

**BEADWORK – ITS CULTURAL AND
LINGUISTIC SIGNIFICANCE AMONG
THE SOUTH AFRICAN NDEBELE
PEOPLE**

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled:

**BEADWORK - ITS CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC SIGNIFICANCE
AMONG THE SOUTH AFRICAN NDEBELE PEOPLE**

**is my own work both in conception and execution and that
information drawn from other sources has been duly
acknowledged.**



.....
Zwelabo Jacob Mashiyane

DEDICATION

This work is once more dedicated to my late parents:

My father, Nqalu Gaselani

“ihlahla bayitjhiya inyand’ evila,

Udumo lezinja zakwaMabhoko...

Igudaguda inyamehloko

Idla bayincunguluza

Bayitjhiyel’ abanengi”

And my late mother,

Banikele Emma.

.....

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt at making a classificatory scrutiny of the art performed by the Ndebele people of South Africa. It sets out to identify and define Ndebele beadwork by looking very closely to its origin, how it survived the dark days of waging wars and made its way into the modern times. In its classification a clear distinction is drawn between the various periods of development and the characteristics of each period are described well. Several attempts have already been made by a number of scholars on the classification and analyses of Ndebele beadwork. In most analyses we find that very brought and general descriptions have been given. One hardly finds any definite patterns and methods used by a Ndebele bead worker.

This study has attempted to describe Ndebele beadwork from the moment of planning to the next step when the first grain of bead is worked through the needle and cotton up to where a real shape is formed. It attempts to explain how the intricate Ndebele shapes are formed and coordinated. The use of the various colours is explained in detail. The wrong impression conceived by a big bulk of people that the Ndebele people use colours indiscriminately is corrected. An explanation is given on how some of the popular colours are linked to speech and how these colours are generally interpreted when used on a piece of beadwork article.

It further rounds up the typical shapes popular with the Ndebele bead worker. It describes how each shape is formed and used. It also discusses the cultural beliefs and stereotypes attached to the usage of beads and the restrictions accompanying them.

The future of Ndebele beadwork is looked into. Recommendations on how the beadwork trade can be turned into a giant industry are made. Postulations are made on what route can be followed that can lead small beadwork handlers into some of the world's greatest.

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CHAPTER 1

1.0 ORIENTING INTRODUCTORY

1.1 Introduction

The handling of beads is perhaps as old as mankind himself. It is not possible to say with precision when and where beads have originated from. Research indicates that glass beads were from Europe with a big bulk from Persia. Costello, (1990: 2) is of the view that the first glass beads were brought to Southern Africa by Arab slave traders, Portuguese, Dutch and the English. Archaeologists have indicated that many other types of beads were African in origin. Each and every race in the world is found to have been in one way or another involved with beads in its history. It appears that mankind cannot rid itself of beads and beadwork. Beadwork has become part and parcel of human life. It has become part of the human way of living and is now intertwined with his culture. It can therefore be stated without any measure of doubt that, nowadays it is difficult to judge aesthetic in the absence of beads.

History does not state with precision which nation was the first to discover and handle beads and items made out of beads. While some scholars point to Sumerians to have been the first, there are those who think that Africa can be counted amongst those countries where skill developed very early in our civilisation. The magazine entitled "Indwe" normally distributed by SAA describes the development of skills in Africa by saying:

It is here, in Africa, that man developed skills in glass making, pottery, metallurgy, weaving, woodworking, leatherwork, and masonry. (Indwe, September 2005, 24).

As a form of encouragement to the present generation to rededicate itself to preserving, protecting and promoting Africa's own talent and skills, the magazine goes on to say:

We who call ourselves Africans are the fruits of their hardships and triumphs. We who live here today are the expressions of their hopes and their dreams. We are their legacy, their gift to the world. (Indwe, September 2005, 24).

It is this skill that has trickled down to the Ndebele people in a form of beadwork skill. Among all South African nationalities who use beadwork in art form, the Southern Ndebele people can perhaps be counted amongst the most outstanding handlers of this form of art. The Ndebele people have not only managed to push this form of art through the difficult period of waging wars and sufferings but also managed to refine this art to the pick of perfection. Ndebele style of handling beadwork is outstanding and has captured the attention of many South African bead lovers as well as many nations of the world. No South African art gallery can be said to be worthy of the name if no Ndebele beadwork items are found as part of its collection.

Beadwork in South Africa is not a peculiarity of the Ndebele people. It is also found among the Zulu, Swati, Xhosa, Sotho and many other South African nationalities. Each of these nationalities referred to above has its own style and choice of colours. The Ndebele style has its own uniqueness. It is so unique that it has of late attracted beadwork lovers and tourists from around the world with the aim of studying the Ndebele style in beadwork. Some come with the sole aim of collecting art just for art's sake. Some collectors are just marvelled by this artistic style.

The arrival of missionaries in South Africa was in more than one way a misfortune for beadwork. Following the missionary teachings many Africans had to abandon their ways of living. Most Africans soon distanced themselves from all forms of cultural beaded dress codes because these were more often than not frowned upon by missionaries who regarded this form of dressing as barbaric if not heathen styles. The teachings of early missionaries stressed that for anyone to repent into a true Christian one had to change his form of dress as well as his "heathen name". A heathen name in this case referred to all names that were in the vernacular languages. It is for this reason that all newly repented Christians were given names unheard of in the history of their forefathers. These are names such as Diogracious, Perpetuous, Sylvester, Vivatious etc. That doctrine sank so deeply in all African people to the extent that to this day a Christian child would have two names, one in his or her language and another in a foreign language. For example, you would a girl child being named Dudu Octavia. Some parents would even totally cut out the African name and have both names in a foreign language, for example the child would be called Freddie Abel. With this form of negativism beadwork knitting should have died a natural death. How beadwork managed to escape this dark wave is hard to tell. All we know is that the art of beadwork is very much alive to this day.

When Thabo Mbeki ascended the throne as the newly democratically elected President of South Africa in 1999, he also announced his famous "African renaissance" campaign. This campaign goes hand in hand with another campaign known in the Nguni languages as, "Azibuye emasisweni". These two campaigns can in a nutshell be best described as a new wave in all people of Africa of reawakening and to rediscover and love what belongs to Africa. The scope is not only limited to South Africa but stretches over the whole continent of Africa. People are encouraged in concentrating and appreciating things found in Africa first before concentrating in things found in other countries other than Africa. This reawakening has trickled down to art forms and finally found its way into beadwork as well. Nowadays suddenly there seems to be this tremendous interest in beadwork and other items made out of beads. People seem to develop a deep desire to know more

about beadwork. This desire is not just a superficial one where one takes a shallow look into items made from beads. It translates into a deep rooted interest in studying this form of art scientifically. Suddenly each of the smaller communities practising the art of beadwork tries to revisit the art of beadwork with the aim of establishing as to whether or not there are any other significant details that could have been missed by their predecessors in this field. As a result of this, this form of art has suddenly awakened and is very alive and kicking even at this very moment.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The isiNdebele language in South Africa is spoken in the entire Gauteng province, the area covering the Western side of the Mpumalanga province bordered by the town Groblersdal in the North, Ermelo and Bethal in the South and Belfast in the East. In this whole area one is likely to see Ndebele people, especially ladies wearing or selling beadwork ornaments and articles.

It is therefore the opinion of the researcher that these beadwork ornaments and articles, although found to be decorating vast areas of South Africa, one hardly finds a well-compiled book containing enough information on this art. Granted, there are some scholars who have made a fair attempt at studying and analysing Ndebele beadwork but there is still room for more research. There are some aspects of Ndebele beadwork that have never been touched. The researcher is of the view that most research projects that have been carried out on this art have left out some key aspects of Ndebele beadwork that need further research. These therefore pose as a problem that needs to be researched thoroughly.

It was because of the above reason that the researcher recognised the need to explore the centrality of Ndebele beadwork in this region as a marker of cultural and national identity. While much national as well as international attention was drawn on Ndebele paintings, relatively little has centred on

beadwork. This study hopes to highlight this gap that has thus far not been filled.

The cultural use of beadwork articles and their transformation into dress for particular cultural, religious or gendered usage is highly distinctive among the Ndebele people. Beads as one of many trade items available in South Africa reflect the interface with Eastern, Western or internal trade, in which beadwork became appropriate and its usage culturally sanctioned. In this, beadwork contributed to the radical transformation of the Ndebele people's economy, practical usages and cultural appearances.

Beadwork has played a central role in the lives of the Ndebele people, but there has been little examination of its origins, cultural reception, adaptations and absorption into what have become identified as national and group-based identities.

1.4 The necessity of studying beadwork

It has therefore become more than necessary for this form of art to be studied in detail by the communities who practise it. Each of the South African communities must study and document the handling of beadwork as it is found in its community. As far as Ndebele is concerned these studies have to be undertaken by the Ndebele people themselves. People who are not Ndebele have already said enough about Ndebele. Time has now come for the Ndebele people to speak out about what they know best. The Ndebele people have to take it as their responsibility to ensure the accurate documentation of this marvellous heritage from their forefathers. They also have to sensitise government in ensuring a proper conservation and management of all commercial and exports of articles built from Ndebele beadwork. Sporadic attempts have already been sported from people who are not Ndebele, attempting to explain and interpret Ndebele beadwork. In a number of occasions there is misinterpretation of figures, colours, style, shapes and other Ndebele drawings.

1.5 Definition of concepts

It is of paramount importance that at this early stage major concepts used in this study be clearly defined so as to eliminate any possible shadows of doubt or misconceptions. The following terms as used in the title of the study warrant definition:

- Beadwork
- Culture
- Linguistic significance
- South African Ndebele

1.5.1 What is beadwork?

In a collection of articles edited by Sciama et al, (1998: 83) Carey has this to say about beadwork:

In its simplest form, it may be no more than a string of beads, even a single bead, worn on almost any part of the body, or added to a carved figure as decoration or as an offering. Beadwork can be more elaborate, with beads strung into complex ropes, sewn into fabric-like panels, applied as covering to figures, clothing and masks, or used to embellish everyday items, to make them more special.

The above passage makes it clear that beads may seem insignificant in that they are inexpensive but the life of human beings is completely surrounded by beads. Every little piece of material that man wears is almost sure to be embellished with some form of beads.

For the last 3000 to 4000 years, beads have held special magic for many people. Beads have stood for wealth, power, love, spirit and magical powers. Kings in olden days would wear leather breastplates studded with beads and other precious stones. Among most African

communities there is a general belief that beads possess some magical qualities of the gods and hold powers far beyond the understanding of the common man.

Ancient kings wore beads as a symbol of strength, courage and invincibility. Among lovers, over the centuries, beads acquired its unique status as the ultimate gift of love. It was believed that a gift of beads between lovers was a gift that had magic that nothing else could equal. Beads have been associated with romance and legend. Lovers believed that the glittering in the beads reflected the constant flame of love. For millions of people around the world, the mystery and magic, the beauty and romance shining out from a simple solitaire says all the heart feels but words cannot express.

Throughout history, beads were made from shells collected from along seashores and riverbanks. Certain types of beads are believed by the Ndebele people to hold many magical, mystical and medicinal properties. The phosphorescence of certain beads, for instance their ability to glow in the dark is considered a proof enough of them having extraordinary powers. Beads are used by traditional healers because they are thought to calm the mentally ill, and to ward off devils, phantoms and even nightmares. Beads are supposed to impart virtue, generosity and courage in battle, and to cause lawsuits to be determined in the wearer's favour. Some people plant beads at each corner of their houses with the belief that the house will be protected from lightning, storms and blight.

Some traditional healers would prescribe that the sick person take a beaded necklace with him to bed because it was believed that beads could heal if the sick person took it to bed and warmed it with his body. If breathed upon while fasting or wearing it next to the skin is believed to have wonderful results in healing the sick. Beads held in the mouth would correct the bad habits of liars and scolds. On many

that have been developed by a society and are shared by its members. Each society develops ways of coping with the environment and making sense out of it. These approaches tend to become systematized and are transmitted to the following generations. Where environments are relatively stable little change, but marked changes in the environment lead to changes in the cultures.

Further down his discussion Lindgren again points out that culture sometimes may be found to undergo alterations depending on new demands exerted on it, demands which hitherto were non-existent. Culture is therefore not static but dynamic, that is, it accommodates changes and new innovations from time to time.

Beadwork craft and all other beadwork products will be considered by this research as subscribing to the behavioural pattern of culture in general. It is therefore expected that whilst some beadwork craft will point to the early stages of the lives of the Ndebele people, others, especially those depicting the modern period will show modern culture.

1.5.3 Linguistic significance

In linguistic terms, any linguistic item is said to be of linguistic significance if it brings about a different meaning from the everyday usage of the word. Crystal, (1985:279) explains "linguistic significance" as:

...referring to the linguistic status of a spoken or written FEATURE: a feature is significant if it is CONTRASTIVE, i.e. where by substituting it for another feature a difference in meaning is obtained.)

Culturally therefore it is found that the Ndebele people usage of beadwork is also to a large extent connected to language. An object

woven from beads is not just a beauty meant for the eye but more often than not also carries with it some linguistic expressions and ideologies. An individual well vested with the customs and culture of the Ndebele people is able to give a remarkably close interpretation attached to any piece of beadwork. This therefore means that instead of using ordinary words and sentences, an artist would use beadwork to convey a message or deep emotional feelings.

1.5.4 South African Ndebele

The South African Ndebele people are a branch of the famous Nguni group of languages. Bell, (2000: 1) describes the Ndebele people by saying that::

They were originally part of the migration of Bantu cultural groups from Central and East Africa into southernmost Africa around 300-400 AD.

This original group from where the Ndebele came from later became known as the Nguni group of languages. The Nguni group of languages consists of mainly four groups listed as follows in no particular order: Ndebele, Swati, Xhosa and Zulu. The most common and most strong characteristic of this group is that the structure of their languages shows a remarkable similarity in both form and sound in all the languages forming the group. They also share a very strong bond of intelligibility.

During the great Southwards movement of the African people in groups from the Great Central African lakes, in no prearranged phenomenon the large Nguni group dismantled into smaller groups. These smaller groups later on occupied and settled in the various corners of the present South Africa. After a long alienation from the main group the small groups developed a speech variety that was somewhat different from the main group and from each other. The

languages of the small groups later on became so different from each other that they each gave themselves new names. The first group to break away occupied the eastern most part of the present South Africa and ended up calling itself the Swati people and occupied the area known today as Swaziland and other strips of land falling outside the Swaziland border on the South African side as well as the Mozambican border. The second group moved and settled in the south-eastern part of the present South Africa and ended up calling itself the Zulu people and occupied the whole area known today as KwaZulu-Natal. The third group proceeded southwards and settled in the southern most point of the present South Africa and later on called itself the Xhosa people and even moved further down and occupied the Cape, especially the Eastern Cape. According to historical records there is a fourth group which when the Swati moved eastwards, it moved westwards and occupied the area of what was later became known as the Western Transvaal and later on called itself the Ndebele people. Thus, the Ndebele people came from where all other Nguni people came from and not from Zululand as some books erroneously say (sic).

Kruger is of the idea that the Ndebele group was one of the first to break away from the main group. He estimates that the Ndebele people were sighted in the Western Transvaal around 1500. In his own words he writes:

According to historical data, the Ndebele must have been some of the earliest immigrants into the Transvaal, and came here most probably before 1500. This makes the Transvaal Ndebele in all likelihood the earliest Nguni immigrants into the Transvaal. It is however, not clear at what stage and where the branching off from the main Nguni group took place. (Kruger, 1983: 33).

After having occupied this area generation after generation the Ndebele people secured for themselves a unique and rich culture. Amongst the most prominent of their cultural practices was working and producing scores upon scores of beadwork articles.

The mere fact that isiNdebele is mentioned here as the fourth group should not be interpreted as meaning that the Ndebele people were the last to break away from the mother language and therefore isiNdebele is the youngest of the four languages. Historical remnants do not indicate to us in precise terms the order in which the forming of groups took place. The level of development attained by any of these languages cannot be taken as an indicator of how old a language is. In a study conducted by Mashiyane in 2002 he found that there were other factors that promoted fast growing in a language:

The issue of a common origin of a group of languages, unfortunately does not give a clear indication of whether or not, one language is older or younger than the rest. Fast development in vocabulary, shifting of sounds and meaning of words, depends largely on the exposure of that particular language to situations demanding new vocabulary, as well as the needs that necessitated such changes. (Mashiyane, 2002: 18).

The only safe conclusion we can reach at this stage is that it cannot be demonstrated conclusively, which of the four languages is the oldest, nor can it be stated with precision, which one is the youngest. There is however a move by some scholars to regard all those languages that share a common linguistic feature to be holding on onto a characteristic feature that indicates the original feature from the great parent of all the languages in question. The language with a new characteristic feature is normally suspected to have deviated because of influences from the neighbouring languages.

1.6 Aim Of Study

The following are the aims of the study:

- The unearthing and proper dignified documentation of the talent in art form which was and still is employed by the Ndebele people in handling craftwork involving beadwork.
- Identifying and properly interpret all forms of beadwork styles employed by the Ndebele people and trace these to the earliest known era.
- Sorting out all confusions found in the classification of Ndebele beadwork by some scholars who either were not thorough in their research or deliberately distorted facts for some unknown reasons.
- Serving as the first serious analysis from someone coming from a traditional Ndebele background. His contribution on this type of art form will hopefully be a prestigious documentation which will help plot the Ndebele on the wall of fame and reaffirm this style of handling beadwork as the Ndebele's own.

1.7 Research Methodology

Two methods will be used in this study, viz. literature review as well as interviews of individuals believed to be knowledgeable on the subject of Ndebele beadwork. The study of literature will form the basis of the study after which interviews will be prepared. Different methods will be used for interviews, person-to-person, telephonic, as well as electronic mail. Data obtained from such interviews will be analysed and conclusions will be drawn based on the evidence suggested by such analogies.

The following methods will be used as a way of gathering data for this study:

1.7.1 Literature Review

The major method to be used will be the analysis of information found in books, journals, magazines, newspapers as well as electronically stored information in sources such as the internet and the like.

1.7.2 Interviews

Interviews will be conducted with Ndebele beadwork handlers whose work is to knit ornaments out of beads with the aim of selling these to tourists and souvenir seekers.

Visits will be made to the elderly from among the Ndebele people who during their time as youth handled and were familiar with the art of beadwork.

Tourist stalls and agencies dealing with Ndebele art will also be visited. At such centres it is hoped that one is likely to find tour guides who are experts when it comes to the interpretation of artwork.

1.8 Value Of The Study

- It is hoped that once completed this study will be a valuable one especially when it comes to the correct interpretation of shapes, colours and style used by the Ndebele people in beadwork. It is also hoped that it will go a long way in helping with the correct classification of the various ornaments made out of beads as it is imminent that there is a big confusion regarding the origin of Ndebele beadwork.

- It is further hoped that this study will serve as an invaluable source of reference work for both students and scholars who have interest in this field of study.
- The study will provide knowledge, understanding and insight surrounding the Ndebele handling of beadwork. Findings of the study will enable the researcher to make valuable recommendations for the improvement and advancement of Ndebele beadwork handling.
- Lastly it is hoped that it will serve as the Ndebele people's own historical record of their handwork for which the Ndebele people will for ever be proud.

1.9 Delimitation Of The Study

The Ndebele people are broadly divided into the Ndzundza as well as the Manala Ndebele. This study will limit itself to these two groups for historical reasons, which indicate that they are closely related. The North Ndebele that are found in the Limpopo province around Zebediela will not be included in this study. The Zimbabwean Ndebele will also not be included here. History has proved beyond any reasonable doubt that the Zimbabwean Ndebele is of a different stock altogether and it is feared that their inclusion in this study may drastically affect the research findings.

The research will therefore limit itself to the area formerly known as the Transvaal and the present Gauteng. A bigger concentration will be on KwaNdebele. This is the area which was proclaimed as a national state for the Ndebele people by the former government of South Africa.

1.10 Dissemination Of The Research Findings

A completed study on this topic will be bound into a thesis copies of which will be disseminated to most institutions of higher learning as well as most major libraries in South Africa. Means will be made to draw the attention of scholars interested in this field by making use of the modern day technology and electronic media. This topic will be further refined when some aspects of it will be further dealt with as conference or workshop papers and some topics will even be published as articles in journals.

1.11 Chapter Analysis

Chapter 1

In this chapter the topic will be introduced in broad outlines, outlining the importance of beadwork in many nations of the world and the place occupied by the Ndebele people in this regard. The problem that needs investigation is stated and an attempt to justify the need for the research is made. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and the announcement of subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2

In this chapter a literature review of all the work undertaken so far by other researchers is going to be made. Gaps and shortcomings will be pointed out and will be given special coverage. The study of background literature also serves as point of departure or "springboard" from which the problem is approached.

Chapter 3

In this chapter a historical background of Ndebele beadwork is going to be made. An investigation of the significance of shapes and colours is also going to be made.

Chapter 4

An analysis of the preparation and processing of beads is going to be discussed in this chapter. Designs, shapes and colours will also receive attention.

Chapter 5

Linguistic interpretations carried by colours and shapes are going to be investigated. The future of beadwork and its part in tourist attraction is going to be given attention. This is the final chapter of the study and it endeavours to give an overview of the investigation as well as a summary of conclusions and recommendations

1.12 Conclusion

This study is a descriptive or ex post facto research. Its main aim is to obtain the A to Z information on Ndebele beadwork. All facts surrounding this subject will be thoroughly scrutinised and analysed and results exposed.

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# CHAPTER 2

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

**I**nterest in studying beadwork in the continent of Africa has been going on for a while longer than what many people may think. Some of the early scholars studying beadwork in this part of the world have shown a keen interest in making a thorough analysis and documentation of this form of craft work and at the same time comparing it with their knowledge of the Western world. In particular, scholars in this field seek to define and understand beadwork in the same understanding of the people who use it for self adornment and the significance brought by beadwork in the lives of these people.

In 1998, Drewal and Mason published a book entitled, "Beads, Body and Soul". In this book they tried to study and analyse the usage of beads by the Yoruba community of Nigeria. They looked at the beads themselves as an important item of adornment and also to the significance of beads in understanding the culture of the Yoruba. They found that beads were not just an item to be studied in isolation but they were linked to all other items surrounding a Yoruba person to make him a complete unit with all his earthly possessions.

Among the South African Nguni speaking people, the Xhosa people caught the attention of many scholars interested in beads. Among some of the popular scholars the names of Alice Martens and Joan Broster come up tops. The latter scholars published a book in 1973 entitled, "African Elegance". In this book they concentrated on the Xhosa people, studying their life and practices with beadwork and beads featuring prominently. Their study covered most of the Xhosa tribes such as amaGcaleka, abaThembu, amaMpondo, amaBomvana, amaMpondomise, amaBhaca, amaXesibe and amaMfengu. Although this book does not put it down in written words how the Xhosa people wear and use beads, but it nevertheless captures the idea in colourful pictures and thereby relay the passion the Xhosa people have for beadwork.

This very passion for beads and beadwork is found to be very strong among the Ndebele people of South Africa. Here beads and beadwork touch on every item found in their lives. It is this very 'complete unit' with one's surroundings that has made the Ndebele people to be easily identifiable by means of their beadwork and mural art.

It would be difficult for any scholar studying South African beadwork to miss the beadwork and other beadwork articles made by the Ndebele people. Literature review indicates that Ndebele beadwork has in the last century attracted a number of scholars who showed interest in this art form.

It is the main aim of this research to leave no stone unturned as far as Ndebele beadwork is concerned. It has been observed that many scholars, who happened to have focused on Ndebele beadwork, did so in passing. Ndebele beadwork was not the primary aim of their research. Many had no aim of discussing beadwork at all. The favourite subject of many scholars was the history of the Ndebele. It is for this reason that a lot of information on the Ndebele people is found in books whose approach is historical.

## **2.2 A brief background check on beads**

An investigation on the topic of this nature requires some background information on it. This helps in creating a clearer understanding on the subject. This research therefore wishes to acknowledge and pay tribute to all researchers who made some meaningful strides in this field. Most if not all scholars who conducted research on the Ndebele language were not first language speakers of isiNdebele, yet most of them made a commendable attempt of presenting a fair analysis of Ndebele beadwork. Researched materials by most of these researchers who are regarded to have made meaningful contribution on the subject were reviewed.

Book review can be likened to a window through which we can be able to pip and from a vantage point see in total all the amount of work covered so far. Book review helps in classifying the various topics covered in a particular field and thereafter paint a broader picture of how much research has been covered on each of the topics. This therefore helps to act as an indicator of what gaps still need filling up in this field. It also helps in pointing out and forming a link with all scholars around the globe who have interest in that particular topic. Contributions by some of the most outstanding scholars on beads and beadwork have been summarised below.

In the year 1998 Sciama and Eicher edited a book entitled, "Beads and Bead Makers". This is an anthology of papers read at a workshop on beads and beadwork. Although all the research in the essays found in this book were made in the 1990's, the topics covered on beads and beadwork ranged from prehistory to the present. The manner in which various scholars explain aspects of beadwork it becomes clear that a bead maker and bead worker are two different people.

This book makes a broad historical overview of bead makers and bead workers. It traces the origins of glass beads from Europe and follows them throughout the whole world. It gives specific details on the part played by

beads in the different parts of world. It also follows beads into Africa and shows how it has influenced the lives of African people. It shows the part it plays in aesthetics as well as cultural rituals. Beads are cherished in an exclusive way in that they are regarded as a valuable possession that enhances the dignity of an individual.

Sciama and Eicher, (1998: viii) have also pointed out that beads play a very important part in archaeological studies in explaining mysteries about buried bodies of human beings who once lived. This becomes clear in their foreword when they say:

***Indeed beads, usually crafted from materials that outlast long-standing burial and are less subject to decay than other artefacts (such as textile), are frequently found in archaeological sites.***

Therefore, beads and beadwork can play a vital point in the reconstruction of the history of a nation where there are no written records or where there are doubts regarding time and period. The type of beads, style and colours used can give a clear indication of where and when that particular piece of beadwork article was constructed.

