



## IN AFRICA THERE IS A BELIEF THAT *'I am because we are'*

In Africa there is a belief that 'I am because we are'. This deeply ingrained sense of community, putting the 'We' before the 'I', is a powerful value that empowers in ways few people can appreciate.

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One of the many admirable facets of African culture is how people come together to create things. It may be music, food, wood carvings or beautifully crafted textiles – what matters, is the combined inspiration and commitment to creativity that people bring to the proverbial 'party'.

Truly, the world has always been fascinated by Africa. It's the cradle of humanity, where art and culture first took a foothold and shaped the development of a plethora of people across the globe. Living on such a culturally rich landscape, how could one not expect exceptional works of art?

Kaross embodies the essence of being African – of bringing people together in a way that makes the world a better place. It is not simply about the beauty and passion that goes into creating incredible hand-embroidered works of functional art. It's about the long-lasting benefits of job-creation within a community. What's more is how the jobs are created FOR the women in rural areas, developed AROUND who they are and their potential. It's not a job telling them WHAT to do and HOW to do it, but rather a special way of extracting value from something the Vatsonga people have handed down over many generations. It is for this reason that Kaross' mission is to provide opportunities based on these pre-existing skills and wealth of experience.

Kaross was founded in 1988 by Irma van Rooyen, a fine artist in her own right, but

also the wife of a citrus farmer. Burgert and Irma van Rooyen started farming citrus in the Letsitele area in 1984 and created a family business known today as Groep 91 uitvoer (Pty) Ltd. From the beginning, both as a family and as a citrus grower and exporter, they have believed in working together with their colleagues, employees and the community to create a sustainable, respectful environment in which everyone can benefit and grow.

As an artist and newly established citrus farmer, Irma was immediately inspired by the seasonal farm workers and their vibrant culture, and wanted to get involved by creating an extra income for otherwise rural woman and men. Irma says the following about what inspired her:

*"The Tsonga people told me their stories and I became inspired. By their humanity, their space, their life - so utterly proud! By their eagerness to be involved, and to be part of the project. These talented women and men, together, raised up the Kaross project from its humble beginnings. And now, the drive to never give up, to keep on exploring and developing and growing. And learning to be stronger, together. To you, whose path I am privileged to share, I owe my inspiration."*

In keeping with the African way, the citrus farming business of Groep 91 not only brought people together, but also created a platform and financial support for Kaross to be born with just 5 ladies sitting on a blanket – a 'Kaross'- doing what they know and do best according to their cultural heritage. Embroidery is a traditional skill for most Vatsonga and Northern Sotho people.

Kaross revived this skill by making it commercially viable and over the past 27 years, Kaross has grown into a South African success story that now employs around 1300 embroiderers in the Letsitele/Giyani area. It produces a comprehensive range of premium quality products from placemats to cushion covers, handbags and wall hangings.

These individual hand-crafted works of art retail through outlets in major tourist hubs such as our international airports, or direct to the public through the newly launched Kaross online shop.

Africa needs more companies who actively seek to improve the lives of others – of building strong communities where the collective become stronger than the individual. The world should be looking to Africa for examples of community in action. If we don't encourage development and the realisation of potential, then what are we doing? What kind of a community are we fostering and what is the end result if we forget about the 'we', and lose ourselves to the ever-lonely 'I'.

To see Kaross in action, or to view the full range of Kaross products, visit [kaross.co.za](http://kaross.co.za) or follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

