

*Legacy*

*Jewelry Techniques of West Africa*



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# Legacy

Jewelry Techniques  
of West Africa

*Matthieu Cheminée*



## *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to the African jewelers who have invited me into their workshops, their homes and into their lives. It is dedicated to the fathers and uncles who taught them, and to the sons and nephews who will carry on the family business. Because this is the spirit of jewelry in Africa, a knowledge and honor passed down from one generation to the next.

### *Fa ci yè*

*(Inherited from my father)*

Dedicated to my mother and father Martine and Jean-Louis—for all that you were and are for me, for your presence and for your guidance in my life. To my two beautiful sons, Nemo and Ziya, my greatest teachers.



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# Foreword

I can still remember the time and place where I encountered *Africa Adorned*, a wonderful book by Angela Fisher. Like hundreds of jewelers before and since, I was moved by the power of the ornaments in those fabulous photos—in fact it is not an exaggeration to say that the book fundamentally altered my thinking about human adornment. Over the years I have reflected on the power of that book but I am unable to put into words just why it made such an impression. I am not a scholar or even a student of African culture, but the connection was not based on information, history or language. Instead, whatever it was that spoke to me in that book, and that speaks to me in this one, is an intuitive rapport with the work of African jewelers.

After that first encounter with a friend's copy, I bought my own copy of *Africa Adorned*, and since then I have picked up books on African jewelry whenever I find them. These are excellent books and I look through them often, but they are usually written by an anthropologist or curator. In them I find tantalizing glimpses of technique but rarely more than that. *Legacy* goes into the markets of West Africa, but also into the workshops and homes of metalsmiths. We see their tools, watch their process, and have access to their techniques. And what a thrill it is.

Matthieu Cheminée is a French-born metalsmith, living in Canada now, who worked in Africa for three years and has returned a dozen times to research this book. Besides being a practicing metalsmith, he is a free-lance photographer and teacher. This combination makes him the perfect author for this book, but there is more than that. I had a chance to travel to Senegal with Matthieu as this book was in its final stages and I was able to witness firsthand the strength of his personality. Everywhere we went, his smile, a ready handshake and a quick joke made him welcome. As he says in his introduction, "I am handed a hammer or a file to test my skills, a test that always ends in a good laugh. Once proven, I am welcomed not only as a friend but as a member of the family."

As we traveled I was overwhelmed by the intricacies of the network of metalsmiths. Within five minutes of any conversation, Matthieu had discovered that he knew a relative of this person, or that they had a mutual friend. This is

all the more amazing when you learn of the nomadic ways of the craftspeople in the region. Political unrest, shifting families and a restless desire to learn new techniques send the craftspeople moving between cities and from one country to another. At first I had trouble understanding this mobility, thinking of the complexity and effort of packing up a house and getting settled into a new community. When I was there I saw that for most of the jewelers we met, their professional lives consisted of a small anvil and a toolbox. Their clothes fit into a backpack and it appears that wherever they go, they quickly find a welcome into their adopted family of jewelers.

When Matthieu approached me to discuss publishing his book, I was primed to like the idea. When I saw his photos, I was hooked. But as excited as I was, when I got involved as editor my enthusiasm deepened. As you will quickly discover, this book is about more than metal techniques. Like his friends in Africa, Matthieu is driven to learn new techniques, but his true passion is for the people he has met in his travels. Beyond the lovely photographs, beyond the clear descriptions of how work is made, the beating heart of this book lies in the personal stories of the jewelers you will meet in these pages. It is worth noting that Matthieu was committed from the outset to include these biographies. His feeling was that showing the work without introducing the artist would not be giving the full story; simply put, it would be rude.

In my brief travels with Matthieu in Africa I met several dozen jewelers. Every one, without exception, was friendly and generous. Though most have few of the conveniences that we take for granted in the West, I never heard a word of complaint. Instead, we were served tea, we shared our ideas and we laughed a lot. The deep connection I have had with African metalwork throughout my career took on a new energy because of my visit there.

I think you will find that vitality in these pages. Through Matthieu's careful eye, his kindred spirit and his passion for those things that are universal, that spark of connection illuminates this book.

– Tim McCreight

# Introduction

*“In Africa, when an elder dies, it’s like a library burning.”*

This quote from the African author Amadou Hampaté Bâ represents the importance of sharing and archiving culture, knowledge and know-how for the benefit of future generations. It is one of the main reasons I wanted to write this book.

Jewelry in West Africa is usually passed down from father to son. As I have been told many times: “It’s hereditary, it’s in our genes.” There are exceptions of course; a jeweler friend in Niamey, Niger taught his wife so that they could work together. Another jeweler who comes from a farming family discovered his passion for the trade during the 1984 drought and famine in Niger. He and his family were forced to leave their land for lack of food and water and moved to Zinder, Niger. There, everyday, he walked past Senegalese jewelers, stopping to watch, sometimes for hours. Eventually, a Malian jeweler who was working there invited him to become his apprentice. A technical school in Dakar brings young women into the jewelry trade; some graduates have even made it as jewelers in New York City.

In 1996 I went to Mali for a couple of weeks and ended up staying for almost three years. Prior to that time I had moved from France, where I was born, to Taos, New Mexico to learn how to make jewelry. While in Mali, I sought out jewelers, eager to learn more about their lives and the way they worked. After my stay in West Africa I moved to Montreal, Quebec, Canada where I live now, but my love for Africa kept drawing me back. Over the last decade I have returned often, usually twice a year, to see more countries and meet more jewelers—always photographing as I went.

The result is this book, in which I have attempted to capture the techniques of the highly skilled jewelers I met on those travels. In addition to the techniques, I have included here profiles of many of the jewelers who share their techniques in these pages. I have also included personal anecdotes that will, I hope, convey the generous spirit and warmth of the people of West Africa. These pieces—the techniques, profiles and cultural notes—are woven together in the pages that follow. Assuming that not all readers will be familiar with some of the technical terms used, I have included a glossary at the back of the book.

I believe this book to be an accurate representation of the most popular West-African techniques. West Africa is a large region, very rich culturally and historically. It is a mosaic of tribes, ethnic groups, and different faiths. Every city, town, neighborhood, village and workshop offers a variety of new and ancestral techniques rarely seen Westerners. A lifetime would not be enough to discover all of them, as the ingenuity of those artisans is infinite.

In these pages I use the term “in the West” to give perspective and to help readers understand the use of tools that might be familiar to North American and European craftsmen. Throughout the book I share names of tools in the local tongue, such as Tamasheq or Bambara. In some cases the spelling is phonetic and therefore variations might exist. For example, depending on the country, the village or region a Tuareg anvil might be called a *touhounte*, *touine* or *tiwinte*.



*the author with  
Ibrahim Abdo  
Guinea*

Most of the time, when walking in African villages, it is the sound of a hammer that leads me through the streets and alleys. For me, discovering a small hidden workshop, finding new techniques, and meeting new people is a kind of treasure hunt. African hospitality and generosity are one of the many qualities that made me fall in love with this part of the world.

It is a real pleasure to spend hours watching jewelers and artisans at work. The blacksmith caste includes most of the trades that have to do with forge and fire. In the

case of the Tuareg people, for instance, it also includes the handling of leather, wood and soapstone carving.

The blacksmith caste is like a large family. Sometimes in my visits I am handed a hammer or a file to test my skills, a test that always ends in a good laugh. Once proven, I am welcomed not only as a friend, but as a member of the family.