## **2.2 Attempts by early scholars**

The colourful beadwork used by the Ndebele was observable from very early stages of the Ndebele life. Early scholars who were among the first to come into contact with the Ndebele people were marvelled by this colourful beadwork. Some of the views of the early scholars were analysed:

### **2.2.1 N J van Warmelo**

One of the earliest scholars to have recorded anything about the Ndebele people was N J van Warmelo. He did this in a publication that appeared in 1930 entitled "Transvaal Ndebele Texts". Reading through van Warmelo's work one soon realises that it is apparently

next to impossible to describe the Ndebele people without saying something about their art. Ndebele mural art as well as their beadwork comes out very often in van Warmelo's recordings.

Although Ndebele beadwork is mentioned so frequently in Ndebele recordings, details such as explanations about where the Ndebele people obtained their beads never comes up. Subjects such as bead preferences, colour preferences and the threading of beads are never researched very deeply. These topics can only be addressed in a research whose main focal point is beadwork.

Scholars like van Warmelo can be applauded for their part in stirring the whole information on beadwork. This research however aims at covering all the corners not covered by the early scholars.

An education journal that appeared in the early 1950's called "Bantu Education Journal" showed great interest in covering aspects about the Ndebele people. In one of its issues it once recorded that:

***The Ndebele comprise two sections, a Northern and Southern group. Although they apparently originate from the same parent tribe, they show importance differences in regard to language and cultural forms. The Southern group is known particularly for its colourful dress and attractively decorated houses... (Bantu Education Journal, 1952: 303).***

The quotation above shows that what the author described as "attractively decorated houses" could never be missed. These are the same decorations found even in beadwork. The author of this article, however, never ventured into discussing Ndebele beadwork. Instead, the author preferred the route opted for by most authors in this field. This is the route of concentrating on the history of the Ndebele and their succession story. This article did however make use of photos with Ndebele paintings to try and illustrate its discussion. Beneath one of the photos are the words:

***An example of the decorations favoured by the Southern group of Transvaal Ndebele. The colours used are mostly brown, blue, grey, black and white. (Bantu Education Journal, 1952: 303).***

Among others, researchers we have Mark Lewis who recorded the Ndebele beadwork in photographs. Mark Hurwitz working with Ivor Powell engaged in a joined effort wherein they produced a book entitled "Ndebele – A people and their art". This is a book wherein a fair attempt was made at recording a short Ndebele history, colourful beadwork and paintings and a variety of other aspects concentrating on Ndebele people life.

### **2.2.2 Ode Weiss' view**

In 1953 Ode Weiss submitted a thesis at the University of Stellenbosch entitled "Funksionele kunsuitenge by die AmaNdzundza". In this research Weiss covered almost all aspects on Ndebele life. He started by discussing their historical background, dwelling place, architecture and in general their whole lifestyle.

He set aside chapter five to deal specifically with dress code and other body decorations. Under this Weiss is one of the few scholars who discussed Ndebele beadwork and other pieces made out of beads. He even went one step further by naming the different pieces one by one and explains briefly how these are worn. If an item is made from beads he mentions that clearly. For example he describes the Ndebele *phephethu* by saying:

***Die phephethu word altyd van seildoek gemaak. Vel is te sag. Binne-in word karton gesit om dit stewig te maak. Dan word die lyne van die ontwerp met potlood geteken, en daarna word dit met krale in verskillende kleure en patrone uitgewerk. (Weiss, 1953: 45).***

The rough translation of the above passage is:

***The phephethu is always made out of canvas. Hide is too soft. On the inside a carton is inserted in order to stiffen it. Thereafter a lead pencil is used to draw the figures followed by beads in various colours and patterns.***

It is noted here that although Weiss discusses the different forms of dress materials so well, he however avoids stating any details regarding the way the beads have been worked on these pieces.

### **2.2.3 Researchers of the 1980's**

The big bulk of research on Ndebele beadwork was done during the 1980s. Among the pioneers studying Ndebele beadwork names like the Wits historian Peter Delius who studied the Ndzundza Ndebele come up. Elizabeth Schneider presented a PhD thesis on what she called wall painting of Ndebele. Professor W D Hammond-Tooke's work is well known for having looked into traditional healing in Africa. Peter Rich also presented an MA dissertation on the meanings of Ndebele architecture. More about some of these scholars follows later.

One name that comes up among the top ones is the name of Peter Becker. Becker is one scholar who travelled South Africa from East to West, North to South. In his journeys through the land he came face to face with most indigenous people of this land. He documented all his encounters with the indigenous people of South Africa in a book published in 1979 entitled "Inland Tribes of Southern Africa".

The Ndebele people are discussed in chapter two of this book. In his discussion of the Ndebele he also focused on their beadwork. In his opening paragraph Becker, (1979: 75) writes:

***The Ndebele woman's passion for personal adornment and her skill in beadcraft are rivalled in southern Africa only by her Zulu***



***and Xhosa counterparts. However, nowhere south of the Zambezi river is there a larger range of ornaments worn by women than among the Manala, and indeed the Ndzundza sections of this tiny and somewhat scattered tribal group.***

The above-quoted paragraph indicates well how beads and personal adornment means to a Ndebele woman. Becker discusses some of the most important beaded items worn by Ndebele women starting from toe to head.

He gives an explanatory narration of each piece of beadwork. He did venture in trying to explain how each item is made and the material from which they are made. Regarding beads he was rather general and did not get into the details of how the beads are strung on the item.

Becker also researched the use of colours by the Ndebele bead workers. He deserves to be applauded for not taking for granted that colours in Ndebele can be used anyhow. In his probe of colours he actually discovered that colours have meaning. This means that a bead worker is not free to use colour as she likes. It is this little but very important detail that betrays an artist who is non-Ndebele or who has little insight on Ndebele use of colours.

Becker concludes his discussion by probing into the use of beads by males. Here he discovered that there was not much to be found in the form of beads belonging to males save for the item he refers to as a "dambo" (Becker, 1979: 85).

Becker's discussion of the Ndebele beads was a fair one. One can only remark that his discussion of colours needs some close details. Also absent is the actual manner in which beads are worked on.

The work of Diane Levy should not be forgotten wherein she presented an MA thesis on Ndebele beadwork. More of her work is found in a book edited by Hammond-Tooke and Neettleton (1989) entitled "Catalogue: Ten Years of Collecting". In this book she gave a prolific description of Ndebele beads and beadwork. For instance she is among the few scholars who could give an accurate description of a typical female Ndebele wardrobe. The reason for her to do this is because she thinks that:

***...beadwork reflects the social status of the women, as the most common and distinctive types of beadwork are worn by women at various stages of their lives. (Hammond-Tooke et al, 1989: 25).***

She goes to the extent of giving an apt description of these beadwork pieces one by one and the stages in life where these are worn. In an article entitled "Ndebele Beadwork" found in a collection by Hammond-Tooke, Diane Levy starts by making a brief attempt at giving the origins of beads and beadwork among the Ndebele. Thereafter she makes a concise description of some of the most important beadwork items forming a female wardrobe. To ensure that the reader gets a vivid idea of the size of the beadwork item, Levy attached a picture of it accompanied by its measurements. (Hammond-Tooke et al, 1989: 25).

Levy, however, neglected to explain in detail how each grain of bead finds itself on a piece of beadwork. She also does not explain the various shapes found in Ndebele beadwork nor does she explain the ratio of colour usage as found on any piece of Ndebele beadwork.

This seems to have been the trend followed by most researchers on Ndebele beadwork. This therefore necessitated a research to be undertaken wherein an explanation will be given on how the process of bead embroidering takes place. Many researchers have merely

explained a piece of Ndebele beadwork as it appears after completion. No one has ever given a step-by-step description from a planning stage to the finishing stage of any beadwork piece.

Some research findings have what can be considered as serious shortcomings. It cannot be denied that language barrier also posed as a major challenge in this. To crown it all, the isiNdebele was not yet a written language when a big bulk of researches were carried out. This fact was acknowledged by Powell, (1995: 9) as part of the preface to his book when he wrote:

***... the commonly used words are often not the academically sanctioned ones; in many cases they have been transcribed in the first instance by non-Ndebele-speaking researchers, and differ substantially from those sanctioned by the language expert.***

Whilst a non-Ndebele speaker may not find any fault at all with some of the issues and regard them as trivialities, a mother tongue speaker of isiNdebele may have some serious concerns about them. For instance, Ivor Powell in his book entitle, "Ndebele: A people and their art" referring to what he calls "lirhabi" writes:

***This apron of beaded tassels may be worn by both boys and girls. (Powell, 1995: 127).***

Gender in Ndebele is a very serious matter. It is an inconceivable thought that boys could be dressed as girls. That would be an insult not only to the child but also to the forefathers of the child. Attire meant for boys is always worn by boys and that worn by girls is always worn by girls. The "*irhabi*" is strictly for females only. Boys wear both on the front part and back part some triangular skin patches. These are different in makes, that is, the front one can always be differentiated from the back one. These are called "*amabhetjha*" in isiNdebele. The name is in the plural because they

normally go in pairs. These are under no circumstances worn by females. There is no crossing of the boundary.

A somewhat related error was found in Levy's work (Hammond-Tooke et al, 1989) when she wrote:

***At puberty, a young woman wears a stiff, rectangular shaped apron, the isiphephethu.... (Hammond-Tooke et al, 1989: 25).***

The word "*isiphephethu*" was crosschecked among several personalities representing different Ndebele communities, stakeholders, as well as isiNdebele radio presenters. The outcome was that not a single one of the above-mentioned persons was familiar with the word. All of them agreed unanimously that this item referred to above is known as *iphephethu* in isiNdebele. The term *isiphephethu* therefore is likely to be a dialectical variation of *iphephethu* and is not known by many Ndebele people.

Therefore such confusions and misrepresentations, however minor they look, cannot be tolerated. They do not go down well to the Ndebele people and are regarded by the Ndebele people as a gross violation of their language and culture.

It is little things like these that this study hopes to correct and put straight so that those who will have interest in following the Ndebele culture and language can have sources with correct information.

In 1995 Ivor Powell published a book entitled "Ndebele – A People and their Art". In this book chapter five was devoted solely to beads and adornments. Here an attempt was made to discuss beads from the time Europeans came into contact with the Ndebele people. According to him this marks the period of glory when the Ndebele started to produce beadwork peaces on a large scale.

What comes very clear in this chapter are the distinct periods through which the Ndebele beadwork has developed. He estimates the first generation of Ndebele beads to have been around the year 1880 when the Ndzundza were defeated at Mabhoko's caves (mispronounced by whites as Mapoch's caves). Powell most probably had an intuitive feeling that told him that the Ndebele people could have been exposed to beads much earlier than this period, as a result he writes:

***It would be naïve, though, to think that this represent the first time the Ndebele had been exposed to beads in any form... is it enough to merely refer in vague terms to possible practices of stringing seed pods and suchlike together and assume that out of this grew the splendour of Ndebele beadwork... (Powell, 1995: 108).***

Powell describes how each period is characterised by its own dominant colour and style. He further made an attempt of explaining the figures and shapes that were dominant in each period. The colourful pictures accompanying his explanations help in making his view point clearer. He concludes his story by discussing the 1950's period, which was followed closely by what he calls the "contemporary beading party style", which are the present day plastic substitutes of the original Ndebele attire.

Powell covered most beadwork items worn by females. These items are accompanied by a brief description of how they look like. The descriptions are however too brief to be understood by a person who has never set eyes on them. One would also have expected at this point to get a detail description of how these beadwork pieces are made. Sadly this did not happen. This is however a good analysis that needs to be applauded especially because it came from a person outside the culture of Ndebele.

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CHAPTER 3

3.0 THE PREPARATION AND PROCESSING OF BEADWORK ORNAMENTS

3.1 Introduction

Beads are central in the lives of the Ndebele people. When one travels in some parts of the Mpumalanga province, parts of Gauteng and parts of Limpopo, it is a very common sight for one to see Ndebele people, especially women, with multicoloured beads all over their bodies. Bead necklaces and rings are found rattling around the neck and arms. Ndebele women especially, use beads as distinctive elements of personal clothing and adornment. For anyone coming across such a scene a deep quest rises up to feel the need of knowing more about the origins of beads and why they came to play such a central part in the material culture of the Ndebele people.

3.2 What are beads?

The Ndebele word for beads is "*umncamo*". Each bead is referred to as "*ithoroyomncamo*". Working with beads is referred to as "*ukuphothela*". Sometimes a more specific word may be preferred depending on the circumstances. For instance we have a word like "*ukuphulela*" used when one transfers beads from a thinner thread to a thicker and more reliable one. The word "*ukunghadela*" is a word used for dressing up a lady with beaded whoops

made out of grass with a beadwork finishing. The term "*ukurubela*" is used to string up beads on a thread when a simple article like a necklace is made.

This togetherness of beads working together with a string of cotton has been assimilated by speech in ordinary talking. It is common to hear Ndebele speakers saying:

Labo abehlukani, yirhara nomncamo.

(Those are inseparable, they are cotton and beads).

This is said of people, especially lovers, who love one another so much that they are always found in the company of each other.

The best place to start discussing beads would be to try and give a clear explanation or more knowledge on what beads actually are. Beads, sometimes also referred to as "seed beads", are small and somehow round in shape with a hole in the middle. It is thought that they got their name from ordinary seeds. More often than not it is taken for granted that all beads are made out of glass. The honest truth, however, is that not all beads are made from glass. Although the history of African people of South Africa, the Ndebele included, reveals that iron and brass were handled long before the arrival of whites, and that ornaments were made out of these metals, but nowhere do we find evidence that they ever handled glass. It would appear that glass beads are latecomers in the lives of the Ndebele. Prior to that, the Ndebele used beads from other material as will be seen in discussions to follow later on.

Beads come in all sorts of shapes, colours and sizes. Researchers in this field reveal that the sizes of beads are measured in what are referred to as "aughts" with the sign $^{\circ}$ used to represent the size of a bead grain. For instance it is said that bead sizes can vary from 8° to 25° . The smaller the number the bigger is the bead size. Evidence from beadwork articles in existence shows that small beads are by far the most favoured type.

3.3 Background to Ndebele beadwork

There are several sometime contrasting views regarding the history of when beads were introduced to the Ndebele people. Regarding such speculations Powell, (1995: 108) summarises his view in this manner:

As far as the Ndebele are concerned, the demonstrable history of bead working goes back only as far as the second half of the nineteenth century, when Europeans bearing beads of Czechoslovakian origin penetrated the hinterland and came into contact with the people living in the present-day Eastern Transvaal. It would be naïve, though, to think that this represents the first time the Ndebele had been exposed to beads in any form. Nor, one might venture, is it enough to merely refer in vague terms to possible practices of stringing seed pods and suchlike together and assumed that out of this grew the splendour of Ndebele beadwork – as many writers on this subject have done.

From the above quotation Powell warns that it would be a gross oversight if it were to be assumed that the Ndebele knowledge of beads only dates back as far as the first arrival of the first Europeans into Mpumalanga, formerly known as the Transvaal. Judging from the sophisticated patterns produced by the Ndebele bead handlers, and also judging from the advance manner in which beadwork is handled by the Ndebele at the present moment, it would sound more logical and reasonably accurate to assume that this is an art that was started by Ndebele ancestors far earlier than is indicated in most books on this subject. The likelihood is that it started from humble beginnings and slowly gained momentum to attain the heights it has reached at present.

Powell refutes the postulation that the Ndebele handling of beads could date as far as the arrival of the first Europeans in the Transvaal. In his own words he writes:

The plain fact is that the actual beadwork produced by Ndebele women in the later nineteenth century is of such a quality and degree of elaboration that it would suggest a long and developed tradition. Besides, we have evidence of a widespread trade in manufactured beads within the southern African subcontinent that predates by several centuries the first known Ndebele pieces. (Powell, 1995 : 108).

We therefore have no other way but to admit that there is a period which could be estimated in "several centuries" (sic) where Ndebele beadwork was undocumented.

Some writers like Davison have put it in black and white that:

Historical evidence suggests that Ndebele beadwork developed rapidly after the Mapoch War of 1882, when white settlers in South Africa defeated the Ndebele. They uprooted and relocated the Ndebele to different parts of Southern Africa. However, the Ndebele maintained a strong group consciousness, and art became one way in which they asserted their identity. They painted their homes with distinct patterns and wore beaded clothing and ornaments as part of everyday dress. Thus the Ndebele proclaimed their cultural identity no matter where they were. (Davison, 1985: 19).

Even after 1885 when the Ndebele were defeated, humiliated and down trodden and their dignity dragged in the mud of shame by the Boers at a place called *Nomtjherhelo*, renamed *Roosnekaal* by the Boers, the Ndebele cling to their handcraft and never allowed it to die out. It is almost unbelievable that after the Ndebele had reached the brink of near complete obliteration they rose from the dust and pushed beadwork up to the heights it is today. This is how Ndebele beadwork survived the atrocities of South African history and flatly refused to die.

Before glass beads were introduced to the Ndebele people the Ndebele relied solely on natural material. One of their favourite materials was ostrich egg shells. These were broken into small sizes of about the size of a ten cent coin. They would thereafter be cleaned well and polished or painted if necessary. They would thereafter be cut into desired sizes and shapes depending on how the artist prefers them. A hole would then be pierced open at the centre of each one of them. A thread made up of some type of grass or a thin lace cut from a skin would then be pulled through each one of them to form a necklace. Capsules from dry seeds were also used. As these were almost ready to be used, they were just threaded together to form necklaces.

Costello (1990:2) studied beadwork amongst the Xhosa people and found that the Nguni people also made use of metal to make beads. These were particularly preferred because one could polish them to shine and they were durable. To this day the Ndebele use the smallest of the coins, polish them and string them on a thread to produce a beautiful "*umdereso*" worn on the forehead mostly by elderly women on special occasions like weddings. Other materials used were animal teeth, animal nails, horns, ivory, carved wood, seeds and roots of plants.

3.4 Getting started

Working with beads is a very laborious job. A distinction is thus drawn between bead makers and bead handlers. Bead makers are people who actually make beads out of raw material and bead handlers artists that can produce beadwork articles out of beads. There is also a third group which specialises by trading in beadwork. More often than not, the artist who produces artworks from beads may be one and the same person who trades in beadwork.

Contemporary bead handlers buy their beads from dealers and may not even know who the maker is. Their sole worry would be to get the type of beads they want and colour preferences.

3.4.1 Preparation of beads

When beads are bought from the dealer they are not necessarily ready for use. These are normally strung on a very light thread to form a strand. The thread used in such strands is not strong and durable enough for use in a beadwork article. One strand can easily be up to about 50cm long and comes curled for easy handling. The artist is thus faced with another formidable task of transferring the beads from the light thread to a better and stronger thread, usually waxed in honey for long preservation. This process is referred to as "*ukuphulela*". This process is attained by joining the two strings, the light one and the durable one by means of a tiny knot. Beads are then transferred from left to right across the tiny knot in groups of five and up to ten units depending on the mobility of the beads. This is mostly done when grass rings known in isiNdebele as *iinrholwani* are to receive finishing by means of beads.

Normally beadwork can be of four kinds. First we have articles like necklaces which are normally fairly simple in design. Secondly we have beadwork used on grass rings (*iinrholwani*) finishing. Thirdly we also have beadwork wherein beads are attached onto a hide backing or a cloth-like material. Finally we have beadwork where beads are just joined to each other to form a beautiful article which could be belt shaped.

Preparation of beads does not end there. Sometimes it becomes necessary for the artist to start by sorting up the beads categorising them by means of their sizes. For instance, the bigger beads known in isiNdebele as "*iindalama*" may need to be kept aside alone for easier choice. Sorting up by means of colour is also very common. Here the different colours are kept into different containers. This is done because often an artist may need only one colour to cover a vast area

of her work. The other colours can therefore be kept away up until they are needed.

3.4.2 Technique in beadwork making

3.4.2.1 Planning

Just like in the drawing of a picture, beadwork needs proper planning. The artist needs to imagine the completed or final form of the article she needs to make. Size also plays a very important part in planning and estimating. The article is planned in terms of its length and width. If the article is going to be worn by a specific individual and remain part of his or her wardrobe forever, the correct size of the part of the body needs to be measured well. For instance parts of the body like the cuffs, head, waist and the like, always require specific measurements.

Unlike in the planning of a house where all measurements must appear on paper, with beading all the planning is done in the mind. It takes an artist with very good imagination to come out with a final piece of artwork which will leave viewers of her work speechless.

The artist must also ensure to buy enough beads, enough to complete her article without any shortages. The problem an inexperienced bead worker may run into is to run short of beads making a certain colour and only to find a somewhat different shade when she goes back to buy some more.

3.4.2.2 Draft drawings

A lot of drawing takes place in a form of planning. Items like the front apron worn by grown up maidens, called "*iphephethu*"

in isiNdebele, or front apron worn by married women, called "*amaphotho*" in isiNdebele are usually decorated with many designs of all shapes and sizes. These shapes need to be drawn on the skin item after it has been cut and tailoring completed. To ensure the maintenance of the same design, for instance a round one, a round object like a ring would be used, depending on the size desired and number of those round object required. If it is a straight line that is required, then it will be drawn. If two or three parallel lines are required, these would be drawn in advance.

It is not until the whole planning has been thoroughly planned and completed that the first bead is sewn onto the leather. Ndebele beadwork makers have not as yet reached the stage where the colours of beads required are shown on the drawing in advance. Nor have they reached the stage where all patterns they use for decoration can be recorded down in a written form. Colouring therefore depends much on the taste of the artist. Of course not overlooking the general trend followed by her other fellow artists of that era.

3.4.2.3 Calculations

The history of the Ndebele people indicates that they were never exposed to schools during the early years of their development. The Ndebele people, therefore, had not been schooled to be able to do sophisticated mathematical calculations. However, basic mathematical operations such as addition and subtraction were their daily exercise. Their ability to calculate was limited to counting their cattle and other household stock. Simple counting, that is, addition and subtraction was thus their daily bread.

It is this counting that plays one of the most important parts in the art of beadwork. To string down beads onto a piece of leather so as to produce a figure, requires accurate calculations involving simple addition and/or subtraction. It is these very simple mathematical operations that were used and are still used by the Ndebele artists in producing all those worldwide famous geometric figures that have made Ndebele beadwork so popular to the extent of receiving international accolades.

A Ndebele artist is therefore able to produce right angled figures, triangular shaped figures as well as circular figures. All these are used as decorative figures on the work of art. All these figures depend entirely on the artist's ability to calculate correctly the number of beads needed in order to construct a particular figure.

3.4.3 Actual embroidering

Mention has already been made that to be a beadwork artist is a very laborious job. An artist uses a needle and a string to pick up the beads one by one. There is no other way of doing this. Hopefully with the modern technology advancement it will be possible to do this form of art using a machine. But up until that machine has been invented the artist will have to rely on the old traditional way of picking up the beads one by one.

Time taken on finishing an item depends on how sophisticated the item is. The artist adopts one of the following styles:

3.4.3.1 Necklaces

Making a normal necklace does not involve much. All the artist does is to decide how the completed form of the article should look like. The simplest of them all is by stringing beads to

formulate one course of string long enough to go around the neck or around the cuffs. Necklaces may be made out of beads that are of the same size and colour or vice versa. It is a common practice that beginners in this form of art start their first attempts by making a necklace.

The art in making a necklace is in the matching of the different beads. Simple as it may seem, appropriate skill is needed in making a necklace. Normally a necklace has a front and a back part. The front part of the necklace is the most important part because it has to be appreciated by the person spoken to in front of the speaker. The front part normally has a conspicuous centre which may consist of one or several bigger beads. These may be made up to be all of the same size and colour or they may differ in size. It is common to find that the bead at the inner centre differs in size and even in colour from the rest of the beads forming the *ihliziwana* (heart) of the necklace. From this centre-most point beads are strung to formulate matching units. The mixing of colours depends entirely on the taste of the artist. Depending on the make of the necklace, it may consist of a single string or a number of strings lying side by side to form a somewhat thicker necklace.

The above-mentioned style is not only used for necklaces but for several other articles which are made in a similar pattern. Under these we find articles like wrist bangles and other single line articles worn around the wrist, arm or waist.

3.4.3.2 Free-running embroidering

The next calibre of artwork has been described as "free-running" in that the beads are not worked against anything but are free-running. This means that each bead is suspended on a thread and the thread runs from one bead to the next. It is for

this reason that double assurances have to be made that the thread used is indeed reliable and will endure the weight of the entire string of beads for a number of years.

Free-running embroidering normally takes the shape of a belt or strip. The width of the belts or strips varies, depending on the type. The width may be anything from about 3cm to about 20cm or more.

It has been observed that basically all belt-shaped pieces of artwork follow one principle. They all consist of a base that normally consists of a single colour of beads. This base also determines the width of the strip. Depending on the period wherein the item falls, white or black colours have always been amongst the most favourites but the artist is by no means restricted from choosing any other colour. The base itself may consist of anything between two to five rows. This base acts as the seam of the belt and normally runs around the whole item maintaining the same width. Thin belts or strips will always have a thin seam and wide ones will have a wider one. The moment a seam thick enough has been attained, the artist starts designing the shapes in order to decorate the belt. It takes a good artist with good imagination to design a seam base which will be proportional with the item without compromising the aesthetic appearance of the artwork.

After the width of the belt has been determined, the artist has to centralise the shape. Centralising a shape is a big issue because it has a big bearing on the beauty of the piece. Centralising a shape more often than not involves individual counting of the beads forming the base or seam. For a shape therefore to be at the centre there must be an equal number of beads bearing the same colour as the seam on each side of it. For a symmetrical shape, the number of the same colour of

beads will be maintained for up to as far as the shape or figure is required. For a tapering figure, there is an involvement of addition and subtraction. For an upwards tapering there is an increase on the beads from the seam and an equal number of beads subtracted each side of the figure. For the figure to taper on the opposite side the action is reversed. Sometimes it becomes necessary to involve both styles in producing a figure tapering on both sides.

Items built from free-running embroidering are items like *umkhala*, a headdress worn only by a woman whose son is at an initiation school. This item is worn everyday for the entire period whilst the young man is still at an initiation school. The wearing of *umkhala* elevates the woman to a better status where upon she may brag to be mother of a soon-to-be-man person. The *umkhala* is a thin strip about 1.5cm wide made out of free-running beads and is worn around the head. Commonly it has a diamond shaped or star shaped figure corresponding to the forehead.

