

# The Bamum Tapestry-Crochet Hats of Foumban

CAROL VENTURA



Photos by Joe Coca

## PIECEWORK.

# ❖ *The Bamum Tapestry-Crochet* ❖ *Hats of Foumban*

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Situated along the inside corner of the western coast of the continent, Cameroon is geographically part of both Central and West Africa. Cameroon's art and culture have absorbed a variety of influences as the country has for centuries been a crossroads linking North, South, East, and West Africa, and it was colonized by the Germans, French, and English.

Diversity is key in this independent nation. Animism, Christianity, and Islam are practiced side by side, with one or another predominating in any given region. Cameroonians are multilingual, speaking not only their own native tongue but also several others. Many speak French or English as well.

Although men in certain parts of Africa wear turbans, hats are far more common. For the most part, it is Muslim

men who wear hats, but not all Muslim men wear hats, and not all men who cover their heads are Muslim. In addition to possibly indicating the wearer's religion, hats may denote a hometown or high status or may be worn for a certain special event; some are worn simply for fashion. Most African women prefer vibrant printed cloth head wraps to hats.

The assortment of shapes and bold patterns found on men's knitted, coiled, woven, embroidered, and crocheted



*The words and date on the Bamum hat shown at left commemorate the biennial Nguon Festival celebrated in Foumban, Cameroon. 2000. The knob on the top and the heavy crocheted fabric of all three tapestry-crocheted hats identify them as having been made in Foumban, Cameroon. Collection of the author. Photograph by Joe Coca.*



LEFT: *A Bamum leatherworker hammering nails into the sole of a shoe wears a tapestry-crocheted hat. Foumban, Cameroon. 2000.*  
RIGHT: *A Bamum woman tapestry-crochets a hat in Foumban, Cameroon. 2000. Photographs by the author.*

hats (many of them embellished with feathers, quills, or spikes) is mind-boggling. Let's look at the tapestry-crochet hats worn by men of the Bamum ethnic group in Foumban, a city in the French-speaking western province of the Cameroon Grasslands. Thanks to the inspired actions of the Bamum people's most famous leader, King Ibrahim Njoya (ruled 1867–1933), who, during his long reign, invited artisans from around the region to set up studios there, Foumban became and still is an artistic center. The workshops that he established continue to train new generations to carve wooden drums and furniture, cast brass jewelry and statues, embroider clothing, craft leather shoes, cover stools and sculptures with beads, weave cloth, and more.

Both imported steel crochet hooks and hooks made from old bicycle spokes are found in the hands of male and female crocheters in many African countries. Although some yarn is purchased new, much is obtained by raveling recycled knitwear. Men crochet in other parts of Cameroon, but in Foumban, it is women who tapestry-crochet hats with single, doubled, and tripled cotton and acrylic yarns. The most popular style is cylindrical with a flat top and a button-like embellishment in the center of a large monochromatic circle. Bold geometric motifs and occasionally words and dates are incorporated into the sides with tall, tight

tapestry-crochet stitches in contrasting colors.

The button is crocheted first; next, the rounds are tapestry-crocheted without joining. Randomly placed increases keep the top flat and circular. The cylindrical sides begin when the increases stop. Colors are changed after the completion of each stitch so that the top loop of the previous stitch lies over the bottom part of the next stitch. Charts and patterns are not used, but sometimes another hat serves as a model. If a decorative repeat doesn't work out perfectly, a partial motif is included at the end of the round. (I find this relaxed attitude quite refreshing!)

Cloth hats (with and without embroidery), hats crocheted elsewhere, and even baseball caps are other popular men's head coverings in Foumban. Tapestry-crocheted hats from outside Foumban are made with thinner yarns and smaller stitches and sometimes include a crocheted embellishment on top. The thin fabric of the imports is starched, but Bamum crocheters commonly carry synthetic sack fibers along with the yarns to produce a rigid fabric with a distinctive spiraling ridge.

There is a lot of speculation as to the origin of tapestry crochet. My own theory is that crocheted hats evolved from looped hats. Looping is a much older technique and is very time consuming because the working strand has to

be pulled all the way through each loop to make a stitch (without a tool). Compare that with the ease of working crochet, in which a hook pulls a short section of fiber through another loop on the hook. I suspect that loopers were the first to embrace crochet simply because of its greater efficiency.

