

DATEBOOK

Crossroads Cafe Showcases African Quilts

U.S. woman starts business for artisans

By Sam Whiting
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Compared with working as a human shopping cart hauling groceries in a head basket for a dollar a day, sewing patchwork quilts is luxury work.

That's what Aminata Brown found out when she shopped in an open market in Accra, capital city of Ghana, in West Africa. The markets there are too crowded for pushcarts, so one day a 9-year-old girl pulled up alongside Brown with tray on her head.

The girl wanted work carrying Brown's produce, but the American thought she saw in her eyes a desire to do something a little more dignified. When Brown began asking the "kaya yo," or "girls who carry" what they'd rather be doing, "Every one of them said 'We'd learn how to sew,'" Brown recalled yesterday.

So Brown decided to start a business to employ 12 "kaya yo" as artisans making blankets from the brightly dyed cloth that is the artist's medium in West Africa. Since June, 500 of these blankets have been sewn, an indication of the industriousness of the 12 former "kaya yo," who can be called artisans starting today when their quilts go on display

QUILT SHOW

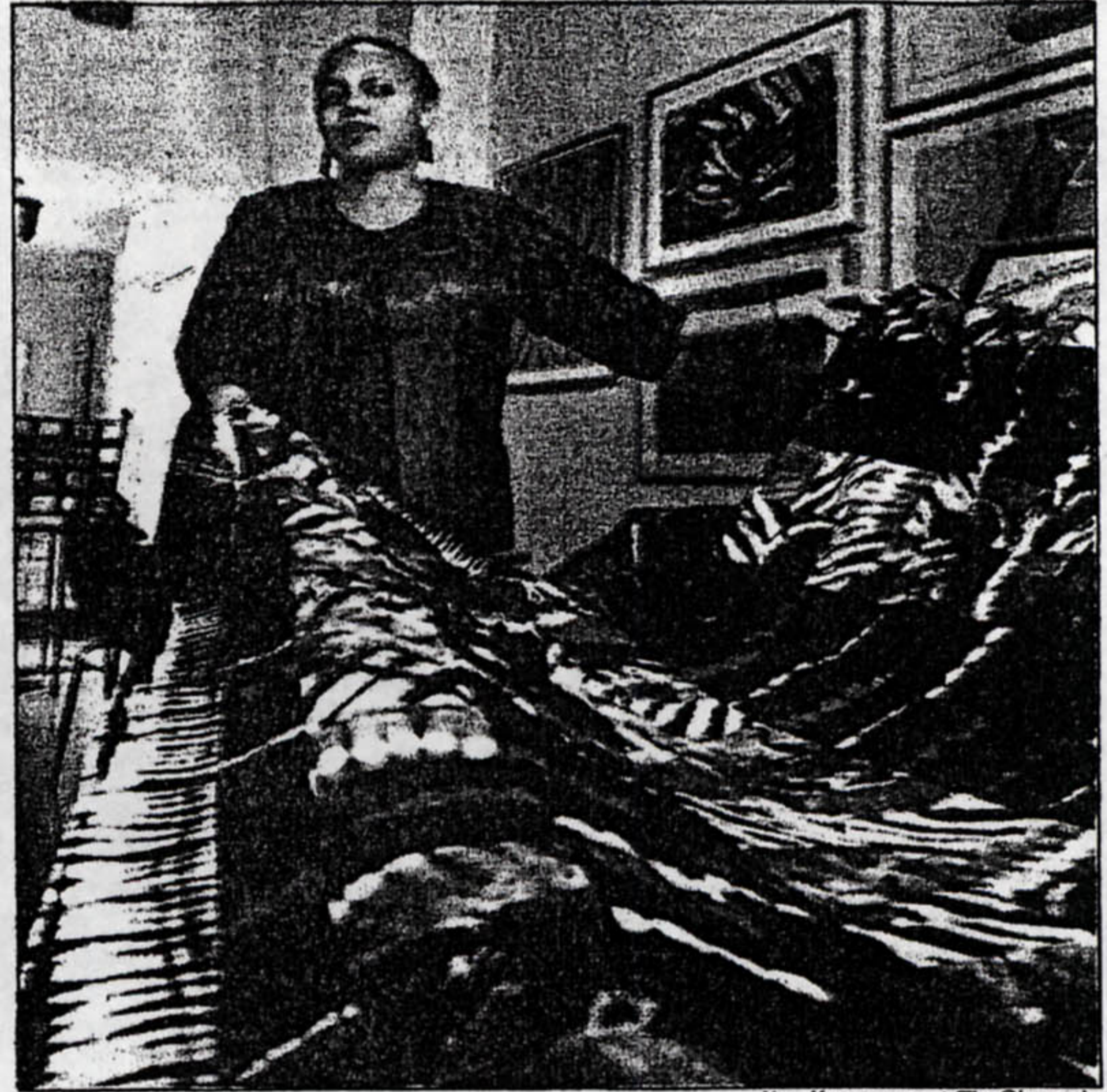
BABA BLANKETS from West Africa are on display today through Dec. 19 at the Delancey Street Foundation Crossroads Cafe, 699 Delancey St., San Francisco. The cafe is open 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Saturday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Call (415) 378-3786 or e-mail at TheDrumNetLtd@aol.com.