Another piece built from free-running embroidering is what is called *imilingakobe*. The word appears in a plural form because these items always form a pair. These are strips of beadwork worn solely by a woman whose son is at that moment at an initiation school. These items are not worn everyday like the *umkhala*. They are worn every time there is a gathering that has to do with the young man who is at the initiation school. Normally after a report has been officially issued out that a young man has undergone initiation, on short regular intervals, all mothers of the young men who are at *entabeni*, literally meaning "at the mountain", move in groups alternating short visits to all the homes where a young man has gone for initiation and perform what is called "*ukuthokoza*", literally meaning "giving thanks". During the *ukuthokoza* visits, the

imilingakobe are a compulsory dress code for all the mothers of the initiates.

Imilingakobe are a beadwork item with long strips worn to hang from head to toe. They are worn by females only and never by males. They are worn to hang on either side of the head, normally well decorated with colourful beads. They are also thought to be used as indicators of the status a woman has attained in life, that is, a status of being mother to an initiate. Powell (1995: 135) summarises this by saying:

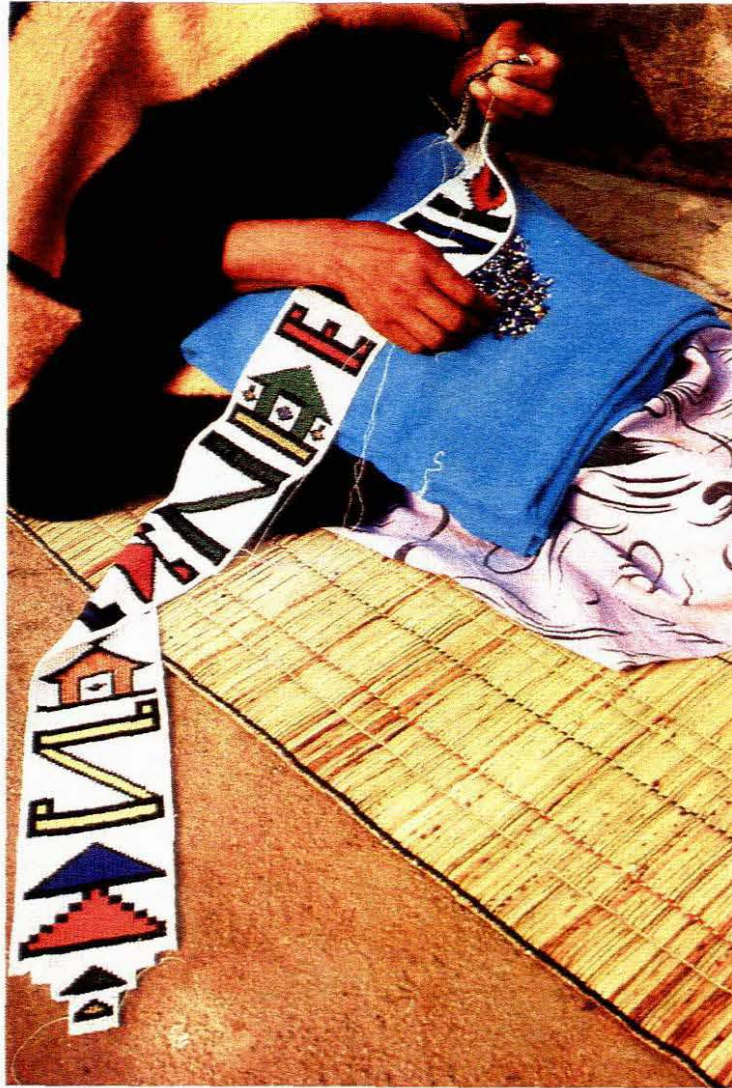
It records a central event in a woman's life and the wearing of it marks an attainment of status, donned as it is by mothers on the occasion of their son's return from initiation.

He continues to say:

... they are understood to record the woman's simultaneous joy at her son's attainment of manhood and her sorrow at losing her boy. At the same time they mark her own arrival at the next level of maturity.

Another beadwork item where free-running is used is the one called "*inyoka*" literally meaning the "snake". This is a wedding item which can be likened to the tail of a veil in a western wedding. It is normally about 30cm wide and 3m long, commonly white in colour with a tassel-like finishing at the tail. This is not a piece to be attempted by an amateur because it is worn during weddings where it is scrutinised by hundred pairs of eyes. Because of its size the artist takes the liberty to design

**The *inyoka* outfit still in the making.
The bead worker is at liberty to make
bigger figures and shapes.**



The inyoka outfit on display. This outfit is worn on the wedding day and is dragged on the floor as the bride moves.

**Inyoka outfit
(Literary meaning
"a snake")**



Nyoga

bigger figures and images displaying her best ability. She employs a combination of styles. For instance she may prefer to have one section to be net-shaped or have an exclusivity of bigger beads only. The shapes run all the way from the shoulders to the tail forming an unbroken line of beauty.

The *inyoka* is worn to hang by means of a well decorated string from the neck backwards across the shoulders of the bride and proceeds to touch the ground with about a 1m portion being dragged on the floor as she moves. Because a Ndebele *umlobokazi*, the bride, by prescription has to move at a snail's speed, this movement makes this piece of artwork to resemble a snake.

The above-mentioned beadwork items are not the only items where free-running style is used. There are a number of such items with some falling somewhere in between being a necklace style and free-running style. Among these we find items like headbands and body rings.

3.4.3.3 Embroidering attached to leather

This style of beadwork is characterised by the fact that all beads are pinned onto a piece of leather all the time. Modern artists sometimes improvise by using a piece of canvas instead of leather.

Embroidering attached to leather is found mainly in items meant to be worn as well as many other small items meant for decoration. In these items, unlike in the free running style, the bead worker is not free to do as she please because she is limited by the shape and size of the leather.

One of the popular items where this style is used is in the making of *iphephethu*. An *iphephethu* is a young maiden's front apron worn during special occasions only. It is not worn daily because it is not easy to do ordinary household duties requiring many reflexive movements wearing one because of its make. This item is made out of stiff cowhide normally rectangular in shape, worn with the shorter sides of the rectangle to be on the sides. It is strapped around the waist and the length from the waist downwards comes to just above the knees.

Working the beads onto *iphephethu* takes two forms. First and foremost, the *iphephethu* has to be well planned and designs envisaged to form part of the decorations have to be planned ahead of time by means of rough drafts. Second comes the labouring. As this item is specially designed for special occasions, it is built to catch the eye. Normally *iphephethu* has about a 2cm strip of trimming right round its edge. This trimming may be of any colour, but the white colour seems to be the most popular one from olden days to this day. To do this trimming the artist uses an awl to pierce two small holes about 2cm apart from each other along the edge of *iphephethu*. A threaded needle is pushed through the holes. The first hole is from the bottom or inner side of *iphephethu* to the top and then strung with bead particles equal to a 2cm length. The needle is again pushed now from the top to the bottom. The first row of beads is then worked onto the leather. The next row is worked tightly parallel to the first one. This process is repeated over and over as the strip becomes longer and longer. Care is taken that these little rows should remain taut because lax ones are despised and described as *-nyefile*, meaning they are not tight enough and therefore not appealing to the eye.

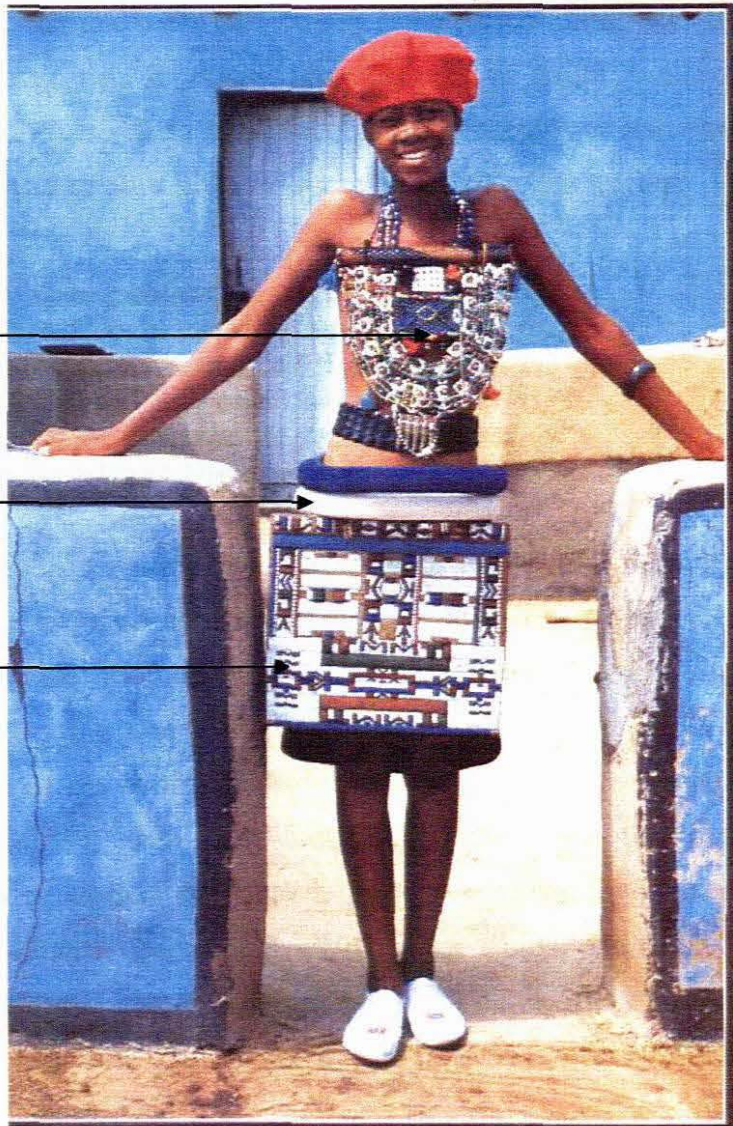
Working from outside inwards, all the other subsidiary designs are ready to be introduced. Some of them may require the same

A young Ndebele teenager dressed for a special occasion also showing off her *iphephethu*.

Beaded chest cover
called *isifutjana*

Waist removable whoops
called *iinrholwani zedinini*

Maiden front stiff apron
called *iphephethu*



style of embroidering, that is, the awl and the needle are used. With the rest, a different style may be necessary. Here the beads are strung one by one on the leather. This method is mostly used when smaller designs are going to be made. A second string of beads is worked onto the first string with the thread of the second string passing through the holes of the beads on the first string. While this is happening, care is taken to mix the colours to the necessary taste. This movement is repeated several times with the string being tightened. As the design is shaping up, it takes the form of a brick wall or beehive. The aesthetic thus produced is very catchy to the eye. Describing designs of this nature Costello, (1990: 20) writes:

Designs are geometric with the beauty of the beadwork coming primarily from the colour and texture of the beads. The overall effect is one of light clear colours with contrasting colours being used to highlight the design.

It is during the formulation of these small designs that the artist takes the latitude of displaying that extreme talent with which she is able to handle beadwork giving it that rare perfection which only she alone can do. This is what is called the attainment of an individual identity or style. According to Costello, (1990: 20) this may be obtained by, ***“...twisting single strings or beads to form a rope ...alternating small beads with large beads...”***. With her bare hands, a professional artist produces work of art so stunning and gorgeous that just one glance at it and it takes one's breath away.

3.5 Gender in bead handling

A question is often asked as to whether which gender participates the most in the making of beadwork. In responding to questions such as this one, a

clear line of demarcation must be drawn between individuals who handle beads just for entrepreneurship and those who actually make the bead articles. Costello studied beadwork among the Xhosa speaking people. Regarding gender in beadwork Costello, (1990: 19) writes:

Beading is a craft practised by women and expresses their taste and artistic skill in the fashioning of ornaments and decorating of clothes and other objects.

Powell (1995: 108) agrees a lot with what Costello says. As opening remarks to one of his works Powell wrote that::

Though in some circumstances beadwork is also worn by men, it belongs primarily to the women of the Ndebele. Through the varieties of beadwork, the entire life of the woman is mapped out, from birth to distinguished matronhood.

The passages quoted above puts it in no unclear terms that the making of beadwork articles is a job for the female folk. Culturally the Ndebele people have jobs that are specifically for men only and those that are for women only. This condition is accepted in good faith and does not pose as suppressive to any of the genders. There are therefore no arguments about these prescriptions. Beadwork is one such instance where the job is done by women only. Costello, (1990: 19) also holds a view that:

Beading is a craft practised by women and expresses their taste and artistic skill in the fashioning of ornaments and decorating of clothes and other objects. Such is the significance of beadwork that girls who cannot bead are considered to be incompetent.

Quotation after quotation may be given with the view to prove that the beading craft is actually a "woman thing" in as far as beading is concerned.

The fact that women hold the sole monopoly of beading cannot be disputed. No sound traditional reason can be advanced why this is happening this way. It is postulated that this could be because of the fact that most of the work done by women centres around the home. Although there is an English saying that says that, "A woman's work is never done", women do get done with their work and find time to "other things". This is the time when they would sit down in groups and sometimes alone and devote the entire time to beadwork. This is also the time when they would teach each other and also interchange knowledge and skills on beadwork.

Whooper, (1988: 3) thinks that the mere fact that women are the sole handlers of beads in Ndebele is an extra mark for women. She argues:

... it is women who have been the practitioners of the artistic forms which are such striking Ndebele cultural markers. In beadwork and wall painting women have an outlet for the expression of their experience of the world, of their aspirations, and of their identity as individuals and as part of a group. (Whooper, 1988: 3).

Women can thus be regarded as carrying the responsibilities of beautifying the homestead as well as beautifying themselves. Beadwork is a strong point that makes women to fulfil their innermost talent without bounds by expressing this in creative art.

3.5.1 Beads as used by women

Beads are part and parcel of a woman from birth to death. Other than the normal way of being used as personal adornment, they are said to be giving clear information regarding a woman's age group.

Age group amongst the Ndebele people is distinctively marked. The term "iintanga" is used for age groups. These age groups are observed throughout life and are never confused nor do they at any stage mix.

They are not only tied together by age but also by dress code. Beads as a form of dress also play a very important role in maintaining a strong bond and identity of an age group:

Traditionally, many societies in eastern and southern Africa have been organized according to age grades. Each individual passes through clearly defined levels, such as childhood, adulthood, marriage, and old age. A transition from one level to the next is often accompanied by a change in clothing and adornment, which are often made from or decorated with beads. What persons wear may communicate to others their age, the identities of the groups to which they belong, and their status within their communities. Certain kinds of beaded clothing and adornment are worn only by men or by women. (Whooper, 1988: 3).

In the Ndebele custom, even newly born baby girls do not escape the tradition of being introduced to beadwork as early as possible. Through no choice of hers, a baby girl is introduced into wearing beads as early as about two months old. Ndebele women simply find a baby girl without bead adornment "incomplete".

A baby girl this young is normally not subjected to wearing sophisticated beadwork items. However, there are those items that seem to be basic. For instance, a Ndebele baby will always wear around the waist a single beaded waistband. This goes for all Ndebele babies, males and females. This band is normally made out of large sized beads, *iindalama*. Sometimes the large beads are mixed with the normal small ones in an ordered fashion. This band is not tied too tightly around the waist. It is made to leave some space as an allowance for growing. The principal duty of this band is to act as an information provider to the mother. It acts as an early warning that informs the mother in good time should it happen that the baby is suddenly losing weight or is not growing normally. In certain instances if the baby is a sickly baby, the traditional healer may prescribe that this band must be punctuated with some small wooden

sticks which are button-like. These are obtained from the healer as they contain medicines that are capable of driving away bad spirits and ailments and take control of the general wellbeing of the baby. In this way then the band is known as *isithukulo sedinini*.

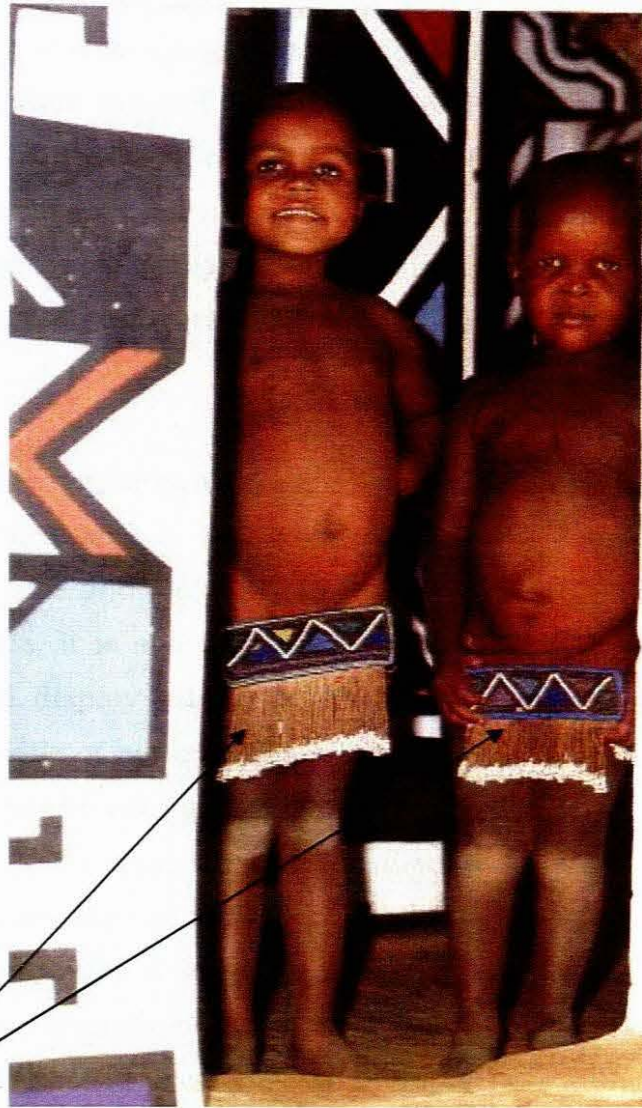
In addition, a baby may have a neckband. This band is made out of special big beads greyish in colour. This band is said to protect the baby from all ailments associated with teething. A baby armed with this neckband proceeds through the teething stage with no problems of the teething stage fever. The grey beads make babies very attractive. With some families, just for the fun of it, the mother may put an additional neckband made out of small beads. If it has some medicinal additions it is named *isithukulo sentanyeni*. It then works together with the waistband against diseases.

Baby girls more often than not receive small light beaded wristbands on each hand. These are mostly for adornment. According to one source of mine, some Ndebele communities use these wristbands to ensure that the arm does not grow in one size from elbow to wrist but tapers towards the wrist.

During special occasions a baby may even be dressed with a colourful headband. This item is not worn everyday.

All Ndebele girl toddlers are introduced to an outfit known as *irhabi*. This is one single item which is so important to any Ndebele girl's wardrobe to the extent that dressed up in anything else with the *irhabi* absent makes her feel half-naked. She wears it from the early age as a toddler through to late teenage stages. Girl toddlers usually wear it alone with nothing covering the back, as it is not offensive to the Ndebele people for a girl to be dressed in this manner.

Young Ndebele girls wearing a beaded irhabi. At this age it is common to find them topless.



**Front tasselled covering
for girls called irhabi**

An *irhabi* is a front apron for girls whose size differs from one person to another depending on age, body size and height. It consists of tassels suspended on a stiff leather about 4 – 5 cm in width. The tassels are worked to be tightly together with no possibility of seeing through them. The tassels have a bead finishing at the end, usually white in colour, and they always hang downwards. The tassels drop about halfway the thighs from the stiff leather that is always fastened tightly around the waist by means of a pair of strong leather strings. Younger girls always depend on their mothers to assist them with the proper dressing up. For younger girls the embroidering is less sophisticated. At this age the beadwork, colour and designs are those of her mother.

As the girl grows up to reach puberty beadwork begins to play an even bigger role in her life. First of all it is observed that she now wears an *irhabi* which is bigger in size and looks much more respectable than the one worn by little girls. It is also observable that the top part of her *irhabi* now begins to display attractive and more sophisticated embroidering which is mostly of her own choice. Older girls, especially those who have been exposed enough and have reached the age of handling beads on their own wear very sophisticated and artistic pieces of embroidered attire most of which is a product of their own hands. This is seen in the *irhabi*. A young lady at this age may even have two *amarhabi*, one worn as an everyday attire and the other kept for wearing exclusively on special occasions. It is noted that a young lady of this age, unlike younger girls, she is advised by her seniors to always wear a small skin skirt at her back known as *ibhayana*. Nowadays an *ibhayana* may be substituted by a towel or a small blanket or a piece of canvas cut to a suitable size to fit the young lady.

The next remarkable stage in the life of a Ndebele female is when she enters her teens. The point of demarcation is when the young lady observes her menstrual period for the first time known in Ndebele as

ukuthomba. To mark her coming of age the young lady's parents organise a big ritualistic event for her called *iqude*. The way this ceremony is practised may differ from region to another and also whether the family is of the royal origin or a commoner. This event may last anything between a week and two weeks. If it lasts for two weeks, it may be preceded by a weeklong preparatory event called *ipuku* attended by both male and female youth. The second week is then for females only, no male is allowed near the house where this event is taking place. All males and all other members of the public are invited on the last day of this event, usually over weekend, to take part in a Ndebele all assorted buffet which marks the final part of this event. Normally, although no Ndebele occasion can be worth the name without the slaughtering of a beast, bread and jam form some of the most important victuals during such an occasion.

After the *iqude* ceremony the young lady is now ready to join the next level of ladies with a different dress code. Being much more matured, she is now going to wear an outfit that displays her status as a much more matured lady. It is at this stage that *iphephethu* is introduced. The *iphephethu* has already been discussed in the paragraphs above. The wearing of *iphephethu* does not mark the total departure from wearing *irhabi*. What actually happens is that she wears them both at the same time where the *irhabi* now acts as underwear. On an ordinary working day, young ladies of this age prefer to wear the *irhabi* alone as a casual outfit and save the wearing of *iphephethu* for special occasions.

It is at this age that she is introduced for the first time to the wearing of the back skin skirt known as *isithimba*. This outfit is made out of a skin shaped like a tale coat. Most fathers are experts when it comes to thorough softening and finally cutting and tailoring of this outfit. In case the young lady's father is not in the position of cutting it because of one reason or another, another expert in the community would be found. It is cut to have a hard top part that is approximately 8 cm in

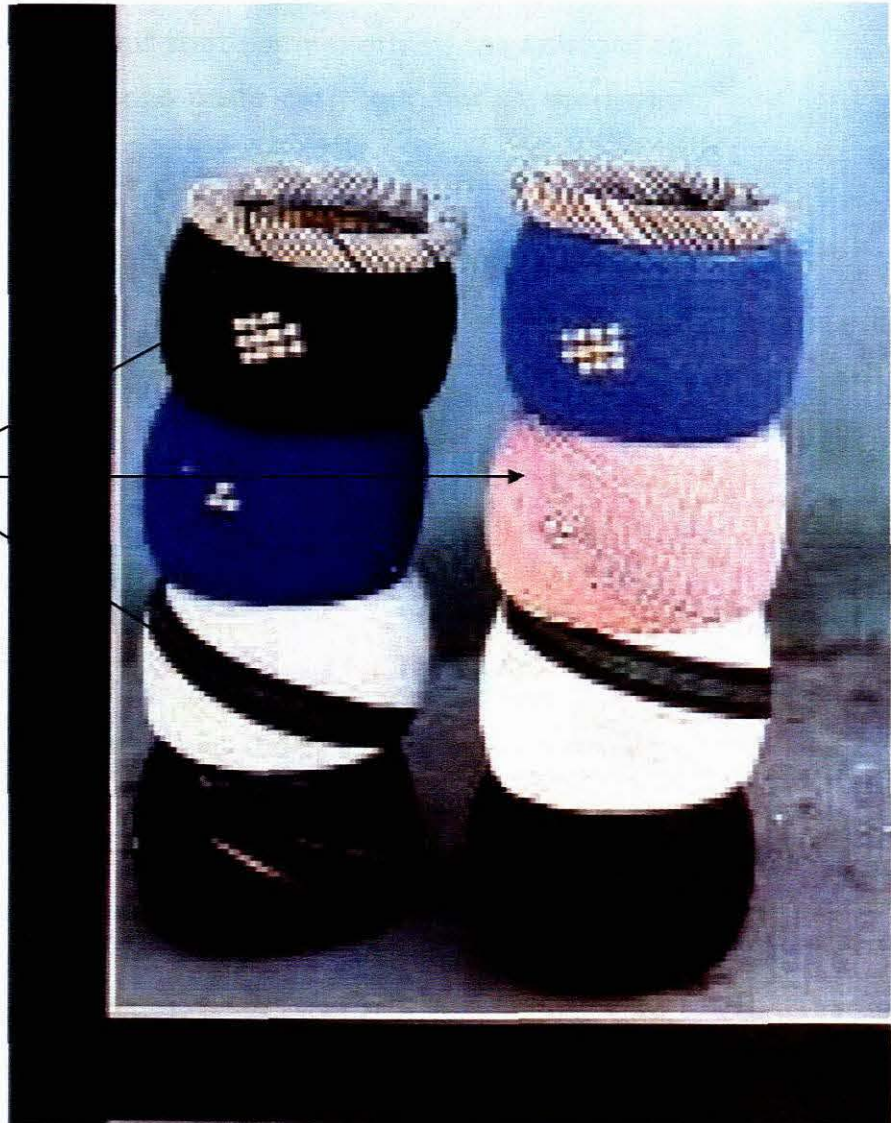
width that is belt-shaped. It is fastened in front by a pair of strong straps and the tail itself is at the back. The tail drops to cover the woman's behind from the waist to knee level. The skin is worked to be very soft and waxed with fat as a preservative measure from being destroyed by termites or other hymenopterous insects. Depending on taste, the belt may receive beadwork finishing. The style used is the same as the one used in *iphephethu*. Some prefer to leave this part plain because most of the time it is hidden by the Ndebele multicoloured blanket called *unokhethwako*. However, a Ndebele maiden when taking the floor for her turn to dance in front of the multitudes, she gently lifts up her *unokhethwako* to reveal the beauty of her *isithimba*. Depending on circumstances, she may even prefer to make a total revelation by removing *unokhethwako* altogether and parade and display all her beadwork items as well as her body built.

