grain bags for binding the elements together.



The colours and patterns in Maasai beadworks have different meanings. For example, the use of black and white is inspired by the proverb: *Maasai bila utamaduni nii sawasawa na punda milia bila mstari* (The Maasai without culture is the same as a zebra without stripes).

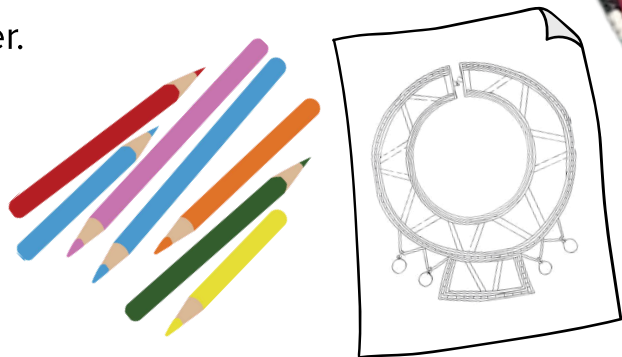
Here is a list of the different meanings behind the colours:

- **Red** signifies bravery, strength, and unity.
- **Blue** represents the sky, water, and divine blessings.
- **White** beads symbolise purity, peace, and health.
- **Yellow** and **orange** stand as signs of hospitality, warmth, and friendliness.
- **Black** represents the people.
- **Green** represents the earth symbolising growth, fertility, and a connection to nature

Using the template below of a Maasai necklace, why not design your own Maasai jewellery imbued with different wishes that you have for a friend or family member.

What you will need

- The template
- Coloured pencils / crayons



Method

You can colour the drawing as you see fit and make little notes on what they wish for that person. For example, if you have coloured something in orange, the wish written could be 'I hope we meet again soon' or using a red and black pattern could mean 'I hope your test goes well'.

Bonus Activity

Upon completion, you can then gift this drawing to the person you were thinking of.