play at Delancey Street Foundation's Crossroads Cafe. Called the "Roots and Blooms Series," these are the first to be put on sale by DrumNet, a company formed by Brown, 29, a Brown University graduate and business consultant, and her father, Reuben D. Brown, a San Francisco financial services consultant.

The patchwork quilts are not put together by a patchwork of quilters, like the California Sesquicentennial Quilt. Each is done by an individual artist who gives it a name.

"We're encouraging them to be creative," Aminata Brown says. "One of the hardest things is naming their work. They've never been asked to have a voice."

The first to be completed, by a 25-year-old woman named Wacela,



KIM KOMENICH / The Chronicle

Aminata Brown unfurled one of the quilts created by girls in Ghana and on display at Delancey Street Foundation's Crossroads Cafe.

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Ghana Girls Making Colorful Quilts for Sale

► **QUILTS**
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is called "Wonders Never Cease." Others are "Remember Tomorrow," "Help Mama Africa," "Victory" and "Together We Build." The 12 artisans themselves are not here for the show. They are back in Accra, head down over looms and hand-cranked sewing machines, making more blankets.

"They're probably fighting with each other over whose blankets are selling," says Aminata Brown, who is offering them for between \$150 and \$350. "They have so much energy, so much ambition, and they have nothing to do except carry a tray on their heads."

BaBa Blankets

The series is called BaBa Blankets for "Back to Basics," and the girls who make them are all ages 12 to 25, uneducated and from villages in north Ghana. They migrate to Accra to look for work.

As it happened, both Browns were in Ghana last year trying to start a business. They were thinking Internet cafe — a sure loser, Reuben Brown knew. So if they were going to lose, at least they could expose a traditional West African craft to the American market. "They are meant to be practical art," Brown says. "The young women that we work with lead practical lives."

With an \$18,000 investment, they set up a workshop and took applications. Hundreds turned up, fighting for the scraps of paper and crayons to put down their names. Twelve were chosen for the first series, but a

hundred more are waiting to be trained to work with their hands instead of their heads.

"One of Africa's advantages is its low-tech positions," Aminata Brown says. "In a world that's increasingly mechanized, we wanted to bring back a human touch."

Risky Investment

To do so, the Browns each invested \$9,000 in the business. Aminata Brown lives in Ghana to oversee it with a local businessman as a partner. "Even if we go bankrupt, we would have had a wonderful experience," says Reuben Brown. "We would have trained 12 women to make these wonderful blankets."

Alas, the 12 do not include the 9-year-old who supplied the inspiration for the project. She disappeared and may have no idea of the spark she fired in Aminata Brown.

"I lost her," Brown says. "She's the lead-in to all of this, and I wasn't able to find her."