If dressed for a social gathering there would be another beadwork item worn on top of *isithimba*. This item is called *amayirhani*, with the term frequently found in plural. *Amayirhani* are formed from long strings hanging from a lady's waist to knee level and are worn by ladies who have passed the teenage stage and are about to get married. The strings hang from a belt-like material worn on top of *isithimba* to cover only the back part but with *isithimba* still clearly visible in between the strings. To create this piece of attire the free-running technique is employed. White average size beads are strung on each string to completely fill the string from top to bottom. The strings are then sewed tightly next to each other. This is one of those pieces of attire that has kept its traditional white colour across generations. With all the modern innovations coming in and going, no one has ever thought of changing *iyirhani* from white to another colour. As the lady is moving around the loosely hanging strings lightly tap on the *isithimba* to make small rattling sounds.

It is at the same time that a Ndebele young maiden is introduced to the *ukunghadela* practice. This is a customary practice whereby a

Legrings called iinrholwani worn by a young Ndebele maiden, considered to be top fashion. One tower for each leg.

Iinrholwani appearing in multicolour depending on the owner's taste.



Ndebele maiden receives a set of grass whoops known in isiNdebele as *iinrholwani*. It is not compulsory for her to have the whoops but since virtually all the girls at this stage put them on, it would be very queer for her not to have a set of whoops and she would be despised by her age mates. It has to be pointed out that some mothers may choose to have their girl child put on whoops quite early but not at the same scale as found at this level.

The young girl cannot put on the whoops all by herself. Usually a more senior lady who is also an expert in this field does the job on request. The wearing of whoops needs to be well decided upon because once you wear them there is no removing them at will except by tearing them down. They are meant to stay with you for a period of two to three years day and night. There is no removing them even when going to bed or taking a bath.

Whoops are put on each leg in a set of about four whoops on each leg. They start with a small one just above the ankle. This small one is there to act as a shock absorber and also as a stopper to prevent the bigger whoops from sliding down the hill of the foot. As a result this whoop is much tighter than the rest. From this small whoop they grow bigger and bigger in size as they move upwards towards the knee taking a symmetrical shape. The last one is just below the knee making an allowance for the knee to bend. Of late there is a new style whereby some maidens would have whoops even above knee level.

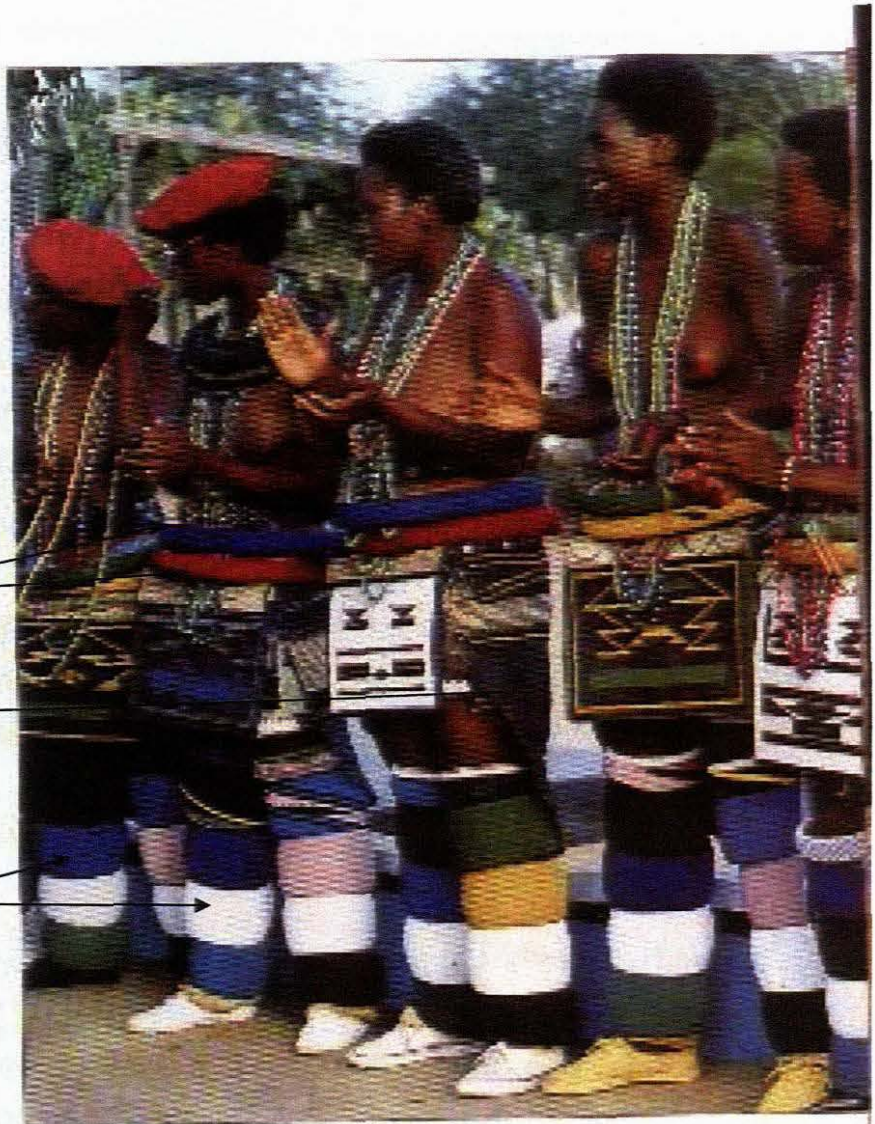
A type of grass known as *utjani bomthanyelo*, (literally meaning "grass for making brooms") is used for making whoops. In some areas the type of grass known as *umthala* is used. Both these types of grass are particularly preferred because they can bend easily without

Ndebele young maidens fully dressed in their traditional attire with iinrholwane clearly visible.

**Iinrholwani
zedinini**

Isithimba

**Iinrholwani
zemlenzeni**



breaking especially when dry. To prevent it from breaking it is soaked into water overnight and worked on whilst damp. A nice round whoop is created around the leg with some little allowance for free movement of the whoop either upwards or downwards. The grass is bound stiffly by means of strong cotton. In the olden days it used to be a thin strap cut from a goatskin. The grass is worked round and round in nice even layers until the required size of thickness has been reached.

Next follows the beading part of the whoop. Beads that have already been threaded on a long string are used round and round the whoop until all the grass has been covered completely. Assurances are always made that the rows of beads are tightly together and remain stiff at all times. To ensure that the whoops remain stiff and tight, syrup or bee honey is smeared on the whoops to keep them stiff and adhesive. Normally each whoop will have only one colour. Occasionally the young lady may prefer to have some designs on one or two whoops. Colours do not follow a strict pattern. The mixing of colours depends on an individual's choice. However, the popularity of colours also depends on the fashion and style of the time.

Whoops for arms are somewhat different from leg whoops. They are never meant to stay permanently on the arm. For this reason they are made to have a bigger hole through which the hand and arm can be pushed. Arm whoops are pushed up the upper arm by smearing fat on the arm so that the whoops can glide easily. These are only used as formal attire for special occasions. They are otherwise not worn during ordinary days. The beadwork art employed in the arm whoops is virtually the same as the one used in leg whoops in terms of shape, make and style involved in the use of beads. But the story of whoops does not end there, there are also neck whoops. Neck whoops appear in two types, the permanent ones and the non-permanent ones. Permanent neck whoops follow more or less the same pattern of making whoops. Normally, only one big whoop is made for the

Big removable neck whoop called ijogi.

Big removable waist whoop.

Front leather apron for women called amaphotho worn by married women only.

Big non-removable leg whoops worn by recently married women



The famous Ndebele songbird Nothembi Mkhwebane dressed in full traditional Ndebele attire.

neck with the bottom of the whoop resting on the collarbone and the upper-most part touching the chin and the lower jaw. A small allowance is made for the movement of the head sideways and up and down. Under very exceptional cases some maidens may prefer to have two whoops on the neck, a big one and a small one both worked in smartly to fit in the little space.

The second type of a neck whoop is the one known in isiNdebele as *ijogi*. It most presumably got its name from the way it is worn. Just like a yoke used for in spanning oxen, on in the morning and out at sunset. It is not meant to be worn permanently. It is only worn on the day when there is a special occasion. At the end of the event, it is taken off and put away to wait for the next event. This whoop is specially made for those maidens who because of one reason or another do not have a neck whoop. When this whoop is made, the measurements of the wearer's head are carefully taken. This is done because for it to be worn the head has to be pushed through the ring almost by force. The head is normally clean shaven and both the head and face are smeared heavily with fat for the whoop to glide smoothly. The style of beads making this whoop follows the same pattern used for ordinary whoops. The beadwork style is the same. The most favoured colours preferred for this whoop are light blue, royal blue and black.

The last types of whoops are those made without strict measurements. These are normally worn on the neck and waist. They are easily noticed because compared to the ones discussed so far, they consist of a large circumference. Those are meant to be worn on the neck and just hang loosely on the neck. Waist whoops are worn by stretching the arms up above the head and the whoop is then pulled downwards to rest on the hip bones. These types are somewhat different because they are seldom found to have a radius of less than 3cm. They are also comparatively speaking, lighter because of their

size. They share the same style of beadwork art. The threaded beads are bound tightly around the already grass manufactured whoop until the whole body of the whoop has been completely covered. Usually, instead of a perpendicular strip, they tilt slightly towards the right hand side forming an angle of about 50° .

It must be mentioned here that the original Ndebele whoops were very heavy. Fully dressed up in whoops the lady's movements were very limited. Movements like fast running were just out of question. No swimming can be attempted. Even during ordinary walking, the lady seems to be grotesquely overburdened as she attempts her normal walking steps. Be that as it may, a Ndebele maiden would rather endure that "heavy" situation rather than to be without whoops.

Thanks to modern innovations, Ndebele whoops are no longer that heavy. In fact they have become very light and flexible. Of late they are built from plastics. Some are elastic in nature and can therefore be removed and put on with ease. Most Ndebele attire has been downgraded to occasional attire. The modern world requires fast movements and modern work places can find it very hard to tolerate a person fully clothed in Ndebele regalia.

No Ndebele maiden can be said to be completely and properly dressed up for an occasion without a set of bangles on both her arms. Bangles actually start at an earlier age. The difference is that at this age most of the young lady's bangles have been beautifully worked up with beads. During ordinary days of the week, she may walk about with two to three plain bangles. Come the occasion day, she puts on a complete set of four to eight bangles on each arm. In some of these she has produced her highest standard of embroidering. During dancing, she lifts up her arms high and wide so that all these beautiful pieces can be clearly seen by all members of the audience. Various styles are used in bangle embroidering. The most common

one is the one wherein a long string of beads is wound round and round the bangle. Each bangle may have its own colour or a combination of several colours. The rows may just be straight or slanting.

With the more sophisticated style, the bangle is first completely wrapped up with a piece of cloth. The beads are thereafter worked onto the cloth to formulate some of the various Ndebele favourite shapes. Although the shapes are fairly reasonably small in size because of the size of the bangle, care is however taken that there is no deviation from the Ndebele style and the current style in fashion. All this is done by the young lady her self.

The most sophisticated style is when the styles mentioned above are combined and bound together in sets of as many as six to form a sort of a hose. Sometimes to wear them, one needs to smear one's arm with fat for the smooth and easy gliding of the bangles.

Normally, it is at this age that a young Ndebele maiden gives in to the persuasive courting of a persisting young man who will not take "no" for an answer. Traditionally, a Ndebele maiden will never tell the young man face to face that she now accepts his proposal even if she is already defeated by the young man's love. As a sign of accepting the young man's proposal, she will offer him one of her most beautiful bangles. If this move is too difficult for her, she will send her closest friend with the bangle wrapped up in a white handkerchief. The young man on receiving this bangle will hold on to it as a promissory symbol. He will thereafter wear it as a sign of pride in front of his friends and sisters to see it. By so doing, the word will go around that the two are now in love and a relationship has been established. In Ndebele, as it is in many other African communities, a relationship of this kind is taken for granted to be heading to a marriage. As a result, there will be no need for the young man at a later stage to "go on his

knee" and ask the young lady to marry him like it is done in White communities.

The promissory bangle is followed by specially prepared beadwork pieces that have been personally prepared by the young lady as gifts for the young man. These gifts are sent from time to time. The young lady sets aside time to prepare these pieces with the aim that her lover should be the best dressed young man during occasions in the area. These beadwork pieces will be discussed under the subheading "Beads as used by men".

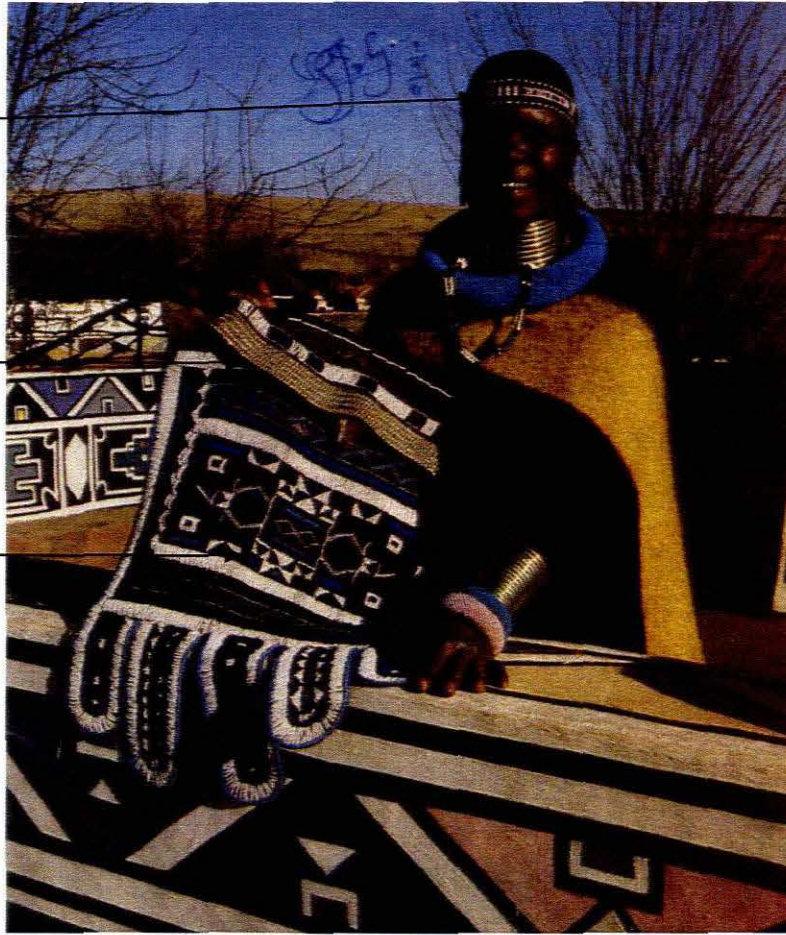
The traditional wedding day called *idwende* in isiNdebele, officially marks the last day of the wearing of *iphephethu* and the beginning of two outfits worn by an adult Ndebele female. These are *üntjorholo* and *amaphotho*.

Itjorholo can be likened to a wedding gown. It is worn by a young lady on a wedding day. It is a front rectangular shaped apron. It is cut from cowhide by a professional. Depending on the body size of the wearer, it normally has a width of between 32cm and 35cm and in some cases even more. The top part around the waist has a seam about 10cm folding downwards. It is this seam that has strong straps on either side top corner whereby the *itjorholo* is securely strapped around the waist. From the waist it drops down to just below the knees. The bottom part ends in five rounded flaps. Depending on the individual taste, the flaps on either side may be bigger than the other three in the middle. Some individuals may prefer to have the middle flap slightly bigger in size than the two smaller ones on the sides. From the hands of the professional who tailored it, the *itjorholo* proceeds to a beadwork artist for decoration. Threaded beads are used. Just like an *iphephethu*, *itjorholo* has a beaded border about 2 –

Beaded headband called *undereso*

Small round copper decorations called *iinkozo* displaying the wealth of the husband

Beaded five flapped front apron worn on the wedding day called *ijorholo*



The famous Ndebele painter and bead worker Esther Mahlangu in her popular Ndebele blanket called *unokhethwako* and other Ndebele regalia.

3cm wide right round the apron. Any colour may be used in creating the border. However, the all time favourites are white, light-blue and black. Some individuals may prefer to have theirs doubly bordered with different colours. The middle part is occupied by shapes and designs consistent with the Ndebele's own favourite. Care is taken that these shapes and designs are as much attractive as possible because this is a "wedding gown" after all, and must be seen to be exceptionally stunning. Most important is the centering of the main front design. It is important that it be centered properly because it forms the main centre of attraction of the outfit. Looking at it from afar, it may look easy to attain. With all the intricacies and calculations involved one soon finds out how complex it really is.

The *amaphotho* are also an adult female wear. The name always occurs in plural form and is never used in singular form "*iphotho*" to describe this outfit. The wearing of *amaphotho* is indicative of a married woman status. This outfit is created pretty much the same as *itjorholo*, in shape, appearance and all. The only difference is found at the bottom finishing. The *amaphotho* outfit has only two panels, one on each bottom side of the apron resembling the five flaps of the *itjorholo* in shape. In between the panels is a row of beaded fringes which give the *amaphotho* an attractive finishing. Sometimes these fringes may be spun from pure leather to have a rope-shaped finishing. This is perhaps where the name "*amaphotho*" is derived from. The name comes from the verb "*photha*" meaning to spin a thread-like object to take up the shape of a rope.

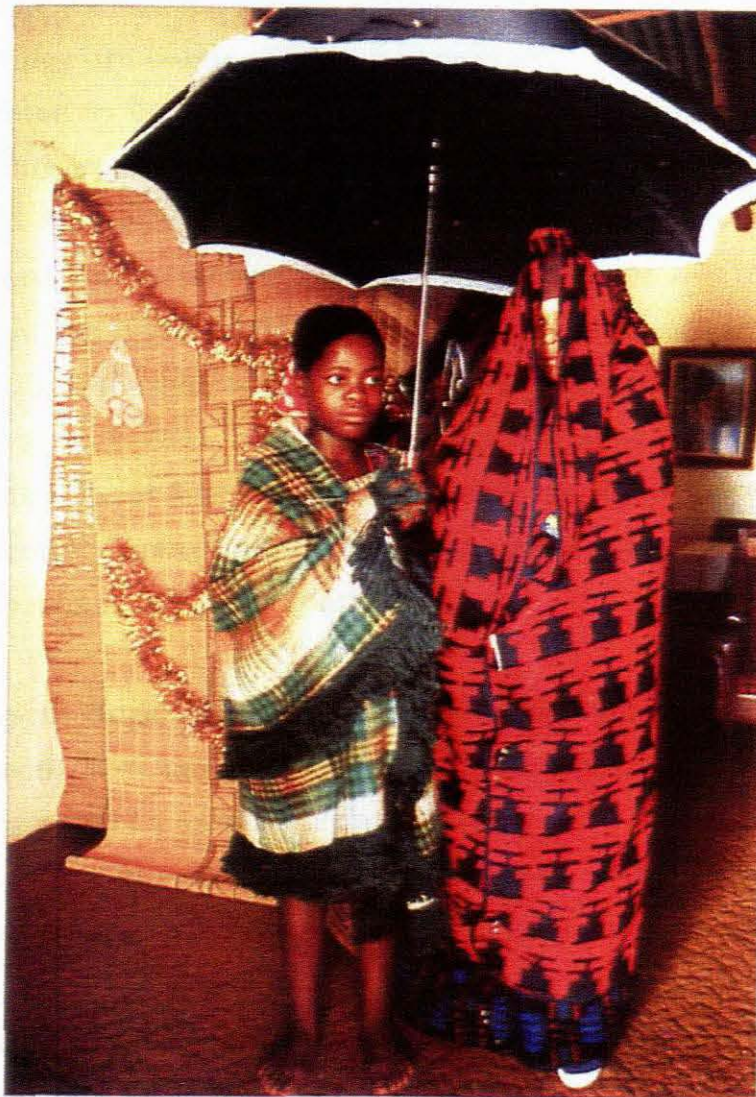
Women who have spent about five years in marriage and less are referred to as *amaqhakazana*. Women in this class usually engage in bitter competitions trying to establish who between them is wearing *amaphotho* with the most beautiful embroidering. It is for this very reason that all the *amaphotho* found in this class are so beautiful that picking up who the winner is would prove to be an extremely difficult

task. Although no formal competitions are held but the spirit for competing fills the atmosphere all the time.

On the day of the Ndebele traditional wedding the bridegroom wears a piece of outfit known in isiNdebele as *isiyaya*. A traditional Ndebele wedding differs a great deal to the western one in that in Ndebele the groom never accompanies the bridegroom on this day. He is not found anywhere near the bridegroom. There is no holding of hands, no matrimonial vows and certainly no kissing. The bridegroom is attended to by elderly women and other ladies of her age group. The groom is found around the kraal accompanied by his age group and elderly men who are there to give advice where necessary. The young bridegroom, known in isiNdebele as *umlobokazi* wears *isiyaya* to avoid eye contact with her in-laws and other people to whom she has to show respect. The custom of *ukuhlonipha* does not allow her to have eye-contact with these people.

An *isiyaya* is a traditional Ndebele veil made out of beads. It consists of a headband about 2cm in width. Correct measurements are taken so that the headband fits her head well. From the forehead, strings of white beads hang downwards to cover the whole face. To make these strings the artist employs the free-running technique. Sometime the artist may prefer to finish each string with a bead slightly bigger than the rest of the beads used in the strings. Although the strings hang tightly together, there is however enough space for her to see where she is going. To avoid eye-contact with her in-laws, the *umlobokazi* covers her whole body from head to toe with a beautifully beaded *unokhethwako* blanket. A young girl of about twelve called *ipelesi* is assigned for leading her around. Only pure white beads are employed in the making of *isiyaya*. This traditional colour has been carried on and on without anyone wishing for a change. The white colour is particularly used because it demonstrates the good wishes coming from everybody, that is, bright future in her new home and lots of luck.

The *hlonipha* custom demands that the *umlobokazi* (the bride) should cover up her whole body to avoid eye-contact with the in-laws. During this stage she is assigned an *ipelesi* to lead her around.



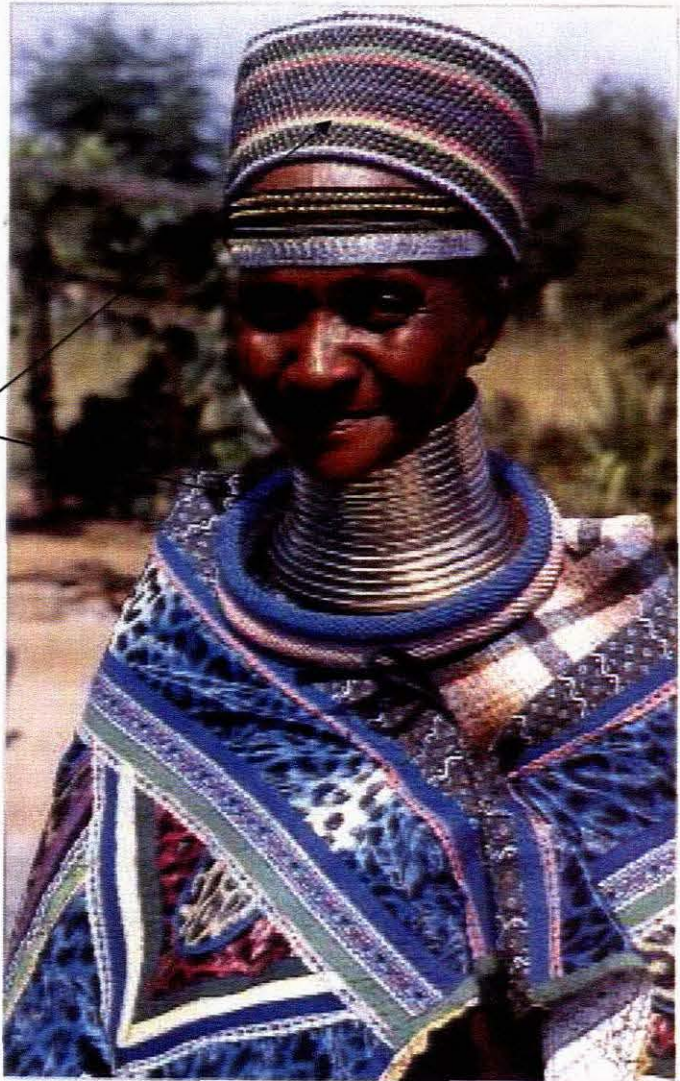
In this class of women the wearing of *isithimba* is the order of the day. This outfit in Ndebele is known to have retained one particular shape since the beginning of time. No significant changes can be effected on the original shape. There is however a slight difference between the *isithimba* worn by young maidens and the one worn by grown up women. The one belonging to grown up women is much more dignified and slightly longer.

Apart from the prolific beadwork decorations found on its hard belt-like top, it is further decorated with small copper rings known in isiNdebele as *iinkozo*. *Iinkozo* always form the bottom part of the belt. These rings are obtained from a person who works with copper. They are created to be round with an approximately 2 cm diameter. They are strung in a row just below the hard belt of *isithimba* to run from one end to another. Because copper is expensive, most individuals can afford just about two rows of *iinkozo*. It is thought in Ndebele that the more the number of rows found is indicative of the wealth of the husband. A woman with a wealthy husband could have as many as six rows of *iinkozo*. She always displays them during her turn of taking the dance floor for a dance by slightly lifting her *unokhethwako* and thereby displaying the glittering copper rings as if she is saying to her opponents, 'eat your hearts out'.

The copper rings called *idzila* worn on arms, legs and neck will not be discussed. They have been omitted deliberately because, even though forming part of a woman ornament, they have no beads or beadwork on them and therefore fall outside the scope of this research. Suffice it to remark that such copper rings always have as their base, just above the ankle, one or two whoops known as *isisekelo*. These whoops act as shock-absorbers between the rings and the hand or between the foot and the rings or between the collar bone and the rings.

An elderly Ndebele lady wearing brass non-removable neck rings. These are worn only by a married woman who has reached full maturity.

An elderly Ndebele woman displaying her beaded head-ware and her neck rings called *idzila*.



A Ndebele woman dressed in all valuable Ndebele ornaments finds herself very heavy laden. Ordinary quick movements like running, swimming and other forms of exercising requiring fast movements are next to impossible. This form of dress may be viewed by modern women and some other nationalities as oppressive and interfering with the freedom of a woman. A Ndebele woman on the other hand would give anything for her to be dressed up in all these ornaments and will wear them her whole life for as long as she is healthy. Thanks again to modern innovations, most of these ornaments have been modernised and are now very light and take only a minute or two to put on or remove.