Looped hats made from twisted black raffia fiber, traditionally worn by nobles to denote their high rank, are still popular in Cameroon. Black nylon single-crocheted hats that resemble the looped hats are worn



*Detail of looped raffia hat from Cameroon.* Photograph by the author.

by men of all ranks, in addition to black and/or colorful nylon hats that incorporate single, double, half-double, and treble crochet stitches. As long as men continue to wear tapestry-crocheted hats, the tradition survives. ❀

### Further Reading

Knöpfli, Hans. *Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon; Part 4, Music and Musical Instruments, Traditional Religion, Native Laws and Customs*. Basel, Switzerland: Basel Mission, 2001. [This volume contains text and interesting photographs of many types of crocheted hats.]

# A Hat in Tapestry Crochet

CAROL VENTURA

## Materials

Tahki Cotton Classic, 100% mercerized cotton yarn, 108 yards (98.8 m)/50 gram (1.8 oz) skein, 2 skeins of #3003 Linen White (MC) and 1 skein each of #3744 Forest Green (A), #3995 Deepest Red (B), and #3861 Midnight Blue (C); [www.tahkistacycharles.com](http://www.tahkistacycharles.com)

Crochet hook, steel, size 1 (2 mm) or size needed to obtain gauge  
Stitch marker

Tapestry needle, small

Finished size: 23 inches (58.4 cm) in circumference and 4¼ inches (10.8 cm) high

Gauge: 32 sts and 30 rnds = 4 inches (10.2 cm)

See below and pages 138–139 for Abbreviations and Techniques

## Special Techniques

In tapestry crochet, one yarn is worked in single crochet while another is carried.

To carry a yarn: Lay the yarn over top of the stitches being worked, then single crochet across as usual, encasing carried yarn within single crochet. If done correctly, the carried yarn will only be slightly visible from front and back of work.

To change colors: Work last stitch before color change until two loops are still on the hook; yarn over with the next color and pull it through both loops on hook, ready to work next stitch with new color.

The shape, motif, and colors of this project were inspired by the Bamum hats tapestry-crocheted in Foumban, Cameroon, Africa. Encasing the carried color in a tight single-crochet stitch creates a naturally stiff fabric, and scattered increases produce the flat circular top.

## Instructions

*Notes:* A hook with a handle is best to crochet tight stitches. A tutorial on making a polymer clay handle is available at [www.tapestrycrochet.com/blog/?p=398](http://www.tapestrycrochet.com/blog/?p=398). Each top round has 8 increases and the motif is 4 stitches wide, so it is easy to make a smaller or larger hat by starting the side earlier or by adding a few more top rounds with the appropriate increases. The hat is worked in the round as a spiral; do not join rounds. Insert a stitch marker into the top of the last stitch of the first round and move it up at the end of each round.

### Hat

Top button,

*Rnd 1:* Ch 7 with MC, leaving a 19-inch (48.3-cm) tail at beg of ch; join with sl st to form a ring. Carry tail and sc 12 in ring (making sure that the top lps are on the outermost part of the ring)—12 sc.

*Rnd 2:* Carry tail and sc 14 in ring again (making sure that the top lps are on the outermost part of the ring)—14 sc.



*Bamum hats tapestry-crocheted in Foumban, Cameroon, Africa, inspired this project hat. Encasing the carried color in a tight single-crochet stitch creates a naturally stiff fabric. Photograph by Joe Coca.*

Rnd 3: Carry tail and sc 16 in ring again (making sure that the top lps are on the outermost part of the ring)—16 sc.

Rnd 4: Carry tail and sc in each of next 16 sc (making sure that the top lps are on the outermost part of the ring)—16 sc.

Rnd 5: Carry tail, [sc in next sc, sk next sc] 8 times (making sure that the top lps fall to the back of the ring)—8 sc.

Rnd 6: Carry tail and sc in each sc around—8 sc.

Top,

Rnd 7: Carry tail, [2 sc in next sc] 8 times—16 sc.

Rnd 8: Cut tail and beg to carry A, with MC [sc in next sc, 2 sc in next sc] 8 times—24 sc.

*Note:* Continue working with main color and carrying A through Round 26.

