



THE ART OF THATCHING

Thatching with natural grass is a centuries-old art form that has been transmitted especially in Europe from generation to generation. Even until a time ago, it was widely practiced by the Coloured Thatchers in the Cape, but due to economic conditions, the younger generation was forced to seek out other pastures.

It is not the case of grass that is packed on top of each other and stitched onto the laths, but a fine art form that takes about five years to learn and more years to refine.

The Thatching Industry is one of a few Trades that offer informal craftsmanship for a long period of time. There are a few phases a prospective thatcher has to go through and the techniques are learned by working with thatchers with many years of experience.

The path that a qualified thatcher should take involves the following:

He starts as a **general worker** who learns to clean and prepare the thatch. Then he has to master the technique of throwing the bundles about 10 – 15 meters up onto the pole construction where the thatcher is. This can take a year.

Then he is promoted to the position of a **sprei man** who works on the inside of the roof. There could be two who work together on the inside. One who goes ahead and lays the spray layer (ceiling layer) and makes it neat and one who pushes the needle from the inside back to the thatcher on top.

The qualification here is that one must not be afraid of heights and it takes one to two years to master this position.

The next level is a **basic thatcher** who works on the outside of the roof. He starts by mastering the technique to lay the bottom layer that has to be double stitched. He learns the basics from the bottom eave line and works upwards. For example how tight the treated sisal twine /stainless steel wire must be to accomplish the correct compaction of the thatch.

Because poles are a natural product and are not always completely straight but sometimes slightly bent up or down, the thatch layer must be adjusted to obtain an even surface on the roof. When bent down the thatch layer must be thicker at that point and when bent upwards, the thatch layer must be thinner. The weight of the thatch layer is about 35 kg per square meter and that may cause the upward bent of the pole to flatten a bit.

Next are the *valleys* which have to be thicker and have to fan open to allow the water to run down the valley. The *hips* must be in a straight line. *Gable ends* are the most difficult to thatch and the thatch must run up at 45 degrees on the gable and the thatch must be turned so that you only see the ends of the thatch and not the sides.

Next are the *ridges* which are made either of thatch or cement or fibreglass. The last but not least is the *dressing off* (make it level) of the thatch as well as the straightening of the eave line.

To qualify as a general thatcher usually takes about five years. With years of experience, exposure to new methods and knowledge of the industry, such a thatcher can later qualify as a master thatcher.

But the ultimate success of a thatched roof depends on the pole construction. If the pole construction is not built according to specification requirements and the design does not meet the challenges posed by a pole construction; no layer placed on top of it, no matter of how well it is done, can make the roof succeed.

Contractors that give themselves out as thatchers without the necessary knowledge and sufficient training caused a great deal of damage to this industry and gave it a bad reputation.

Owners of thatched roofs also tend to accept the cheapest quotation and do not insist on referrals from previous clients or follow up on the references.

The biggest problems encountered by TASA are faulty pole constructions, incorrect maintenance methods and thatch that do not meet specification requirements.

The TASA has committed itself to offering training seminars for NHBRC inspectors, insurance companies, banks and municipal building inspectors to inform them of specification requirements and what to look at during inspections. Publications such as "A Guide to Thatch Construction in South Africa" and "Pros and Cons in the Thatching Industry" can be ordered from the TASA office.