3.5.2 Beads as used by men

Generally speaking, all observers and researchers on Ndebele beadwork agree that Ndebele males are never involved in the making of beadwork articles. They are only found to be users of beadwork. Even the wearing of beadwork articles is a lot less than is the case with women.

However, just like in women, Ndebele males live their whole lives surrounded by beads and they just do not seem to get rid of them. A closer look of some forms of beadwork as found in different age groups of Ndebele males will help paint a clearer picture of the extent to which beads are used by males.

3.5.2.1 Baby boys

It seems to be a general practice worldwide that parents want to display as early as possible what the gender of a child is. In the Western world they even assign colours on the baby's clothes to indicate gender, blue for boys and pink for girls.

There is a perception that among the Nguni speaking people, baby boys are given a much warmer reception than baby girls. This is so because it is believed that the baby boy is going to further extend the family name. This practice is also found among Ndebele people. Therefore a Ndebele husband is never completely happy up until his wife gives birth to the first baby boy.

Immediately after birth the baby boy undergoes the usual rituals and is thereafter ready to receive his first beadwork ornament. At this age it is usually difficult to assign a special dress code for each sex. It is for this reason that at this age the mother more often than not has to answer over and over again this question, "*Alo umntanakho lo mumuntu bani?*" (By the way what sex is your child?)

The first encounter with beads is when the baby receives his first waistband, which takes place at the age of about 1 – 2 months. This waistband, as already explained earlier, is worn by all Ndebele babies regardless of gender. This is normally a single line band worn around the waist day and night. It has a dual function, that of monitoring the baby's normal growth as well as being a preventative medicinal tool which is capable of protecting the baby against harsh evil spirits and ailments. With many Ndebele people having turned to Christianity, this waistband has been replaced by a woollen band which has exactly the same functions. In fact some people have so much faith in this waistband that they never seem to outgrow it. They continue to wear it until late in adulthood.

A few weeks just before the teething stage begins, the baby boy receives yet another band called the neckband. This one just as the name suggests is worn around the neck. The Ndebele people believe that the neckband helps the baby to go through the teething stage amicably with no adverse flue or diarrhoeic attacks like it happens ordinarily with many babies. With some babies the neckband may

have one or two square inch size of beadwork worked onto the necklace to hang just below the chin.

After a few months, overenthusiastic parents may even decide to cut a small *ibhetjha* for him. An *ibhetjha* is a male wear consisting of two flaps, one in front and another at the back. These flaps have different shapes and are supposed to protect and hide an individual's private parts. At this age the flaps are more of a show off rather than a serious wear. The mother ensures that both flaps are beautifully decorated by means of bead embroidering. The beautiful beadwork shapes are created on the back flap as well as the top part of the front flap. A baby boy dressed up in these flaps becomes a cute centre of attraction. By the way, normally the *amabhetjha* are worn at an older age, from about age five until puberty stage with no embroidering or beads of any kind.

3.5.2.2 Young boys

The period from being a toddler to around twelve is normally a very dull period when we think in terms of beadwork. Boys during this age do not wear or use beads at all. It is during this period that an emphasis is made for a boy to be modelled into a strong and tough being. Any behaviour simulating the female folk is despised vehemently. Thus, beadwork plays very little or no role at all at this age. The only form of beadwork is likely to be a necklace around the neck that may or may not be a health healer's prescription. For this reason, very little or no beadwork can be found or discussed for this age group.

3.5.2.3 Umsegwabo

When a boy enters the teens he is called "*umsegwabo*" or "*ugwabani*" in isiNdebele. He now joins an age group where his whole world suddenly changes regarding his attitude against beadwork. He now

enters an age where sooner or later he is going to enter into a relationship with a girl of his age. This is a normal practice generally accepted by the whole Ndebele community and his immediate relatives become very worried if this does not happen. The practice here is that once a relationship of this kind has been established, the boy will receive from his lover scores upon scores of beadwork articles. It is expected of him to wear most of these articles especially during social occasions.

Among the most popular beadwork articles a boy receives from his girlfriend is a set of bangles. This is usually the first sign whereby a boy can be seen to have found the love of his life. This love relationship is kept very confidentially among the youth and is never passed on to the adult folks. Under certain circumstances the mother may know about it but the father is always kept in the dark. The boy's brothers and sisters are the ones who are first to know about it and are always ready with advices. The boy's sisters become overjoyed when they see this sign. To show that this is no ordinary bangle, the boy's lover will artfully have beadwork embroidering all around it. In some cases the bangles are joined together up to three or four bangles. The typical Ndebele designs are always clearly visible with chevrons being among the most favourites. The mixing of colours according to the taste of the time is closely taken care of.

The boy will also receive a rectangular piece of artwork known as "*isifutjana*" worn on the chest almost like a baby's bib. It is made up entirely of beads. The popular style is for it to have a white ridge all around it. It will have a design at the centre that could take the shape of a star. It would further have other smaller shapes on either sides of the star. It is common to have other supporting small designs to further enhance the beauty of this art piece. The rest of the background may be of black beads or any other colour suitable to the artist.

The boy may also receive an article called "*isiwele*". This is an item made out of beads. It consists of a pair of flaps about the size of a palm each. The two flaps are joined by means of a tiny string right in the middle of the forehead. The *isiwele* is worn on the forehead with each flap slightly towards the side but almost covering the entire forehead almost like horse blinkers. These flaps are beautifully decorated by means of carefully chosen beads. Although the flaps may not necessarily have the same colour of beads but they share similar and matching designs and symbols. Again, this is a piece of ware worn only on special occasions.

The young man is given many various beadwork items like broaches worked onto a safety pin that can be pinned on ones trousers with small tingling bells called in isiNdebele *abonotjherere*. These bells are meant to draw the attention of the public towards the young man who is the spectacle of the day.

During the olden days a young man was allowed to have a number of girlfriends for which act he would be praised enormously by his peers and the general public. The young ladies would then be engaged in a fierceful competition for marriage. All these young ladies would also compete in sending their gifts to the young man who was at this stage their prospective husband. The young man in turn would also put on all the items he got from his girlfriends. A young man with many girlfriends is called *ubhayi*. The wearing of all articles from ones girlfriends is called *ukubhayela*. This kind of behaviour would be practiced openly in public without a shred of shame.

3.5.2.4 Initiates

This stage is followed immediately by the stage when the young man has to go for initiation. According to Ndebele customs and practice, this is an important stage in every young man's life in that it acts as a

line of demarcation between childhood and boyhood. When it is time for the initiation custom to take place, every young man of this age has to attend a mountain school. This custom is called "*ukuwela*" in Ndebele. This mountain school lasts for two to three months at the pick of winter. The Ndebele people believe that every child entering adulthood needs to be properly schooled in preparation for adulthood. The main aim of this school therefore is to teach the young man everything about adulthood life and about life in general.

At the end of their stay on the mountain, all young men make a grand return home. It is during this time that beads play a very important role in the young man's life. Immediately after his arrival he receives a set of beadwork clothing from his sisters and also from his girlfriend if he has one. These beadwork clothing are worn during the next few days as the young men move from one homestead to another to make a "grand entering" in each of their classmate's homes by uttering the words "*Sangena ngakwethu sesimasokana!*", roughly translated as "*We enter home as new initiates!*" This followed by them announcing their new names by means of which they will be known henceforth.

A new initiate wears a beaded headband on his clean-shaven head. This headband is about 1 – 2cm wide. It is tailored to fit the head tightly. Just like all other beaded outfits belonging to the initiates all measurements are individualised in that they are taken in advance to ensure a perfect fitting. The headband commonly has a tiny boarder on both sides and the white colour is normally favoured for these boarders. The rest of the headband consists of black beads with sporadic typical Ndebele shapes. An artist is however free to choose any other colour besides black. It is common for the headband to have some kind of a shape right in front of the forehead.

On the neck the initiate wears two or three whoops. These are more or less 2 cm in diameter and are not built to fit tightly but usually hang

New initiates (*amasokana amatjha*) after completion of the *ukuwela* course arriving ready to announce their new names in a praise poem.

NDIBELE — A PEOPLE AND THEIR



their villages and while the *abakwetha* recover from their

loosely on the neck for easy removal. Usually they are of different colours so that there can be a noticeable contrast of colours.

On his upper body the initiate wears a batch of white beads crossing them on both his shoulders to form an x-sign on his chest and at the back known in Ndebele as **izipha** (plural) and **isipha** (singular). It has not as yet been ascertained why this set of beads is always white. The beads themselves are never mixed and are all of the same size. The same method of construction is used in making these batches, being the stringing of beads to formulate one course of string long enough to go around the whole body. These strings are then gathered into a batch big enough to fit into one hand.

On the waist the initiate again puts on 2 – 3 whoops sometime none. These whoops are slightly bigger in size than the ones worn on the neck. These even fit tighter on the body. Sometimes it becomes necessary to smear the whole body with fat for the easy gliding of the whoops as one puts them. Again attractive colours are used with the colours white, powder blue, black and royal blue being some of the favourites. The style of constructing these whoops is the same as the one used earlier. Beads are strung onto a cotton string and then twisted round and round the grass ring.

The arms are also dressed up in small whoops, two to five on each biceps. The cuffs may also receive a small armband each. Just below knees will be small beaded rings of about half a centimetre in diameter. Here extreme caution is exercised in making sure that the fittings are accurate. This is so because the rings must never glide downwards when the initiate walks or runs about. To complete the whole set the initiate puts on a Ndebele blanket called *unokhethwako* when walking about. *Unokhethwako* will be taken off when the initiate takes the floor to announce his new name in a long praise poem giving a poetic narration his heroic triumphs in front of the whole community. It is during this performance that the young initiate has

to look his best in his complete attire. They take the stage one after the other and parade for everyone to see and enjoy.

3.5.3 Divine spirits

It is an indisputable fact that beads also play a significant role among Ndebele divine spirits and healers. In fact it is believed that beads carried around by a traditional healer have powers of driving away bad spirits and ailments.

Beads and beadwork articles worn by traditional healers are somewhat different from those worn by ordinary people in that the healer is dictated upon by his or her ancestors on what beads to wear. Also, the healer's beads are not necessarily for self adornment but for healing purposes or better communication with the land of spirits or ancestors.

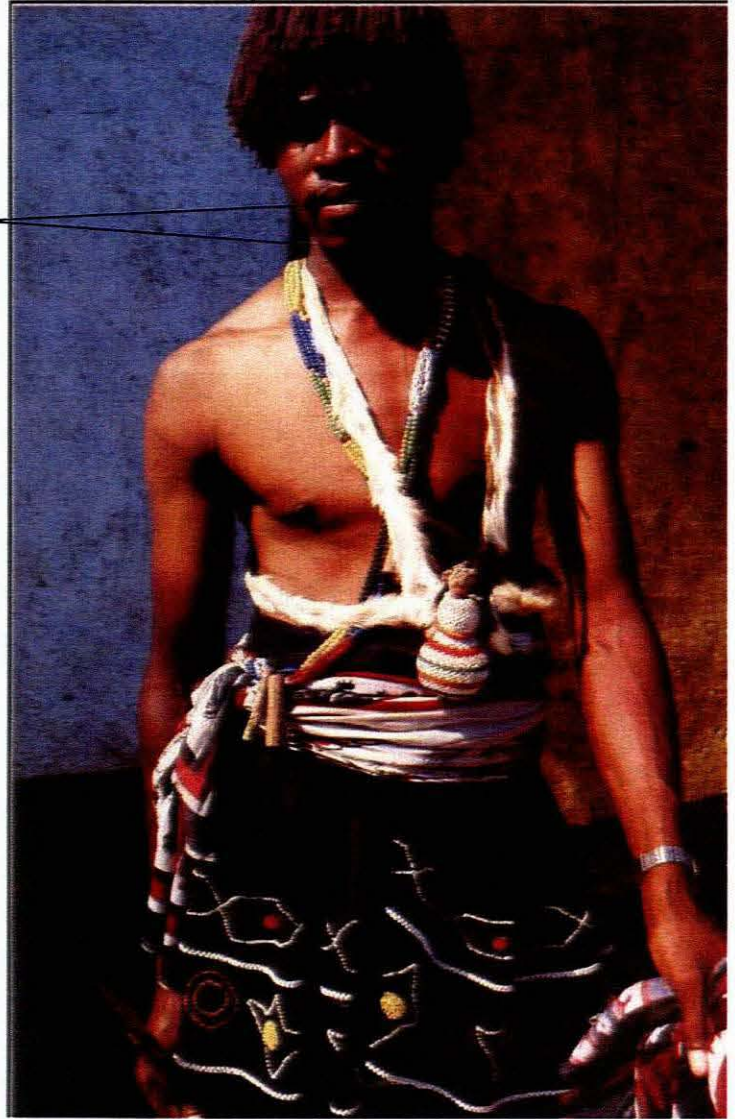
It is very common among the Ndebele people for one to find a *sangoma* or *inyanga* clad in bead articles from head to toe. Normally a *sangoma* grows his or her hair and allows it to be very long and usually uncombed. This type of hair is referred to as "*umyeko*" in isiNdebele, literally meaning "hair that has been left alone to grow long". The hair is then spun into singles, exactly in a Rastafarian style. A *sangoma* may then choose to have the back of the head receiving white embroidering to formulate a sort of a protruding cradle. Occasionally others may prefer to have the whole head receiving embroidering. White beads are preferred most of the time. On the whole, the favourite colour of the *isangoma* and *inyanga* is the white colour. The white colour stands for purity and the red colour stands for blood, communicating the living with the land of the ancestors. The white colour among the *sangomas* is also thought to be associated with purity and clear vision. It is perhaps for this reason that animals

Even traditional healers cannot escape the use of beads. Below is a picture of an isangoma dressed up in his beaded attire believed to have a healing effect.

Long hair called *umyeke* sometime beaded

Crisscrossed necklaces called *isithukulo*

Black beaded sangoma skirt
Called variously as *ivadla*,
isikotjhi or *isikhweji* worn by
both genders.



slaughtered by *sangomas* are most of the time white in colour, for example, chickens and goats. Occasionally the beads are a mixture of white and red. Red is thought to represent blood. Any serious unity or communion performed by *sangomas* will always involve slaughtering of an animal.

Around the neck a *sangoma* may wear several types of necklaces. A necklace made out of white beads only is very common. So is the one made out of a mixture of red and white beads. This necklace is normally not sophisticated. Normally the beads are strung on a piece of a strong enough thread. It could be a simple stringing of white beads or the beads may follow a definite pattern alternating the red and white beads.

A *sangoma* wears beads on several conspicuous parts of his or her body. Stringed beads are always found crisscrossing his or her upper body. Sometime beads worn on the upper body may slightly be a size or two bigger than the ordinary size. These are normally accompanied by strips of goatskin also crisscrossing the upper body.

The cuffs, ankles and the waist are always neatly wound up by means of a set of red and white beads. This enables anyone who comes across a *sangoma* to recognise it at once and also to notice that this is a special being that needs to be accorded a special treatment in the society.

On the lower body, both male and female *sangomas* wear a skirt which may be red or black. Various names have been assigned to this type of wear depending on which corner of the Ndebele land you come from. The most popular names for this wear are *ivadla*, *isikhweji* or *isikhoji* in isiNdebele, the names vary from one region to another and there may be more names. Normally this skirt consists of two or three overlapping layers. At the bottom of each layer the skirt has a beadwork finishing called *umtjhayelo* in isiNdebele. This is a strip of

beadwork that goes right round the layer forming a sort of a trimming. It is always white in colour and is between 1-2 cm wide. On the general body of the skirt, sometime sporadic spots may be chosen where bigger grains of beads may be worked on to form a beautiful finishing.

3.5.4 Beads in grown up men

As if it is by law, grown up men do not participate a lot in the wearing of beads. Only a few items worn by men are beaded. Amongst them could be a necklace made up of a string of average size beads. Occasionally, the wrist would be having tiny beaded strings around it.

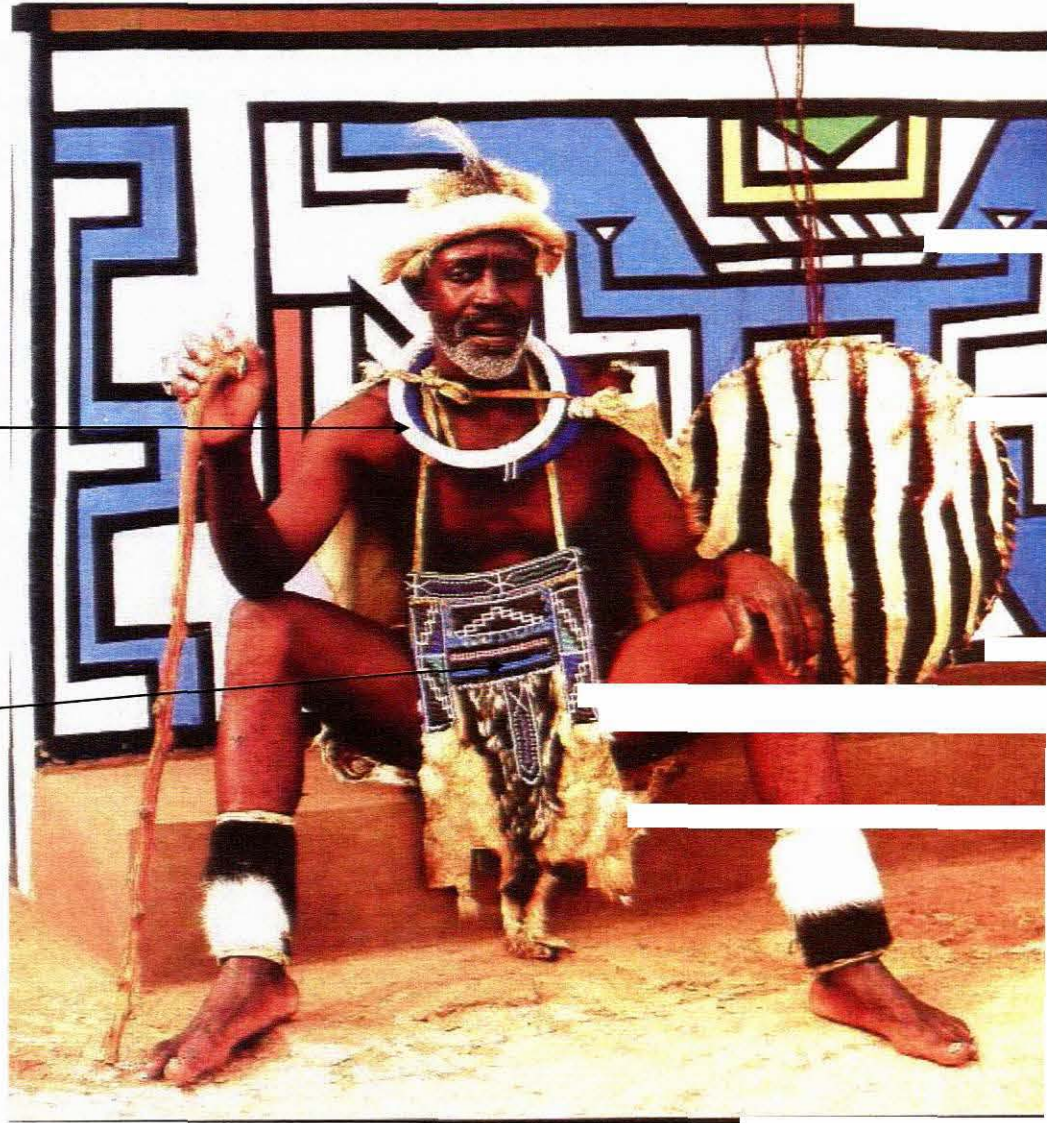
The wearing of lots of beads by grown up men is found during initiation period. During this period, the young initiate's father would be found wearing what is called *iporiyana*. This is a rectangular animal skin shaped to cover the chest often with tassel ending at the bottom. This is a very important piece of outfit among the Ndebele people. It indicates that the wearer is now a matured married male, possibly with a son among the initiates and is a well respected person in the society.

An *iporiyana* is conferred onto its owner by his friend and age mate at a special function. It is tailored to have a strap for hanging it on the neck. The upper part of *iporiyana* is the one that receives a lot of beadwork. Normally it will consist of a belt-like beading stretching from the left to the right. Chevrons are a common feature of this type of wear occasionally with a netted finishing.

A Ndebele grown up man sitting in front of his homestead displaying his iporiyana. This outfit can only be worn by matured men who are married and have reached a certain age.

**Isirholwani
sentanyeni.**

Iporiyana



3.5.5 Conclusion

From the above discussion it is noticeable that the lifestyle of the Ndebele people is intertwined with beads and beadwork. In Ndebele the wearing and use of beads and beadwork cuts across gender and age. It is further noticed that all traditional activities have in one way or another beadwork acting as a core of all activities.

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# CHAPTER 4

## 4.0 DESIGNS, SHAPES AND COLOURS

### 4.1 Introduction

**F**or every traveller in our country, be it a South African, a tourist or just a passer-by on a business trip, it is almost impossible to miss the colourful mural art found on Ndebele houses as one travels across the provinces of South Africa. Of late this art has become so popular that it has become fashionable for it to be used even on government buildings and a variety of other buildings that are centres of attraction. Many, especially learned people, think of this art as resembling “geometrical drawings”. The Ndebele people themselves refer to it as “*amagwalo*” which is a word derived from a Ndebele verb “*gwala*” meaning to draw or make a drawing. These drawings are found both in mural art as well as in beadwork. There is no evidence in existence that can be used as tangible proof that the early Ndebele people ever studied geometry during their time. It is for this very reason that it cannot be explained with convincing reasons why these Ndebele figures resemble geometric figures. Some scholars believe that Ndebele artists always draw figures about something that seems to fascinate them at the time and the one that seems to be a symbol of fashion and is the talk of the town. There is therefore a strong belief that earlier drawings, that is, drawings before the Ndebele encountered any geometric drawing might have been something totally different from the present ones. The fact

that the Ndebele people did not have any means of preserving their earlier drawings, many significant drawings that could have shared light into the past life of the Ndebele people unfortunately died out with time. We are therefore in no state to can tell how the early Ndebele drawings looked like unfortunately. We can only make wild speculations.

## **4.2 Design/Shape types**

A Ndebele bead artist is someone, usually a female, who has mastered the art of employing the different types of designs and shapes to produce an article very attractive to the eye. This is professionalism attained over a long period of time and certainly through a lot of practice and experience gained over a long period of time. There are several shapes used by Ndebele people and there is no piece of beadwork where all have been employed at the same time. It takes talent, professionalism and diligence for any artist to come out with a piece of art that can take someone's breath away.

### **4.2.1 Straight line**

Designs that are in a form of a straight line feature frequently in Ndebele beadwork. This type of design is based on a geometric line as defined in mathematics. It is a design wherein beads have been in spanned in a linear fashion so as to form a strip that appears as a straight line. This is a style employed in beadwork to produce beadwork which is mostly belt-shaped.

For a belt-shaped design to be managed with ease, the artist must first determine the width of the belt. Once the width has been determined, the artist will continue working on the length until the required length has been achieved. The artist uses a needle with a long thread to pick up grains of beads usually with the same colour. It is common for the artist to maintain one colour and cover a large portion of her work. These areas are punctuated by sporadic smaller designs that are typically Ndebele in appearance.

Working from the base line the second line is knitted neatly next to the first. The technique is so well refined that no threads are allowed to show on the sides or hang loosely. The difference between an amateur and a professional is seen here. The amateur work will be untidy, uneven and rough showing no mastery over the beadwork art. On the other hand, the professional will show smoothness and flow and extreme tidiness. These are the small details the adjudicators capitalise on during competitions.

Extreme care is taken in ensuring that a regular width is maintained throughout. To make sure that this does happen, the artist accurately counts the number of beads in each row. For purposes of style and splendour, the artist may prefer to use a lesser number of beads in some rows and in some use slightly more. This style causes the beadwork to assume a different shape. This is a shape that somehow differs from the ordinary and is catchy to the eye.

#### **4.2.2 Horizontal shapes**

The bigger bulk of the shapes created by a Ndebele bead artist appear to be shapes that are horizontal. These include houses, which feature frequently in this form of art as well as furniture and a variety of other objects.

The technique used by a bead worker in depicting a horizontal object somehow differs from the one used by an artist using a pencil or brush. In beadwork it seems to be much more involved. Here the technique is to start by using one colour of beads as if a straight-line design is employed. The artist has to have good imagery of the shape to be created especially the size. It should be remembered that most of the time there is no sketching of the figure in advance. The bead worker must for this reason have a very clear vision of what the final product should look like. The shape is in the mind of the bead worker.



To depict a horizontal line well, the bead worker uses contrasts of colours. First she uses the colour that she has chosen as the base or background of her work. The white colour used to be very popular with the early bead workers. Depending on the size of the object, the artist would start by using her base colour to form a belt of a particular thickness. The artist after carefully considering her options will pick a spot where the horizontal line will start. She makes this by suddenly changing colour by choosing a colour that will form a strong contrast to the original colour she was using.

Depending on how thick the line should be, she will maintain that same colour for a few more rows. After attaining that, she may opt to move back to the original colour or use a different colour all to gather. This method will be repeated for as long as there are horizontal lines needed. From a naked eye this arrangement of beads looks like a watertight horizontal line. Lines like these are a characteristic feature of most Ndebele beadwork.

#### **4.2.3 Triangles**

Triangles are some of the shapes a Ndebele bead maker prefers to use in order to decorate her work. They come in upright shapes or inverted ones. They may also come in a variety of sizes. What is of utmost importance here is the skill employed by the artist. The skill involves accurate centering of a triangle, size maintenance and shape.

Creating a triangular shape on beadwork is not as simple as drawing one on a piece of paper. It requires precision and accuracy in ones calculations. In other words the bead worker has to predetermine a number of things. Among them is the size of the triangle including its height, the number of triangles required, whether or not the triangle is going to be upright or inverted, as well as deciding on whether or not the triangles are going to share the same colour etc.