Rnd 9: [2 sc in next sc, sc in next 2 sc] 8 times—32 sc.

Rnd 10: [Sc in next 3 sc, 2 sc in next sc] 8 times—40 sc.

Rnd 11: [Sc in next 2 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 2 sc] 8 times—48 sc.

Rnd 12: [2 sc in next sc, sc in next 5 sc] 8 times—56 sc.

Rnd 13: [Sc in next 5 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next sc] 8 times—64 sc.

Rnd 14: [2 sc in next sc, sc in next 7 sc] 8 times—72 sc.

Rnd 15: [Sc in next 4 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 4 sc] 8 times—80 sc.

Rnd 16: [Sc in next 9 sc, 2 sc in next sc] 8 times—88 sc.

Rnd 17: [Sc in next 3 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 7 sc] 8 times—96 sc.

Rnd 18: [Sc in next 8 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 3 sc] 8 times—104 sc.

Rnd 19: [Sc in next 6 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 6 sc] 8 times—112 sc.

Rnd 20: [Sc in next 3 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 10 sc] 8 times—120 sc.

Rnd 21: [Sc in next 14 sc, 2 sc in next sc] 8 times—128 sc.

Rnd 22: [Sc in next 10 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 5 sc] 8 times—136 sc.

Rnd 23: [Sc in next 5 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 11 sc] 8 times—144 sc.

Rnd 24: [Sc in next 17 sc, 2 sc in next sc] 8 times—152 sc.

Rnd 25: [Sc in next 11 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 7 sc] 8 times—160 sc.

Rnd 26: [Sc in next 4 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 15 sc] 8 times—168 sc.

Rnd 27: Carry MC, with A [sc in next 16 sc, 2 sc in next sc, sc in next 4 sc] 8 times—176 sc.

Rnd 28: Carry MC, with A [sc in next 21 sc, 2 sc in next sc] 8 times—184 sc.

Side,

Rnd 29: Carry A, with MC sc around.

Rnd 30: [With A sc in next sc, with MC sc in next 3 sc] 46 times.

Rnd 31: [With A sc in next 2 sc, with MC sc in next 2 sc] 46 times.

Rnd 32: [With A sc in next 3 sc, with MC sc in next sc] 46 times.

Rnd 33: Carry MC, with A sc in next 8 sc, cut MC, beg to carry B, cont with A and sc to end of rnd.

Rnd 34: Carry A, with B sc in next 8 sc, cut A, beg to carry C, cont with B and sc to end of rnd.

Rnd 35: [With C sc in next sc, with B sc next 3 sc] 46 times.

Rnd 36: [With C sc in next 2 sc, with B sc in next 2 sc] 46 times.

Rnd 37: [With C sc in next 3 sc, with B sc in next sc] 46 times.

Rnd 38: Carry B, with C sc in next 8 sc, cut B, beg to carry MC, cont with C and sc to end of rnd.

Rnd 39: Carry C, with MC sc in next 8 sc, cut C, beg to carry B, cont with MC and sc to end of rnd.

Rnds 40–49: Rep Rnds 30–39.

Rnds 50–57: Rep Rnds 30–37.

Rnd 58: Carry B, with C sc around.

Rnd 59: Carry C, with B sc around.

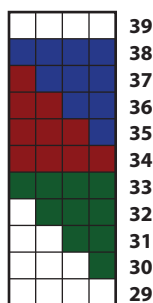
Rnd 60: Carry C, with B sc around, cut C flush, with B sl st in next sc, cut B leaving a 10-inch (25.4-cm) tail, pull B all the way through lp, thread the tapestry needle with B, anchor B in back of 1st 16 sts of rnd, cut B flush.

### Finishing

Steam iron the hat.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND DESIGNER.** Carol Ventura is an art history professor at Tennessee Technological University. Crafts from around the world inspire many of her designs. She was introduced to tapestry crochet as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala in the 1970s. Since then, she has explored the design potential of the technique and developed a system of graphing motifs, which she has published in books and videos. For more information about tapestry crochet, visit her website at [www.tapestrycrochet.com](http://www.tapestrycrochet.com).

### Hat



46 times

### Key

- Linen White (MC)
- Forest Green (A)
- Deepest Red (B)
- Midnight Blue (C)

*Chart may be photocopied for personal use.*