If for instance the bead worker wants to have only one triangle, she will decide whether to have it on the left, centre or right-hand side. Suppose she needs it at the centre, she will then have to find the centre by counting the bead grains forming the beadwork and divide these by two to arrive at the centre. Thereafter she needs to know how long the base of the triangle is going to be. From the centre of the beadwork, she counts a *predetermined number of grains* to the left, and again from the centre move the same number to the right. These beads will be given a different colour that is going to be the colour forming the border of the triangle. As she proceeds with her embroidering of the next line the beads forming the border will be one less on both sides. This will ensure the tapering of the hands of the triangle towards each other up until the apex is reached. At the same time the inside of the triangle shall have been covered with a suitable colour. If the triangles are more than one, the above-mentioned process is repeated the number of times required.

If an inverted triangle is created, the above-mentioned process is reversed. After the centre of the article has been secured, the artist uses only one grain with a different colour to mark the apex of the triangle. As she proceeds to the next row the beads on the inner side of the triangle will increase steadily with one or two beads each time. This will cause the two arms to move away from each other up until the required size of the triangle shall have been attained. Again the inside of the triangle can be filled in with any attractive colour suitable and in line with Ndebele decorations.

The final product is always of two types. First, the triangle may end up as an equilateral isosceles triangle. This is a type of triangle with all sides having the same length and all angles having the same magnitude. This sight is very appealing to the eye. Here upright triangles may be next to each other or an upright triangle alternating with an inverted triangle. Second, the triangle may be a right-angled

triangle with the other two angles having a magnitude of forty-five degrees each. Save for the hypotenuse the other two sides are always equilateral. This triangle is also one of the favourites. These angles may all face in one direction or be vertically opposite to each other.

#### **4.2.4 Squares and rectangles**

Squares and rectangles are by far the most popular shapes found in Ndebele beadwork. The rate at which these are used in Ndebele decorations tempts one to think that they are easy to make. Could it be that in the real Ndebele world squared or rectangular figures are actually more than all the other shapes? The only challenging task in creating a squared or rectangular figure is the centering of the figure. Centering follows the same pattern as was seen in triangles.

What makes the squared or rectangular figures to be somewhat simpler in creating is the fact that there is no subtracting or adding of beads involved in their creation. Once it has been established as to how many beads are needed in forming either a horizontal or a perpendicular line, the same number of beads is retained up until the figure is completed. Except for when the bead worker chooses to go for a more sophisticated style like wherein the square or rectangle has other shapes inside it. This happens for instance when the bead worker decides to depict a house that is rectangular in shape. She may decide to depict the rectangular shaped windows and arch doors. If this should happen, certainly a lot of calculation is going to be involved. It is needless to state that such a complicated figure can only be attempted by a matured and well experienced bead worker. The emphasis of beadwork is always on beauty. Therefore any figure attempted should be there to further beatify the work and not do the opposite. Attempts are therefore made to maintain high standards at all costs all the time.

#### **4.2.5 Chevrons and v-shaped figures**

Chevrons and v-shaped figures are often found beautifying Ndebele beadwork pieces. These figures are normally used side by side next to each other. The technique used in their creation is based a lot on the creation of triangles. The common factor they share with triangles is their slanting nature either to the left or to the right.

A decoration consisting of chevrons will more often than not be separated by a v-shaped figure. The v-shaped figure is usually at the centre of the beadwork article and always divides the article into two equal halves. The portion on the left will have chevrons slanting to the left and the portion on the right-hand side will have chevrons slanting to the right. If the v-shape is upside-down, the order of the chevrons takes a converse arrangement of the order discussed earlier.

The first pillar of chevrons is the vital one because all other measurements are based on it. The usual tilting of chevrons either to the left or to the right is at a fort-five degree angle. In order to attain this tilting, the bead worker has to count a certain required number of beads on the first row up to a point where she wants the first pillar of the chevron to be. Thereafter, she immediately changes colour to the colour she wants the chevron to be. This new colour will be maintained to cover the required width of the pillar. Usually the colour of the pillar is a contrast of the background colour. Subtracting one bead away from the pillar ensures that the pillar tilts to the left. Reversing this action causes the pillar to tilt to the right.

Chevrons and v-shaped figures are a big and beautiful attraction. They work well on small articles and used mostly as borders marking either the bottom or the top-most part of the beadwork. Occasionally, the bead worker may choose to use chevrons and v-shaped figures to mark the middle of an article.

#### **4.2.6 Round figures**

Round figures are not a common feature in Ndebele bead making. Even though articles like grass whoops and earrings are round, one hardly finds a round figure depicted on other ordinary beadwork. Round figures are found on rare occasions when the bead worker depicts a car or a bus. She then becomes obliged to depict its wheels as round figures.

A Ndebele bead worker chooses to avoid round figures because it is not easy to make a circle using beads. This is most probably because, in order to obtain a round figure, one would have to go through some intricate calculations. Calculations not engaged in when other shapes are made. Occasionally, some bead workers have been found to improvise by using round buttons for a vehicle wheels. This saved them the trouble of having to design a wheel.

#### **4.2.7 Zigzags**

Zigzags are some of the favourites of a Ndebele bead worker. The reason these are favoured so much is because constructing zigzags is fairly easy. Zigzags are in essence baseless triangles linked together. Just like chevrons, zigzags are mostly used as borders on an article. They can also be used to mark the centre of an article.

Zigzags as designs on a piece of beadwork are never found in very big sizes. The largest are about five to six centimetres and the smallest can be about one centimetre. They mostly occur in two shapes. The first one is wherein the two arms meet at a sixty degree angle before turning into a different direction. These arms will keep on linking to form a chain whose length will be decided by the bead worker. The second type is the one wherein one arm moves tilting to a side up to a required height to meet the other arm and form a sharp angle of about forty-five degrees with the other arm standing in a

perpendicular position. This combination repeats itself several times to form the required chain length.

The technicality involved in the construction of zigzags also involves a lot of calculations. For a zigzag arm to slant towards the right-hand side, it means that the bead worker must gradually increase the number of beads on the left-hand side, each line having one extra bead than its predecessor. For the line to tilt towards the left-hand side an opposite action is necessary.

Zigzags have been found to be used on headbands, chest coverings, belts, blanket borders and many other beadwork articles.

#### **4.2.8 Lozenge**

A lozenge shape is an eight-sided figure. Lines forming this shape meet at a point where they form an obtuse angle of about 120 degrees. These angles are also eight in number resulting into a shape very close to a round shape.

Very few Ndebele bead workers have attempted a lozenge figure. This could perhaps be attributed to the fact that there were no lozenge shapes in the life of the ancient Ndebele people. The sporadic appearances of lozenge shapes in the modern Ndebele beadwork can be attributed to the influence exerted by the modern shapes surrounding the modern Ndebele people. In an attempt to depict the modern life outside, the Ndebele bead worker becomes forced in attempting lozenge figures.

Sometimes the bead worker may prefer to weave a lace-like pattern with large holes. These holes can be as big as a two rand coin or smaller. These holes are most of the time lozenge shaped. The bead

worker conveniently avoids the construction of a lozenge shape by opting for a lozenge hole. Such patterns can be found bordering many a piece of beadwork. For an onlooker they resemble a lace finishing on a blanket or gown. They are also a favourite as a finishing for armbands and leg bands.

#### **4.2.9 Perpendicular shapes**

Perpendicular shapes are some of the most common shapes found in every Ndebele piece of beadwork. They are used in depicting an upright figure such as a pole, wall or anything standing upright.

What makes a perpendicular shape to be fairly easy to construct is the fact that the number of beads used are fairly consistent in number as compared to a slanting figure. After the bead worker has established how many beads are necessary before and after the figure, the same number is repeated over and over again. Care is always taken that the borders of the perpendicular shape are always parallel to the sides of the main article. The beauty of a perpendicular shape lies in the parallelism formed by its own borders with the borders of the main article.

Perpendicular shapes are found in figures depicting high walls of a building, figures like electric poles as well as tree stems. Windows in a house and all other box shaped figures commonly require perpendicular shapes.

#### **4.2.10 Diamond-shaped figures**

One other very popular figure forming part of the Ndebele shapes is a diamond shaped figure. Almost no beadwork piece can reach its completion without a couple of diamond shapes forming part of its making. In formulating a diamond shaped figure the artist uses the same technique employed in creating vertically opposite triangles.

Here accurate calculations and measurements are necessary. After determining the exact spot where the diamond must be positioned, the bead worker will start and formulate the bottom-most point of the diamond shape. She does this by suddenly changing the colour she was using this far and have one grain of bead with a different colour. It is common to choose a very bright colour, brighter than all the colours she has used this far. The beads designated to form the diamond shape will be increased in the next row from one to two and three in the third row and so on until the required width has been achieved. Thereafter a reverse action is going to take place whereby the beads are going to be decreased gradually until there is only one bead of that colour on the last row.

A Ndebele bead worker will more often than not create her beadwork piece to consist of two big halves. These two halves are almost always divided in the middle of the piece by a diamond shaped figure. A diamond shaped figure is therefore used mainly as a divider or partition. On the other side of the diamond shape, the bead worker merely repeats all the designs found on the first half of the beadwork piece in a reverse order.

As to how many diamond-shaped figures are necessary on any one piece of beadwork depends entirely on the taste of the bead worker. However, a mature bead worker always makes sure that her work is kept uncluttered with diamond-shaped figures. Too many diamond-shaped figures may still away the limelight from the actual main figures of the artwork.

The size of the diamond-shaped figure also plays a very important part. Its size in relation to the other figures on the beadwork piece should indicate that the duty of the diamond shape is just to act as a divider. The bead worker may for instance choose to have three diamond-shaped figures in a row with the middle one either bigger than the rest or smaller than the rest. In order to create this pattern



successfully, a bead worker needs very good skills in beadwork handling as well as accuracy in calculations because the figures are not created at the same level. The bigger ones always start earlier and end latter, while the smaller figures start latter and end earlier. It is also important that the distance between the figures must be totally maintained. This is attained by literally counting the number of beads in between the figures.

The colour of the diamond shape is always meant to be an eye catcher. For this reason it will always have a colour that is much more conspicuous than the rest of the colours used in and around that area. Its colour always ensures that it is not missed easily. More sophisticated bead workers may prefer to add an extra trimming with a different colour around the diamond-shaped figure over and above its original colour.

### **4.3 Typical Ndebele style**

The Ndebele beadwork has over the years developed into a style that can be referred as their “own” through which their beadwork can be identified among many other nations. The style is so unique that beadwork lovers can identify and differentiate Ndebele style even if it were to be placed among other Nguni beadwork pieces.

Two main features can be identified as forming typical Ndebele style. First, are the favourite figures the Ndebele people prefer having on their mural art as well as their beadwork. The different types of popular Ndebele figures have already been discussed at the beginning of this chapter. A Ndebele artist never deviates from these shapes. It is also true to say that the Ndebele people share some of these shapes with their sister Nguni groups. Second, is the matching and mixing of colours as will be seen in the next few pages of this chapter. Ndebele people follow a strict pattern in mixing and matching colours. The proportion in which these colours are used is also very significant.

The next few paragraphs will detail how the Ndebele people achieve this identity of their own in beadwork:

#### **4.3.1 Adjacent structures**

The concept adjacent structures, refers to a concept used in art or beadwork study. It refers to a situation wherein shapes in a piece of beadwork are constructed next to each other so as to evoke a particular meaning or imagery. In beadwork analysis it is used to refer to a situation wherein figures or shapes are used on a piece of beadwork to create a specific imagery that serves as an identity or style of an individual or individual group.

The traditional Ndebele received no formal schooling on the beadwork art. Although there was no formal schooling, the Ndebele traditional bead workers were taught this style of art, the style that became so famous that no Ndebele bead worker either consciously or not, would dare deviate from it.

##### **4.3.1.1 Perfect adjacent structures**

Perfect adjacent structures are encountered when like shapes of the same size are found to be having the same base and are at the same level with each other on a piece of beadwork. This happens when the bead worker chooses to create the shapes and make them all face in one direction. This is a very popular way of creating an attractive finishing of a belt-like piece. In this case all dimensions of the various figures lined up side-by-side formulate a “perfect” similarity hence the name perfect adjacent structures.

It has been observed that whenever Ndebele bead workers create a shape or figure, they tend to choose one type only and

create at least two like figures. In other words, it is very unlikely that one could for instance find a triangular, rectangular and a round shape all standing next to each other. She prefers figures that are the same. For this reason, perfect adjacent structures happen to appear frequently in Ndebele beadwork.

Again, it is very seldom that a Ndebele bead worker would create a shape or figure to stand alone. If a figure stands alone this can only be attributed to two reasons. The figure is either both too big and cumbersome to be repeated on the piece of beadwork or the figure marks the centre of the beadwork piece.

#### **4.3.1.2 Coupling of figures**

Of all styles used by a Ndebele bead worker, coupling of figures appears to be the most favoured. There is hardly any piece of beadwork where this style has not been employed.

Coupling of figures is a style normally employed by bead workers where figures always appear in two's. For instance, it is common practice that if a figure has been created at the beginning of a piece of beadwork, its mate is always created at the end of the piece. However, there are some restrictions that seem to accompany the coupling of figures. First, the measurements of the two figures have to be equal in all respects. The second figure must face on the opposite direction. Secondly, regarding colour, the bead worker is free to maintain the same colour or give the second figure a different colour.

#### **4.3.1.3 Back-to-back coupling**

Back-to-back coupling is yet another style favoured by Ndebele bead workers. This refers to a situation where there are two figures that are exactly the same and with the same measurements and all, except for the fact that the second figure is facing in the opposite directions. This is common with right-angled triangles, figures resembling steps, chevrons etc. This means that if the first figure is facing towards the left-hand side, the second will face towards the right-hand side.

It is noted here that round figures and squares cannot form back-to-back coupling because they have no front or backside. Back-to-back coupling can be formed by figures that are closely back-to-back to each other or they may be separated by another figure totally different from the figures forming back-to-back coupling.

#### **4.3.1.4 Vertically opposite coupling**

Vertically opposite coupling is encountered from time to time in Ndebele beadwork. This refers to a situation where there are two figures that are exactly the same and with the same measurements and all, except for the fact that the second figure is on top of the first one such that features that are the same in these two are facing each other.

It is common to use vertically opposite coupling to indicate the point where the beadwork piece can be divided into two equal parts. Vertically opposite coupling is however not restricted to this situation because situations can be found where vertically opposite coupling does not necessarily form a demarcation line.

#### 4.3.2 Rhythm and rhyme

Beadwork is by its nature a work of art and thus has its emphasis on aesthetic. For this reason a bead worker always tries her best to appeal to the eye of the potential appreciator of art. Therefore, to enhance the beauty of her work, she also employs rhythm. This term is normally used in poetry and very seldom in painting and beadwork. Experts of art, however, do use rhythm both to judge and classify beadwork and other works of art.

In an attempt to throw more light in this subject Brooks et al, (1975: 2) writes:

***Rhythm is, we know, the repetition in time of a perceptible pattern. The pattern may be visual, as in the flashing of a light or the advance and retreat of waves on the beach, or it may be a pattern or repetition not in time but in space – we sometimes even speak of the rhythmic elements in a scene or a painting.***

From the above quotation, it becomes evident that rhythm does exist even in painting and is used by the artist to further intensify the beauty of her piece of art. For the mere fact that the bead worker places her shapes at strategic places, these are meant to set off a conversation with the eye of a potential appreciator of art. The regular occurrence of carefully selected shapes becomes part of the beauty of the piece of art.

An artist finds it very difficult to express her emotions properly without the use of rhythm. It is for this reason that Brooks et al, (1975: 2) writes:

***Rhythm is a principle of all life and all activity and is, of course, deeply involved in the experience of, and the expression of, emotion.***

Rhythm will always drag along its twin sister rhyme. Rhyme always has the effect of creating an artificial comfort zone in which the appreciator of art will feel lulled. The relationship found between the shapes at the beginning of a piece of artwork, middle and the end could be likened to a baby cradle when swinging to and fro.

Cuddon, (1979: 572) in his description of rhyme says that rhyme:

*... echoes sounds and is thus a source of aesthetic satisfaction. There is pleasure in the sound itself and in the coincidence of sounds, and this pleasure must be associated with the sense of music, rhythm (q.v.) and beat; the pulse sense which is common to all human beings.*

This 'aesthetic satisfaction' can only be attained through rhyme which itself has sweet results that can be likened to music.

#### **4.4 The different periods of the Ndebele as marked by colours**

An overview of favourite Ndebele colours over the ages clearly indicates that different generations had their own favourite colour that was dominant during their period. In order to make justice to the study of the Ndebele colours, it is therefore most appropriate to subdivide the various generations into 'periods'. A close scrutiny of these periods indicates that the entire period can be subdivided into three periods, the classical, the intermediate and the modern period.

##### **4.4.1 The classical period**

The classical period refers to the farthest known remote period where the Ndebele people started to establish themselves as a nation. It is a period so far back in history that no one of the present generation can

say in precise terms when this period was. Present day scholars can only make rough estimations of the year. According to one historian called Kruger, (1983: 33) this period must have been earlier than the year 1500. It is estimated that this period stretches up to the early 1930's. In an attempt at describing this period Kaufmann, (1999: 2) says:

***Very early beadwork was almost monochromatic, white with contrast provided by lace-like patterns in negative space... this early style which may date to the early decades of the century...***

Life during this time was characterised by unrests, wars and simple traditional life. The Western form of dress was not yet popular and the traditional Ndebele people were still anchored to their forefathers' form of dress. Samples of beadwork that survived the rough times and made it into the present period show simplistic and non-sophisticated style. This means that the art of beadwork among the Ndebele people was still at its infancy. Certainly a long road was still lying ahead before the present standards could be attained.

It is an undeniable fact that all language groups falling under the Nguni group of languages are generally fond of the white colour. The white colour has certainly been seen to play a very important part among the Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and of course the Ndebele. Although some of the Nguni languages have shown some signs of gradually moving away from the white colour, others have clung to it like magic. Here the Xhosa people can be singled out as a good example of the latter group. Up to today the traditional Xhosa people still whitewash their huts and are extremely fond of white beads. To the Xhosa people it makes no difference even if all the huts in the village are white. A traditional Xhosa person does not care even if every little piece of beadwork he or she is dressed on is white.

The classical period attire was dominated by white beads in all respects.

Umdereso headband  
decorated with 10c  
coins.

Isibhukwana, a  
small knop-kerrie  
used for dancing.

Amaphotho.

Idzila.

Isisekelo.





The Ndebele people emerged from the classical period with white being their favourite colour for both mural art and beadwork. This was perhaps a depiction of vast tracts of unoccupied land and the absence of present conglomeration of town or city buildings. More than eighty percent of all beadwork ornaments of this time were made out of white beads. This is not to say that other colours did not at all play a role during this period. Sporadic patches consisting of colours other than white were also found but played a far lesser role. It is interesting to note that some Ndebele female dress called *amayirhani* have retained the pure white colour to date. Therefore, this period can in beadwork be rightfully referred to as “the period of white beads” because of the predominance of the white colour.

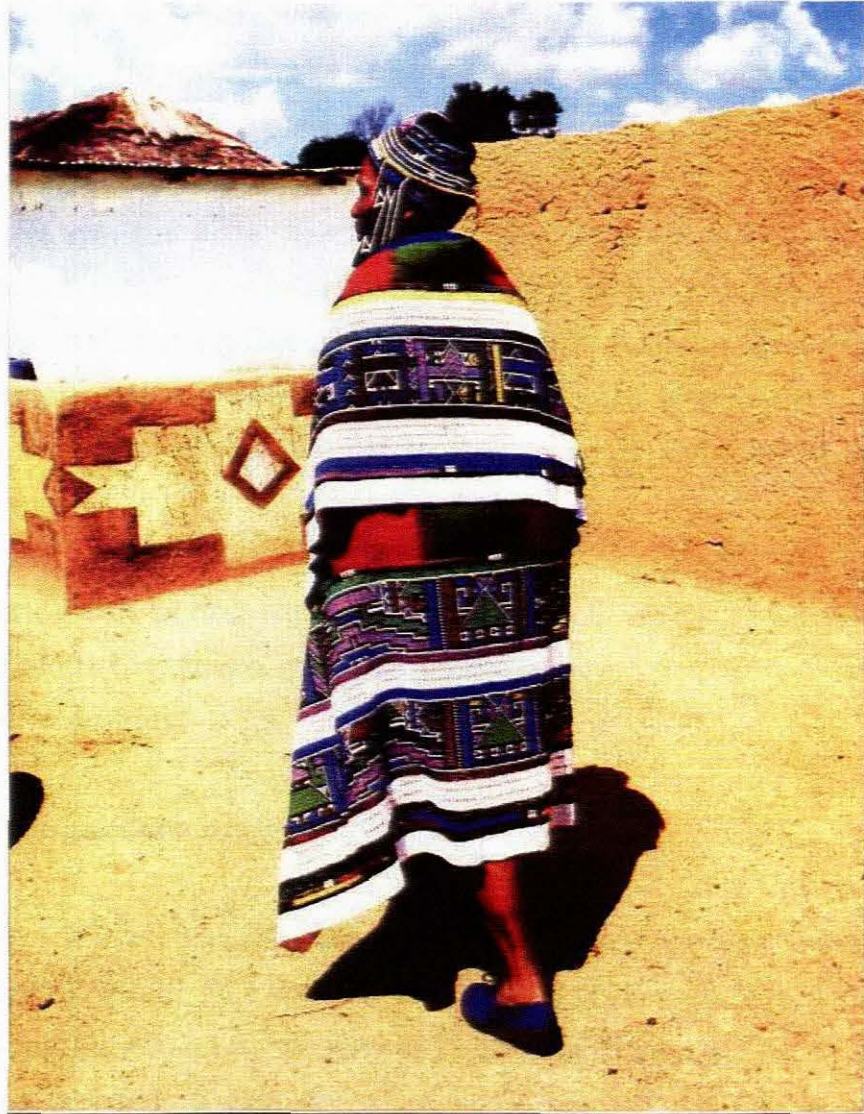
#### **4.4.2 The intermediate period**

The intermediate period starts from the early 1930's to the late 1950's. Colours used in beadwork during this time are a testimony of the fact that this was indeed a different period.

The environment of the Ndebele had changed drastically. Empty tracks of land saw towns with colourful buildings mushrooming in them. The stereotype view of the world through white colour only was about to change. Railways were being built across the country with trains moving up and down. Tarred roads were also a novelty with cars moving up and down. The bigger section of this period falls within the World War II period. Large armoured vehicles pulling cannons were forming part of the everyday sight. This new view of the world affected the Ndebele artist profoundly.

The view that the Ndebele artist is always influenced by what he or she sees around him or her, holds water. This was soon to be seen in works of art such as beadwork. The choice of preferred colours suddenly changed from predominantly white to a mixture of assorted

**A typical Ndebele intermediate period outfit characterised by eye-catching colours and large figures.**



colours. Shapes and figures depicting buildings with arch doors and large pillars and flight of steps now became a frequent occurrence in Ndebele beadwork. Modes of transport such as trains and cars also caught the attention of the bead worker.

This period is characterised by white beads used largely as background. However, what characterises this period is the creation of large shapes and figures of all types that started surfacing and became a factor to be reckoned with. To ensure that these shapes catch the eye, the artist used colours that contrast well with white to form a breathtaking combination that can completely sweep you off your feet. It is during this period that colours such as royal blue, sky blue, green, red and black came to play a very important role. This period therefore appealed a lot to the sense of sight because of its colourings.

Comparing this period with the period prior to it, the classical period can be likened to dawn and the immediate period to the period after sunrise to midday.

#### **4.4.3 The modern period**

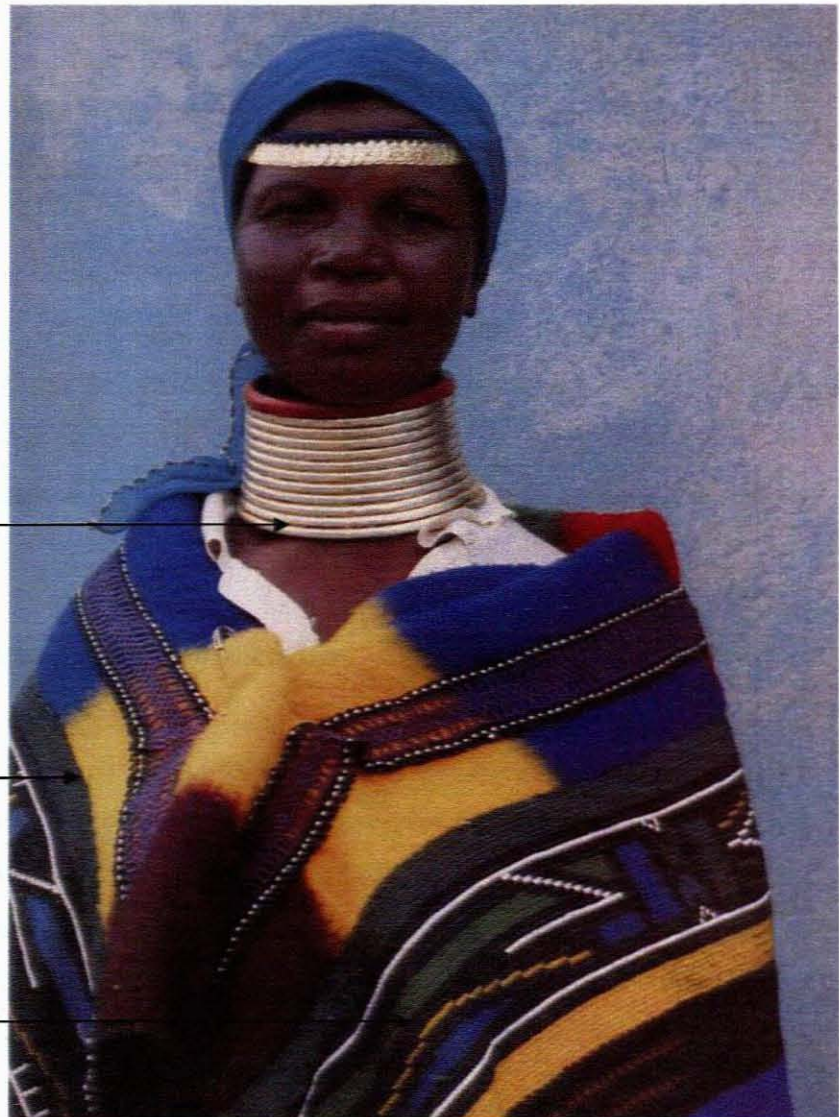
The late 1950's up to the early 1960's have seen the swift entrance of the modern period. The wave of the modern period started in the early 1950's and is still on as we speak. There was absolutely no doubt that this was certainly a new period in beadwork as this was so obvious from the sudden change of colours used in beads. The predominantly white background seemed to have gone over hill and on the rise were black beads. All superstitions associated with the black colour and black beads were dead and buried. Black beads received a huge embracing from Ndebele bead workers as well as the entire youth of the time.

**A Ndebele elderly women wearing the Ndebele favourite multicoloured blanket called *unokhethwako*. The blanket trimming depicts the modern period with black beads occupying the majority of the beadwork piece.**

**Brass neck rings called *idzila* worn by elderly women**

**The popular Ndebele rainbow coloured blanket worn on special occasions only**

**Typical modern era beadwork piece dominated by black beads.**





The huge change of beadwork colours must have taken the older generation by storm. Modern beadwork consists largely of black beads. This is the same space that was previously occupied by white beads. Black beads are used for all background work. It has become fashionable for any piece of beadwork to have its greater percentage consisting of black beads.

This period has retained the relationship between black beads and white beads. Contrasting black beads with white beads always makes a strong statement and is an all time favourite of bead workers. Other favourite Ndebele colours like blue, green, yellow and so on are also used but more as supporting colours. For this reason their appearance is significantly less comparatively speaking.

Comparing the intermediate period with the modern period the most striking difference is the fact that the intermediate period tends to be 'bright' and the modern period 'dark'. However, these two should not be mistaken as compromising the beauty of any piece of beadwork. All the time the beauty of all articles remains unaffected by the change in colour.

#### **4.4.4 Modern innovation substitutes**

Since the early 1980s, a new period of modern innovation substitutes started to take up the place of the original Ndebele attire. This means that, instead of using the genuine original Ndebele material for attire, material like skins, grass and beads, there was a rigorous swing to modern innovation substitutes. These modern innovation substitutes are mostly made up of plastic material.

Modern innovation substitutes have come up with new *itjorholo* improvisation made out of cotton material with frills, lace and plastic decorations.



Different needs could have given rise to these plastic substitutes. First, to build the original Ndebele whoops from grass takes a long time. To complete one set of attire for just one person needs time and patience. The modern time is fast moving and mass production is the order of the day. Plastic substitutes therefore come in handy to alleviate the problem of slow production. This means that machines can now be utilised to manufacture these pieces. Secondly, because of the fact that original Ndebele whoops are heavy and non-removable, the modern Ndebele woman is tempted to go for the light plastic substitutes because they are easier and faster to wear and are removable.

These modern innovation substitutes will not be discussed in detail here because most of them use little or no beads all which thing makes the fall outside the scope of this research. This research is interested in these modern innovation substitutes only in as far as the style, shape and colours used in them are concerned.

Whoops are shaped exactly like the original Ndebele whoops except that they are made out of plastic. They are easily removable because they are hooked or zipped on. Some of them the method "one-size-fits-all" is used. The shapes created are those of Ndebele as well as the size and colours used. Attire like *amaphotho* and *itjorholo* are made out of cotton material with sporadic appearances of beads wherever possible.

#### **4.5 Bead colours**

The fact that the Ndebele people use a variety of colours in their beadwork becomes so obvious the moment one puts eyes on Ndebele beadwork for the first time. However, there is still a controversy regarding the classification and arrangement of colours in their beadwork. Scholars who have made some significant attempts at studying beadwork among the Ndebele could not come out with any

conclusive evidence that could be used as the basis in the usage of colours. It could not be established as to whether or not the usage of colours follows any definite pattern or not. It could also not be established as to whether or not colours used in any piece of artwork can be said to be having a particular interpretation.

In 1993 Maphumulo undertook a study among the Zulu youths wherein he studied the usage of colours in beadwork and their interpretation during courtship. The usage of colours among Zulu youth during courtship is so sophisticated to the extent that it is used for conveying very intricate love messages. Maphumulo found that the usage of colours was not just a haphazard act but it was a carefully planned artistic work. Each and every colour used in any piece of artwork could be attached to and associated with a particular message or carrying meaning that can be associated with a romantic message. In other words, the usage of colours in a piece of beadwork by a Zulu maiden to her lover is the same as the conventional method of communication through letter writing. In his explanation Maphumulo, (1993: 20) writes:

***Different colours and types of beads have symbolic function in traditional courtship. The mixing of certain colours of beads conveys the message to another person... It therefore becomes logical to transmit love messages in a most confidential manner, that is, through beads...***

These findings have recently been corroborated by scholars of substance in this field, among them D B Z Ntuli.

Already as early as 1953, scholars like Becker (1979: 75) had already started probing into the usage of colours by Ndebele bead workers. The latter scholar was fortunate to have come across a source who seemed to have supplied him with vital and accurate information on



this subject. In Becker's own words this oral source "...was the great-great-granddaughter of Chief Nyabela..." (Becker, 1979: 75).

#### **4.6 Interpretation of colours**

In his introductory words Drewal et al, (1998: 17) found that among the Yoruba people of North Africa, various colours represent particular strong points of the individual adorned in that particular piece of beadwork. Put in his own words he writes:

***A number of key concepts – temperament, empowerment, protection, potentiality, desire, wealth, and well-being are associated with beads. (Drewal et al, 1998: 17).***

The significance of bead colours as seen in the above-mentioned quotation can be traced in many other African communities. For instance, unlike is the case among the Zulu people as was revealed by Maphumulo in his study of the usage and interpretation of colours by the youth. In Ndebele the view of the usage and interpretation of colours is a general one because it is a view held by the whole Ndebele nation. Here the bead worker will be expected to be able to show that she has acquired all basic technical foundations which have to do with the mixing of colours. She will be further expected to demonstrate that through the use of relevant variations she can mix colours in a manner that will arouse a sense of enjoyment and enthusiasm among her audience.

All these features are demonstrated in pieces of beadwork that is simple enough to be understood by the members of the audience as belonging to typical Ndebele art. These are identifiable by their small attractive figures that are of Ndebele origin and can be interpreted to mean something.

The fact that the Ndebele people were and are still scattered over tracts upon tracts of land in South Africa, inadvertently results into somewhat varying interpretations of colours in beadwork. Variations found on certain aspects of language are also found in the interpretation of colours. Spoken speech is known to be a natural habitat of speech variations. To have varying interpretations on some aspects of language or interpretation of some words of wisdom or even work of art in any nation is not an uncommon phenomenon. In such cases it is always found that even though there are minor differences here and there but there is a general trend agreed upon by almost everyone. Becker found that most Ndebele people interpret their colours in the following manner:

#### **4.6.1 White beads**

In capturing information on white beads Becker, (1979: 75) writes:

***... white beads were regarded by both the Manala and Ndundza (sic) tribes as the most beautiful of all. White ... stood for goodness, purity, love and protection and was the dominant colour in all the finery worn on religious occasions.***

A white colour among the Nguni speaking people is always associated with positivism. It is associated with daylight, bright future, hope, safety and general cleanliness.

Ndebele initiates called *abakhethwa*, during their period of attending the mountain school always smear their entire bodies together with their sticks and other possessions white. This process is called in isiNdebele "*ukukghwara*". The white colour here signifies the departure from the period of darkness including lack of adult knowledge and impurity associated with

boyhood and the embracing of the new and pure period of manhood and adulthood.

Perhaps it is for this reason that even traditional healers believe a lot in a white colour. In a traditional Ndebele setting, Ndebele people, just like the rest of the Nguni speaking people, every now and then slaughter a goat to communicate with their ancestors. For anyone who wishes to slaughter a goat with the aim of communicating with his ancestors requesting them to either show him the way on how to go about in tackling a particular problem or asking for forgiveness or fortunes, the goat will always be white in colour. Even if it is a chicken, a white chicken is a standing prescription for a ceremony of this nature.

It is perhaps because of the above-mentioned reason that a traditional Ndebele person would have the larger part of his or her beadwork consisting of white colour because white is always associated with luck.

In a study carried out by Xulu, (2002: 20) for her Masters degree at the University of Zululand, she quoted Levinsohn who also pointed out to the positive atmosphere with which the white colour is received. Levinsohn, (1984: 84) is known to have written that:

***White beads ...always convey a positive message; love, purity, goodness, happiness, virginity or good luck.***

Therefore, a lady wearing white beads does so with confidence, knowing very well that there is no possibility of her to be received negatively or of being associated with bad luck.

#### **4.6.2 Green and yellow beads**

Becker, (1979) speaks about green and yellow beads as having a very close relationship and therefore falling into one stream of meaning. This fact cannot be easily refuted because colour mixers agree that yellow is a product of mixing green with white. Becker further explains that whilst some colours are associated with “pleasant connotations”, others have negative, unhappy and evil situations.

The use of green and yellow beads by a Ndebele bead worker is not as elaborate as the white colour. For instance green or yellow is normally not used as background or to cover a large area. The latter colours are normally used to decorate small areas, just to give that floral touch. While green whoops are sometimes found worn by Ndebele maidens, but yellow whoops are almost unheard of. Becker, (1979: 80) found that:

***The greens and yellows were generally ‘good’ through their association with growth in spring, abundance in summer and the harvests in autumn.***

For any Ndebele person, spring is always welcome because it drives away the adversely cold winter conditions and it ushers in green looking sights of green tracts of grazing land and plantations. Green colour therefore represents time for plenty - especially food in the fields. Food that was in the field soon turns yellowish during autumn. After harvesting all storages are full and a person wearing green or yellow colours also represents abundance of food.

#### 4.6.3 Blue beads

The blue colour is one of the favourite colours used by the Ndebele people. There is almost no piece of beadwork or mural art where the blue colour does not occupy a conspicuous position. On the Ndebele multicoloured blanket worn on special occasions, known as *unokhethwako*, the blue stripe is always prominent. For this reason, there is a special interpretation associated with this colour. Becker, (1979: 80) found that:

***The blues were 'powerful' colours, because they were linked with the sea and the sky...***

The wearing of blue beadwork therefore makes a statement about the wearer. It says that the wearer holds a position of power. It says that the power of the wearer can be associated with tempestuous storms in the sea or hurricanes and is as high as the sky.

#### 4.6.4 Opaque red

An opaque red colour is also an important colour in the lives of the Ndebele people. Becker's oral source described opaque red in this fashion:

***Opaque red beads, for example, which resemble blood, might be used to signify strife or heartache, while the transparent ones, being likened to fire or lightning, could hint at anger or host of ominous events. (Becker, 1979: 80).***

If a young girl were to send a piece of beadwork article to her lover using these beads, the meaning attached would be that the young lady is missing him so much to such an extent that her heart is "red" caused by loneliness. Sometimes she would

be meaning that she is not in good health physically. On the other hand, this colour also happens to be the favourite of the traditional healers, *izangoma*. To them it means a very serious undertaking involving blood in it.

#### **4.6.5 Black beads**

Among all African nationalities the black colour is under normal circumstances received negatively. It is associated with sorcery, bad luck, death, widowhood, bad spirits and all evil thoughts. In her study of beadwork among Zulu women Xulu, (2002: 20) found that black beads are associated with negativity even among the Zulu people. She quoted Levinsohn, (1984: 84) who says:

***For instance black beads, isitimane, most frequently mean darkness, gloom, disappointment, or sorrow...***

It is perhaps because of the above-quoted reason that early Ndebele people seem to have preferred white beads to black beads. The belief system of the Ndebele people is such that they make sure to stay away from anything that may be associated with bad luck and that may bring mishaps to their families and to the village at large. But it is said that culture is not static but dynamic. Culture changes from generation to generation. What earlier generations believed in is not necessarily upheld by the modern generations.

Beliefs and superstitions associated with black beads have turned full circle. The modern Ndebele people suddenly seem to accept and accommodate black beads. This cuddling of black beads was noted by Levinsohn, (1984: 84) when he wrote:

***For black... there are several interpretations, which generally fall into two categories, those of either positive or negative content.***

Black beads, therefore, are regarded by the modern Ndebele people as the most favourite colour that can be used for background to express dignity and maturity. For this reason, modern beadwork tends to consist of a big percentage of black beads. Black beads blend well with white beads. Although other colours are also used by the Ndebele people as their favourite but black and white is by far the most favourite combination.

This has overturned the whole belief system about the negativity associated with the black colour. Black colour has now come to represent dignity, reaches, modern and class.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has indicated that the word 'style' can be used when referring to Ndebele beadwork. The Ndebele people have over the years mastered their art and managed to come up with an 'identity' of their own. This identity includes shapes that are favourites of the Ndebele people, figures and colours matched in a specific manner to harmonise with Ndebele taste. In recognising this identity Powell, (1995: 138) writes:

***The Ndebele look has so completely established itself in recent years as the quintessentially African look that people wanting to wear their African credentials on their sleeves have done so by spontaneously quoting, in one way or another, the colourful designs associated with the Ndebele people. (Powell, 1995: 138)***

This entire combination forms a unit found only among the Ndebele people. Many present day artists who have tried to emulate Ndebele drawings, have done so without any great success. Most probably

because of lack of thorough knowledge of Ndebele beadwork and mural art, many thought that it was just an indiscriminate use of geometric figures with unrelated colours. As a result many have randomly drawn geometric figures and coloured them with different colours of their liking. In so doing, not only did they misrepresent Ndebele art but they also missed the pattern involved in making Ndebele drawings. They also messed up the art and technique involved in favourite Ndebele colouring and ratio involved in the use of colours on any piece of beadwork or mural art. Such drawings and figures are not only a poor replica of Ndebele art but are also distasteful and denigrate the Ndebele nation.

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CHAPTER 5

5.0 THE ECO-SOCIO AND CULTURAL VALUES OF BEADS

5.1 Introduction

The discussions in the chapters above have in no doubt indicated the amount of planning and better organisation still needed by the Ndebele people in the successful handling of beadwork.

It has also indicated that Ndebele beadwork is very exclusive in style as was pointed out by different scholars. Most researchers in this field are of the view that what makes Ndebele beadwork so special is the exclusive talent applied by the Ndebele bead worker in planning as well as processing her work of art to the finish. Only a matured artist who is also an expert in beadwork can attain the unique way in which particular colours are chosen and matched in this artistic way. Combining the various shapes into a decorative geometrical arrangement presents the Ndebele people with a unique style of their own that makes them unmistakeable. The geometric shapes themselves play a very important role of expressing ideas and feelings of the Ndebele nation as a whole.

Researchers on beadwork among the Zulu people have established beyond any reasonable doubt that beads are capable of being used as a communicational system similar in principle to a written language. A type of secrete symbolic code is used by lovers for their own romantic communication. The Ndebele people on the other hand do not have a

beadwork system as well developed as that of the Zulu people. Beadwork in Ndebele only carries messages in a broad sort of way. Its communicative power is limited to indicating gender, marital status, age and sometimes role played by an individual.

5.2 The economic value of beads

Studies in beads and bead-products show that the traditional Ndebele people engaged themselves in beadwork for reasons other than economic factors. For the traditional Ndebele person the emphasis was put on self adornment, ritualistic ceremonies and religious significance. Latest studies however, have shown another dimension of beadwork. Schiama and Eicher, (1998: 7) have indicated that early traders used beads a lot as means of long-distance trade. This means that to be involved in beads also means money in one's pocket. Therefore nowadays many centres and institutions keep beads for their economic value.

Carey in an article published and edited by Schiama and Eicher, (1998: 91) writes that:

Beadwork enables a woman to become a wage-earner, by making and wearing massive quantities of personal beadwork and posing for photographs (for a fee). Well known are Ndebele of southern Africa or the Maasai of Kenya; ...

The above quotation indicates clearly how a natural talent and social habit can be turned around and be used as means to put bread on the table. This could even be better intensified and more refined. The ladies can organise the photo taking by themselves, frame and sell them to people who love beadwork.

In her research on Ndebele beads, Whooper found that beads became a blessing to many poor Ndebele communities by boosting them economically

and also by acting as a reliable source of income. In her own words she writes:

In recent years beadwork has also been made for sale in the cities or to visiting dealers, and in this way women in very poor economic circumstances have gained a small independent income. (Whooper, 1988: 3).

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, Ndebele bead workers can make some very fine beaded baby dolls that display miniature examples of the adult woman's wardrobe. These dolls have beaded whoops worn around the neck, arms, waist and legs. These are very attractive and are sold to tourist, bead collectors and lovers of Ndebele beadwork. Items like beaded bottles, brooms and photo frames can also be added to such collections. If these were to be mass produced, small businesses could be formed that could in no time find themselves not only producing for South African consumption but also for export to overseas countries as well.

A doll industry can even be established and be well developed along business lines. The concept of the popular westernised doll called "Barbie" can even be adopted. A Ndebele version of Barbie can be created and be given a popular Ndebele name for a stunning beautiful lady. A name like *Nomhlekhobo* would be very suitable and appropriate for such a doll. This doll could come out with her complete wardrobe of an assortment of Ndebele beaded costumes and be well commercialised. It would be the duty of that particular industry to make sure that the doll is well marketed and that the doll is obtainable in all major toyshops in the country.

The market of such articles is unlimited. This was established by Whooper, (1988: 1) in an article entitled, "The Art of Ndebele Beadwork". In this article he found that the modern Ndebele artist makes use of items such as razor blades, telephone poles and car registration numbers in her beadwork. All these are prospective economy builders.

In her study on the economic value of beads among the Zulu people Xulu, (2002: 18) observed that:

... some modern bead projects found, especially, in KwaZulu Natal are commercial in nature and rake in huge revenue for either the bead makers and mostly the “middle-man”.

The concept of keeping beads for economic purposes has of late been snatched by many Ndebele people who deal with beads. Although many of them do not as yet possess the sophisticated trade methods, there has however been a paradigm shift brought about by the attractive prices offered by buyers of beadwork-products as well as tourists who buy these articles as souvenirs. This type of situation has produced yet another trader whom Xulu, (ibid) refers to as the “middle-man”. Powell, (1995) also noticed that this type of activity was taking place among the Ndebele. According to him this was started by:

... a nationwide self-help scheme which, during the early 1980s, identified the potential of Ndebele beadworking as a way of generating some kind of economy within the depressed areas occupied by the people. ...its representatives made beads available to the women, placed orders for saleable items, then returned on the next round trip to collect the finished products for sale via the organization’s local and international outlets. (Powell, 1995: 120).

These are the people who have the necessary capital and they seize the opportunity to produce flourishing businesses. They pose as a link between the producers of bead artwork and the prospective buyers of beadwork. They afford to go to the Ndebele bead makers and buy bead articles in bulk and negotiate a huge discount. They thereafter inflate their mark-up margin and end up with very large profit margins at the end of the day.

The Ndebele producers of beadwork need to organise themselves better in order to enjoy the fruits of their labour. That is but exploitation and the producers should be protected by legislating this type of industry.

5.2.1 The “middle-man” must be totally cut out.

The Ndebele people possess this God given talent of producing fine beadwork products. The style employed by the Ndebele is their own. So far no claims whatsoever have come up with any idea of the Ndebele beadwork resembling any artwork in the world. This means that it should dawn to all the Ndebele people that this gift can be translated into cash in their pockets. To ensure that they reap full benefit of this talent they should endeavour to keep the benefits of all artworks produced from beads to the Ndebele people. Any trades engaged in with outsiders, be they national or international, should be handled by competent Ndebele scholars whom the Ndebele people shall have produced and who have the Ndebele people at heart.

South Africa is infested with people who pose as a “middle-man” who is also a “good Samaritan”. These are the people who have to be cut out completely. By so doing the Ndebele people will be able to gain handsomely from what is their own. Any person who shows interest in Ndebele beadwork must expect to be handled just like all prospective buyers of Ndebele beadwork products.

5.2.2 Establishment of stalls and art galleries run along business lines are a prime necessity.

Having realised the huge interest shown by art collectors on Ndebele beadwork, stalls and art galleries will have to be built where this form of art will be kept, displayed and sold. Qualified personnel will have to be employed to run these centres strictly along business lines and procedures. The aim should be to make huge returns where not only one individual will gain but the whole district where such centres are

found. This will result in an economic boost to the region as a whole thereby empowering the local community by opening up job opportunities.

5.2.3 A proper advertisement is a prerequisite.

Nowadays not only has globalisation enabled communication to be fairly easy but it has also made international trade possible at very low costs. The onus rests with the individual to network and communicate with relevant sources. In order to be known by outside prospective trade partners one needs to be well advertised. The most cost effective form of advertisement these days is the internet. A construction of an informative webpage linked to web pages of other famous companies is often a very good idea and works like magic.

Therefore, Ndebele people involved in beadwork need to take advantage of the presence of the internet. They should acquire services of people with the necessary knowledge on how to place advertisements on the internet. By so doing, not only will they make their small outlets popular to their immediate prospective buyers but they will also make their products to be known even in places abroad. This has a great potentiality of attracting tourists and prospective buyers from abroad even before they reach our country.

For internal consumption they need to consider advertising on the radio, television, newspapers and all other news media. It is common knowledge that the last mentioned media are very powerful tools of communication and information dissemination. Therefore, advertising on these media would ensure a wide circle of informed prospective dealers. In addition, flyers and leaflets with attractive pictures and full contact details would be a positive contribution towards success if they were to be put strategically at all airports, train, taxi and bus terminals.

5.2.4 Employment of brand name officials

With the beadwork market growing, it will at some point reach a stage where it is going to be necessary to employ people to move around the country. These people's duty would be to ensure that the product is perceived and received positively by outside markets. These are the people who will make sure that first of all, the product is used for what it was intended for. For instance, they will make sure that the product is not snatched by people involved in some covert operations and used for illegal intentions.

Brand name officials protect the product from possible distortions and misuse. Further, they will also run maintenance to make sure that their opponents in the industry do not interfere with their brand name or advertise negatively and unfairly against them. They will further check that the name used for their product is not snatched by some unscrupulous groups who will impersonate the industry and produce substandard material to the disadvantage of the industry. If this were to happen, an irreparable damage would happen to the industry.

5.3 The social value of beads

Beads as a social means of indicating class and status are held at a very high esteem by the Ndebele people. Literature reveals that it is not only the Ndebele people who value beads so much socially. In a study conducted by Carey and edited by Sciama and Eicher, (1998: 89), Carey noted that even among the Zulu people beads play a very important role as a factor in social values. She writes:

Even within one group, such as the Zulu of Natal, there are differing styles and local colour codes; bead colours change with the passage of time and fashion, and it is often possible to give approximate dating.

The above quotation indicates that whilst an outsider may look and appreciate with amazement the colourful beads worn by African people, sometime it takes a deep knowledge of beads to recognise what each style, colour or make stands for. In short, a simple piece of beadwork may not be that simple if it were to be explained to an outsider item after item.

For anyone who wishes to appreciate Ndebele beads well, he or she has to understand that traditionally certain beaded items are worn to distinguish young people from their more senior sisters or brothers. Beads are also used socially to identify Ndebele girls engaged to be married, or to adorn brides and young mothers after the birth of their first children. Among the Ndebele people, special beadwork marks off peer groups of different age-sets while distinctive regalia are reserved for the bride and groom at weddings and for guests closely associated with them.

5.3.1 Beads as used for decoration

Apart from the above-mentioned use, Ndebele people use beads for a variety of social decorations. The Ndebele people are extremely fond of decorations. Sometimes so fond to the degree of being referred to as being "over-decorative" which sometimes tends to be distasteful to people who are non-Ndebele. The forms of beadwork decorations used all conform to the aesthetic tradition established by Ndebele predecessors from time immemorial and these are styles considered to be palatable to the Ndebele people. In Ndebele, considerable concern is also given both to the maintenance of traditional beadwork forms within a culture and to the encouragement of creativity and innovation to the youth to follow suit.

The youth who chose to follow beadwork as a career receive their training from established bead workers within the community. Often the talent is seen as hereditary and is passed on from generation to generation. Most girls are taught from early childhood years. More

often than not creativity and success can be made more complex if linked to a divine ancestral endowment. It is therefore common for some Ndebele bead workers to state that they received their artistic wisdom and creative styles from their ancestors in a dream. Remarks such as these are very common, *“Umsebenzi lo ngawuphiwa bezimu bekhethu. Ngibo abanande bafika kimi ngebhudango”*. This would be roughly translated as, “This trade was given to me by my ancestors. They always come to me in a dream.”

5.3.2 Colour and style restrictions in beads

To some people it may seem that the Ndebele people use colours anyhow in beadwork and that any form of beadwork may be worn by just anyone. However, this is not altogether true. Colour and style in Ndebele beadwork is used with the strictest caution because it has a story to tell. In ordinary social gatherings, it is easy for instance to tell in which age group an individual belongs because of the colours and style in the beadwork he or she has chosen to wear. Young girls who are still virgins will wear pure white beads with pride as this will be an indication of purity and innocence.

A Ndebele young man will receive all sorts of beadwork ornaments from his girlfriend as gifts. During social gatherings, he will put all of them on, called in isiNdebele as *“ukubhayela”*. If he has many girlfriends he puts on all the beadwork ornaments from his many girlfriends for the whole world to notice. This practice used to be an accepted practice for the traditional Ndebele. Young girls would compete by means of beadwork ornaments to try and win over the young man for marriage purposes.

Beadwork known as *imilingakobe* and *umkhala* can only be worn by a woman whose son is at the initiation school at that particular time. No other woman is allowed to dress up in these ornaments nor is

anyone allowed to wear these when it is not an initiation season. It is infuriating these days to see on television young girls who have not

A Ndebele grown up woman wearing a pair of imilingakobe and a headband known as umkhala. These indicate that her son is at an initiation school. No woman is allowed to wear these unless she has a son at an initiation school.



even reached childbearing age wearing these ornaments under the “excuse” of being “in traditional attire”. It becomes worse still, if some ornaments are worn by a wrong gender who happens not to have a slightest knowledge that he or she is in the wrong. Something needs to be done to correct that kind of practice because it is misleading and it offends the owners of that culture.

5.3.3 Symbolism in beads

In an article entitled, “Gender in African Beadwork: An Overview”, Carey in studied beads in Nigeria, Cameroon and Zaire and remarked as follows on symbolism in beads:

The insignia worn by royalty and priesthood in Nigeria, Cameroon and Zaire show clearly how an important man's status is marked and enhanced by his official beadwork. (Sciama et al, 1998: 89).

The process observed by Carey above is more or less the same as the one found in Ndebele. In Ndebele beads found in men attire are used more as a symbol of showing status and social position than being decorative. The king can easily be identified from between his headmen and other officials because of the beads used in his attire. These are worked out to make the king much more conspicuous than the rest of his generals.

5.4 Beads in a changing socio-cultural environment

Modernity and change exert heavy pressure on the originality of Ndebele beadworks. There seems to be more and more swing towards light-heavy ornaments. People seem not to be in favour of the old type of heavy ornaments that do not allow free and quick movements. Traditional Ndebele beaded attire used to be very heavy when worn and it could not be conveniently carried from one place to another. The requirements of the modern world would not favour a Ndebele business lady to be dressed in full

Ndebele attire in a boardroom or conference for instance. Such places require free and easy movements. Sitting on a chair wearing *isithimba* and *amaphotho* with *iinrholwani* (whoops) or *idzila* (neck or leg brass bracelets) on the neck and legs would be a most difficult undertaking for a business lady.

Because of the above-mentioned reasons, the modern world has come up with very interesting innovations. *Isithimba* and *amaphotho* are now made from a very light canvas that is as light as an ordinary dress. *Iinrholwani* are also made from plastic, some with elastic for easy wearing and removal. *Idzila* is no longer made out of brass but plastic coated with a very thin layer of brass or paint.

These innovations are both good and bad news to Ndebele beadwork. They are good because they are a very light substitute compared to the original Ndebele beadwork articles. Like ordinary modern garments they can be easily worn and removed as circumstances require. They are also good because they do not remain permanently on the individual's body like it used to be in the olden days. They are however bad because their mere presence announces the demise of the original Ndebele attire. With the economic factor ever beckoning for such opportunities, we could soon see less and less of the original Ndebele articles from beads with everyone opting for the fast selling product.

If extreme care is not exercised, in a not-so-far future we could see the original Ndebele beadwork being completely overtaken by the newly introduced innovations. All the original type could be reduced to museums and art galleries where they will only serve to tell history.

5.5 The significance attached to beadwork

In an address entitled, "African Literature written in the vernaculars", delivered by Ngcongwane at an event called, "The Annual Festival of African

Arts” the latter quoted a black American scholar, James Weldon Johnson, who is known to have once said:

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognised and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all people is the amount and standard of literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. (Shepherd, 1935: 19).

Although in the above quotation Ngcongwane in his address was particularly referring to written literature but the same can be said about art. Art is a form of measuring the standard and level of development achieved by any nation. If beadwork, therefore, is art, it has the potentiality of plotting the graph of development the Ndebele people have achieved from their early days of civilisation up to the present.

The study has in no uncertain terms indicated that there is a great need for proper analysis and proper documentation of this art. The general impression one gathers about the small museums, handcraft shops and stalls where beadwork can be appreciated or bought is that most of these places still “think small” instead of “thinking big”. This means that most people are only interested in using beadwork for commercial purposes and therefore limit themselves to smaller places of business. Most people who deal with beadwork tend to be interested in the turnover they make rather than the survival of the art and the preservation thereof for future generations.

5.6 Strategic plans for improving beadwork

It would appear that the watchword here is “improvement” all the way. The sad sight of Ndebele beadwork observable all over South Africa needs some

drastic improvements. To ensure maximum speed in improving this form of art, some rigorous steps have to be taken by Ndebele NGO's involving some significant icons in the community who will work in partnership with the government. As a giant step that could ensure a proper and fast development, a beadwork museum is envisaged.

5.6.1 The Ndebele Beadwork museum vision

Ndebele beadwork has reached a stage where its standard should not by any means be allowed to drop to anything lower than what it is at the present moment. To ensure this, the building of beadwork museums is recommended as a proper solution for this.

First, an appropriate physical location should be identified somewhere in the former kwaNdebele region. A sizable building should be erected at this site. Although this building will have to take pretty much of the Ndebele taste of building houses, it should however be equipped with all basic necessities needed in a modern building. The building should for instance have a reliable electric supply as many of the gadgets used here will be electrically driven. Reliable running water is also an important basic necessity. The condition of the roads leading to and from the main road should be impeccable. In South Africa, poor and sometimes dangerous road conditions are a big source of the demise of many tourist attractions.

The building should further have enough storage rooms and other places where all the beadwork not as yet analysed will be safely kept whilst awaiting their turn to be analysed. There should be offices for the administration staff where general administration work is done. There should also be a chamber where qualified technical staff has enough space to work when classifying beadwork strictly according to Information Science standards. There must be a special room fitted with all modern forensic tools manned by an expert in this field for use in the analysis of beadwork. In this room all forensic tests on all

incoming collected beadwork will be conducted so as to capture whatever little data is found on them regarding origin, year of weaving and so on. This information will be kept in a computer data base and will be used to facilitate analysis. Full time fieldworkers should be employed whose task will be to go around the whole country and collect all Ndebele beadwork from the earliest known period to the present. These individuals should also form links with the outside world with the aim of tracking all the valuable Ndebele beadwork which left our country. If necessary, some of the work considered to be of the highest quality should be bought back to be analysed and displayed in the museum with a "not for sale" sign. The building should also consist of a large exhibition hall where beadwork articles will be displayed for the public to visit the museum and view the work at a nominal fee. Revenue generated through this attempt can be reinvested in the further future developments of the centre.

5.6.3 Beadwork associations and competitions

Up and coming beadwork artists need to be well organised. A well-organised association of such artists should be formed supported and maintained financially partly by government. The Department of Arts and Culture is perhaps the most appropriate department to house this association. Some form of competitions, celebrations or exhibitions should be held annually. These could start as regional events where eliminations are held. The top five in order of merit would then be allowed to proceed to provincial and ultimately to national events. Winners can receive sponsorship, cash or bursaries to further their talents in institutions meant for such works of art. A strategic plan must be built around the vision of broadening beadwork into an industry. Attempts must further be made to launch this art in higher education institutions where prospective students can follow a career in this field.

As part of its mandate in developing the industry for up-and-coming beadwork handlers, the Department of Arts, Culture and Tourism could form a partnership with the Department of Education. A month in the year could be identified which could be termed "The beadwork month". During this month all beadwork and beadwork handlers would be celebrated. Such a celebration will ensure that this form of handwork is taken seriously and the public is constantly reminded of the importance of beadwork in the lives of all South Africans. Such celebrations could be further spread to schools where schools could hold their own small celebrations. In so doing the youth will grow up taking beadwork as a serious career that can be followed even at tertiary level. It is my strong belief that such programmes could play a vital role by way of broadening the beadwork industry knowledge in schools.

For the participation of schools in the "Beadwork celebrations", a proposal could be made to the Department of Education for it to support the "beadwork celebrations" through its School Enrichment Programmes Directorate. This is a directorate established and designed specifically to promote the participation of learners in Arts, Culture and Sport.

Learners' increased participation will be achieved through:

- Strengthening arts and culture in the implementation of the curriculum, particularly highlighting the development of indigenous arts and culture activities. Here a historical perspective will have to be considered wherein a historical review is going to be analysed as well as the part played by beadwork. Different stages of development of the community will also be analysed where observations will be made on how the different stages have affected beadwork either positively or negatively.

- **Creating partnerships for development of arts and culture in schools and promoting cultural activities for learners in schools.**

As a strategy for marketing the art of beadwork among the youth some short videos of more or less thirty minutes could be produced outlining career opportunities and organisational structure in the beadwork industry. The youth should grow up with a full knowledge of understanding beadwork and that they can choose careers involving working with beads.

Such videos should be distributed free of charge as broadly as possible, to higher education institutions during the “The beadwork celebrations” as a vehicle for youth to get an in depth understanding of:

- **Job opportunities in the industry**

The aim of introducing beadwork at institutions of high learning should be to produce prospective business people whose aim will be to open up industries and deal with beads on a large scale. The ultimate aim should be to establish trade relations with neighbouring countries, and if possible, with overseas countries as well. This should be the type of industry that will create job opportunities and help the people in its immediate environment to improve economically.

- **A broad overview of key stakeholders**

An industry of this kind will be working with all types of people who have interest in beads and beadwork. Such an industry should therefore have a general knowledge of who these people are and how to locate them. Because these people have interest in this type of art,

their views should always be respected and taken seriously. For any major alterations or deviations from the normal style people are familiar with, all stakeholders will have to be consulted and their views closely analysed. If the outcome of the analysis indicates that the change may have a negative impact on the industry, the move will have to be discontinued immediately. However, if the key stakeholders are impressed with the innovations, production will continue.

- **Channels of information**

As this will be a professional industry, it will be expected of it to have clear channels of communication and information. If a customer were to come looking for a specific piece of beadwork article, this industry through its network of communication will have to be able to sort out the customer's request. By so doing it will be creating a good image of being a reliable dealer.

5.6 The future of beadwork and its part in tourist attraction

The constitution of South Africa supports the equality of all cultures and beliefs and that no culture belonging to anyone may be despised by anyone or group. This is an encouragement enough to the Ndebele people to hold on to what is theirs. The Ndebele people should embrace their God-given talent and hold it as one of the most precious gifts given to them by the Almighty.

This however is not going to happen on its own. The Ndebele people should realise the necessity of keeping this art well and alive for future generations.

Ndebele beadwork is not only important to the Ndebele people but also to all South Africans as a tourist attraction. No where else in the whole wide world can anyone experience the Ndebele bead workers displaying their skill of working with beads except to see them in South Africa which is their natural habitat. First class viewing of Ndebele beadwork will also be found in South Africa. That on its own is a good tourist attraction both for the people who

appreciate beads and beadwork as well as scholars who intend carrying out some more research on Ndebele beadwork.

CHAPTER 6

6.0 FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

A thorough study of beads and beadwork as found and used by the Ndebele people was a very necessary undertaking during this era. Not only was it very necessary but it was also a long overdue assignment as well. A research of this sort must attempt to come up with credible answers to problematic questions faced by scholars who deal with beads and beadwork. In doing this the research has also to answer whether the creators of Ndebele beadwork follow any definite systems or patterns in their work.

Ndebele beadwork is found almost in every corner of our country. No true South African can claim not to have, at least once, come across this form of art in its pure form and was never touched by it. There are however, some people who cast doubts on the creativity systems as well as the organisational nature of beadwork. Therefore it comes as no surprise that after all these years beadwork failed to catch the inquisitive minds of scholars who after all these years did not bother to bring it under their microscope and analyse it thoroughly and come out with findings and recommendations regarding the origins, nature and use of this form of art.

6.2 Findings

After a careful analysis of various factors on Ndebele beadwork, the following are some of the major findings of the study:

6.2.1 The art of beadwork is an original African practice not imported from the west: The research has successfully reaffirmed the fact that beadwork and beadwork-handling among the Ndebele people is not a phenomenon borrowed or imported from outside countries. It is a practice that had been engaged in by all African nationalities from the earliest days. The Ndebele people must have inherited it from the great grand parent of all the African people. The art has turned and taken different styles and forms as the various nationalities occupied their various home-lands.

The research has demonstrated beyond any shadows of reasonable doubt that beadwork practice among the Ndebele has been engaged in since time immemorial. All theories purporting that the ancient Ndebele copied the art of beadwork from foreigners who came from overseas have been proven to be devoid of truth. The lives of the early Ndebele people were intertwined with beadwork embroidery and mural decorations from early days of their civilisation. Research further shows that original beadwork made out of horns, animal nails and shells were used during the early stages of Ndebele life. Glass beads only reached the Ndebele people after the first contact with the Portuguese. Today glass beads seem to have overtaken the original beads by far. Perhaps the only reason why glass beads seem to have overtaken original Ndebele beads is the fact that the Ndebele artist seems to have fallen in love with the glossy, shining nature of glass beads. As a result glass beads have of late taken a bigger percentage of her artwork. The original Ndebele beads are still found but on a lower scale. They seem to have been overtaken by glass beads because glass beads have a longer lifespan and are catchy to the eye.

6.2.2 Over and above self-adornment and decorations, beadwork has a linguistic value: The research has further indicated that the function of beadwork goes beyond decoration and self-adornment. Over and above decoration and self-adornment beadwork art also has a linguistic value. The research has tested the likelihood that beadwork could have been used as symbols carrying messages in a similar way a book is being written. The research indicated that unlike is the case in the isiZulu and isiXhosa languages where beads are said to be readable like alphabetic letters, it is not the case in isiNdebele. However, it is true that beads among the Ndebele have been found to be having a very close association with certain linguistic meanings. By mere looking at a Ndebele piece of beadwork, a person familiar with Ndebele beadwork will be able to make a general interpretation of the message the artist intended to carry across.

It is because of these intrinsic linguistic meanings based on certain favourite Ndebele shapes and colours that particular meanings can be attached to beadwork art. The research found that because of certain beads and their colour restrictions, the Ndebele community becomes better organised in terms of age-mates, gender, leadership status and seniority. This thus gives beadwork an additional significance of being a message carrier.

6.2.3 Beadwork is a serious and carefully planned exercise: The research has also established that, contrary to unfounded beliefs by some people over the years, beadwork practice among the Ndebele people is a serious and carefully planned exercise. There is no haphazard and negligent way of doing things. Each piece of artwork is made with the strictest artistic mastery from an expert. This takes place from the moment the idea is conceived in the mind, up until the actual material is in the hands of the artist. This passes through the stages of cutting, designing of figures and the choosing of appropriate colours.

Some well-respected and reputable figures of the community are identified and be generally acknowledged as experts in handling certain pieces of beadwork art. This perfection is attained through the professional manner in

which they handle that particular piece of artwork. Usually this is an experience gained over a number of years, from that individual's humble beginnings until full maturity in that field is attained. It is for this reason that, sometimes it becomes necessary for a person to walk long distances in order to get the best of the bests in beadwork art.

6.2.4 The ancient Ndebele was well-vested with basic calculations: The research has also found that the ancient Ndebele was familiar with working with calculations. Some of the beadwork pieces can only attain their perfection by the employment of accurate counting of beads, either in addition or subtraction operations. Counting was also employed in obtaining various geometric angles in the formation of typical Ndebele favourite shapes. Thus, to have a figure with either an acute or obtuse angle requires subtraction or addition of beads. This is proof that some of the simple mathematical operations were not a novelty that came from the west.

6.2.5 The only serious studies of beadwork were only carried out towards the end of the 20th century: The research has also indicated that the first people to have recorded anything about the Ndebele people were historians. Historians were not that much interested in recording attire and personal adornment. Their real interest was in the recording of history. Ndebele beadwork was therefore not their area of interest. Historians were more interested in the history of the Ndebele and also what they called "lifestyle" of the Ndebele. Beads and beadwork were regarded as mere hobbies and were not taken seriously. In most historic records, the mentioning of beadwork was covered only in a few lines, often not more than a page. There was no attempt at making a deep study of Ndebele beads with the aim of understanding the minute intricacies found in it. It is for this reason that, while the recording of history forged on, the study of beadwork was ignored and thus legged behind.

6.2.6 The mixing and the use of colours by the Ndebele people follow very strict regulations: One other fact that this research has unearthed is the mixing and the use of colours by the Ndebele people. Up until now very

few people knew that the mixing and use of colours among the Ndebele people follows a definite pattern with strict restrictions. Many people erroneously believe that one can use a whole conglomeration of colours in a Ndebele work of art and attain the required standard. An analysis of colour preferences among the Ndebele people has revealed that not all colours are particularly liked and used regularly by the Ndebele people. Some colours are never used because they are associated with bad omens. The black colour, for instance, is generally thought to be associated with bad luck and misfortunes. The Ndebele people tend to shy away from a black colour and avoid it by all means.

Some colours are just distasted by the Ndebele people. The oxblood-red colour is also not particularly liked by the Ndebele people because it is thought to be associated with the spillage of blood. It is thought that it insights people to engage in fighting and wounding of one another. If used it could trigger and encourage a fighting urge in an individual. Some colours are just despised because they are used by some nationalities despised by the Ndebele people because of one reason or another.

The research has pointed out, however, that the Ndebele people's attitude is slowly becoming accommodative. The black colour has turned to be the favourite during the modern period. The red colour is also used much more often of late. On the other hand there are those colours, like the white, blue, green colours, that are the all time favourites of the Ndebele people and are almost never left out whenever an attempt is made to produce artwork of a high calibre.

6.2.7 There is a contravention of the Ndebele dress code which leads to the mismatching of colours: This research has also established that there is either a degree of naivety in the usage of Ndebele dress code among the modern Ndebele people or a deliberate contravention of the rules pertaining to dress code. The research found that in many nowadays ceremonies known as "cultural celebrations", there is a lot of improper dressing and incorrect usage of colours. Many individuals burning with the desire to be

relevant in such gatherings, tend to wear “anything traditional” they come across. This is a demonstration of an inner desire to create a link with the forefathers. However, this desire needs proper channelling and pruning so as to be in line with Ndebele dress code.

In Ndebele, the wearing of an outfit, for instance, the front apron for girls known as *iphephethu*, is reserved for the grown up girls only and may not be worn by very young girls, nor can it be worn by elderly women. The outfit known as *amaphotho* can only be worn by elderly women only and no unmarried girl may wear it. Likewise in men, the chest cover known as *iporiyana* may only be worn by men who have reached a certain age. More often than not, there are also certain cultural procedures to be followed before one puts on a piece of beadwork. In some cases the non adherence to the prescribed restrictions often has harmful outcomes to the wearer. All these outfits come out with colours that are relevant to groups to which they belong and carry certain meanings.

6.2.8 The use of colours has been found to be dynamic and changes with time: Further findings of this research are that the Ndebele style of working with beads has been more or less consistent throughout the ages. This means that the articles they were making in the past have been maintained in a more or less the same shape with very little alterations, if any at all, even in the modern era. However, there has been a dynamism that has been observed regarding the usage of colours. It has been observed that each period is always dominated by the usage of a colour that is the favourite of the time. For instance, during the classical period, the most favourite colour was white. It is for this reason that most, if not all beadwork articles of this time are white or predominantly white.

The intermediate period has seen the slight shifting from pure white and had all the favourite colours used on a somewhat 50/50 basis. This equal mixing of colours stayed on for a period of about 25 – 30 years. It was finally cast out by the entering of the period known as the modern period. During this period, the black colour, which was frowned upon by most Ndebele

people during the classical period, was embraced as the favourite colour of the time. During this period, most beadwork articles, if not all, were predominantly black. This thus opened a free-for-all usage of black beads without any fear of being associated with bad luck known as "*isinyama*".

6.2.9 Beadwork among the Ndebele people has reached a stage where it needs to be refined and run along business lines: Further findings of this research are that beadwork among the Ndebele has past the stage of being considered as a hobby rather than a way of life. Beadwork practice has reached proportions where it can now be run on a large scale along business lines. It has now reached the stage where, with proper planning it can be turned into an industry with the prospect not only of creating wealth but also job creation as well as self-sustenance of the people who practice it on a daily basis.

This study has revealed that with the interest the modern scholars have shown in undertaking detailed studies of beadwork, there is hope that, in the near future it is going to be possible to produce and keep accurate, well-documented records on Ndebele beadwork patterns, embroidering styles, popular shapes and correct-usage of colours.

6.3 Recommendations

From the foregoing discussions and arguments the following recommendations are therefore made:

For Ndebele beadwork to flourish well in South Africa it is recommended that Ndebele beadwork be introduced as a school subject in schools and learners must have an option of choosing it and specialise in it. A well-drawn syllabus must be available and only properly qualified educators be accorded the opportunity of handling this subject. This official should be able to devote enough time to each student interested in the subject and be able to evoke the sometimes latent talent in the

student. It is therefore the duty of the Department of Education to create the necessary circumstances at school level whereby the artistic talent of a budding beadwork student can be encouraged

Normally, the elderly Ndebele women will tell that budding bead workers usually identify themselves at a very young age. It is therefore an art educator's job to recognise such gifts and talents and to organise relevant support from experts within the locality of the young one. This can for instance be done by obtaining a venue where all those who wish to try their hand at producing beaded articles can go to at their spare time in the afternoons or during weekends. Such an activity can ensure that interest can be instilled in young artists with all the necessary guidance.

Teachers should treat students who desire to specialise in beadwork with the necessary respect and refrain from treating them as mentally under achievers. Enough guidance should be given to the students with the aim of boosting their self-confidence. Wherever possible the subject of beadwork should be linked to beadwork found in the community and at home. Students should be accorded the opportunity of visiting local beadwork artists with the aim of seeing practically how the work is done. This will ensure a continued linkage with the society in general even after school life.

The old mentality of regarding a student who has interest in subjects involving practical skills rather than theoretical ones as retarded should be dropped. Instead such a student should be accepted as having a different interest. This view was summed up in these words in an inquiry performed in Lisbon and published by Gulbenkian, (1982: 101):

It is an awareness of this breadth of potential which we would like to see matched in the curriculum and in out-of-school activities to encourage the widest possible development of talent.

Having said the above, it should not be forgotten that all this will be happening in South Africa, a country with some sections of the community experiencing the severest form of poverty. Thus, the ideas suggested above may be achieved with great difficulty or in some areas never achieved at all. The greatest stumbling block will be the educator who is a specialist who may have little or no interest at all in leaving the glittering city life to go and work in remote areas. Parents may have an extra burden of having to pay extra fees to cover the long journeys of such an individual. Thus, it calls for the Department of Education to do proper planning to accommodate such disadvantaged places.

The talent of people with little education or no education at all but who have proven themselves to be prolific handlers of beadwork and who have produced beadwork of high class should be recognised. This can be done by the Department of Arts and Culture by arranging for the assessment of their work and thereafter confer them with diplomas and certificates. Thereafter they should be further assisted to be able to document their work on paper. This will be done by providing them with a qualified person who will be able to write down a proper record or handbook of the work. The present adult centres should also be equipped with teachers who can handle a beadwork syllabus. Illiterate or semi-illiterate people should be able to enrol and further their qualifications in these centres. This will make them better qualified to read patterns in books

or even handle trade records of their own should they choose to do beadwork as a business venture. A standard should therefore be envisaged whereby a style of woven beadwork could be committed onto a paper and be accurately interpreted by someone else in a land far away just like in an ordinary book.

In different parts of our country annual exhibitions should be organised by the Ministry of Arts and Culture where both small and big beadwork handlers are invited to show off their products. To be able to recruit beadwork handlers from far off places, organisers of such exhibitions should provide appealing prizes. Qualified adjudicators should be employed to assess the articles and grade them as first, second or third class grade. Attractive prizes could be organised. For example, the overall winner could even win a trip to tour a country where beadwork is popular or even win a scholarship to overseas to go and further his or her knowledge on beadwork.

To further uplift the standard of beadwork and also to ensure that a high production standard is maintained at all times fashion shows could be held. These could be run in a similar fashion an ordinary clothing fashion show is run. Traditional African outfit has never had the chance and fame of being modelled on stage by famous models of the world. In a show like this, one famous beadwork designers would come together and employ top models to showcase their work on stage. This will help designers in this field to have time of sharing ideas and development of current trends in modern beadwork. From such gatherings fashion magazines could also be established whereby current beadwork concepts can further be explored and popularised. Already well-established designers will gain a lot from such gatherings because their work and styles will gain more and more exposure. On the other hand budding designers

could get assistance and guidance from the already established designers.

Traditionally the handling of beadwork among Ndebele is a “woman thing”. Ndebele men have never shown any interest in taking part in the embroidering of bead articles. No encouragement whatsoever was at anytime in the past given to the male folk to take interest in beadwork handling. It is recommended that time has come that men should also be introduced to beadwork. After beadwork handling shall have been properly introduced to be an ordinary skill that anybody can learn, this is sure to attract many males who can learn the skill and get involved in the trade of beadwork articles.

The focus of this study is on beadwork as practised by the Ndebele people. It is a known fact that beadwork, just like language is always surrounded by many other nationalities who also practice beadwork. If two communities practising different styles in beadwork move closer and coexist side by side, their styles will always influence each other. It is therefore recommended that in future studies be undertaken to study the extent of influence exerted by the Nguni languages on one another or the influence of the South African races on one another.

6.4 Conclusion

Beadwork in Ndebele should not be viewed as a mere craft practised by some individuals as a form of recreation or a hobby. Beadwork in Ndebele is the way of life. It involves every member of the Ndebele nation. It becomes part of an individual's life from the early stages of life until death. Not all individuals get engaged in beadwork embroidery. However, each individual is accompanied by beads his or her whole life because beads have a tale to

tell about the individual wearing them. For Ndebele, beadwork acts as a powerful communication system that can be likened to a written code. It tells the tale of the different levels as an individual passes through them. They clearly define and differentiate one stage from the next. Stages such as childhood, early teenage, late teenage, early adulthood, marriage, late adulthood and old age are clearly marked by means of ornament types, style and sometimes colour used in beadwork. The distinction between stages is often marked by change in clothing and adornment with beads used as a principal distinction. Therefore, the type of beads an individual uses communicates to the world the age, group identity and often but not always, status held by that particular individual within the community.

This was aptly summarised by Kaufmann, (1999: 2) in an article published from Noupoot Farm, a small farm with a beautiful Ndebele collection:

Beadwork reflects the social status of Ndebele women and marks the transition in life from infancy to puberty, marriage and motherhood. The weaving of beadwork also honours the spirits of the ancestral dead, a deeply important role for the Ndebele people.

Next to their language, beadwork is one other original valuable thing the Ndebele people have to hold on to. After the Ndebele were nearly annihilated by the Boers at *kwaNomtjherhelo* in 1885, their language and their art of beads and house painting were the only three things that held them together as a nation and perhaps kept on telling their story to the world when they themselves because of being disadvantaged and lack of the know-how could not do so on their own.

The main objective of this research shall have been achieved if it managed to unearth some facts about Ndebele beads and beadwork. These facts are seldom explained to the public. This is either because of lack of exposure to relevant knowledge or deliberate neglect by scholars in this field. This study shall have done even better if in future it will prickle the minds of scholars in this field to have a burning desire of engaging in more intense studies on

Ndebele beadwork with the aim of refining findings in this research and others earlier than this one.

It is hoped than in future the world will see analyses of Ndebele beadwork occupying its rightful place among other giant analyses of this type carried on other nationalities. It is further hoped that these Ndebele analyses will be of a class second to none thereby uplifting the standard and dignity of all the Ndebele people who are still alive and our ancestors who have since passed on and who are the real owners of isiNdebele and Ndebele culture.

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