Cover captions:

FRONT COVER: Matseape Phofolo, (South Sotho, Lesotho/ South Africa), skirt (thethana), date unrecorded (c. late 20th C), fibre, beads, thread, 20 cm x 80 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).

BACK COVER TOP: Artist unrecorded, (Zulu, South Africa), waist band (xhama) (detail), date unrecorded (c. late 19th C), beads, thread, cloth, 13 cm x 71 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).

Contents page:

LEFT PAGE: Artist unrecorded, (Xhosa, South Africa), bead panel on pin (isipeliti), date unrecorded, beads, blanket pin, 20.5 cm x 15 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).

RIGHT PAGE: Artist unrecorded, (Ndebele, South Africa), Bridal Veil (inyoka) (detail), date unrecorded, beads, 158 cm x 21 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).
Beadwork, Art and the Body

Dilo Tše Dintshi/Abundance

Edited by Anita Nettleton
CHAPTER 8

‘Looking deeply on the way my mother does her beadwork’: Conversations with three foremost Ndebele beadwork artists

Helene Smuts and Petrus Khobongo Mahlangu

“My mother was a beadworker,” relates Sophie Nosinkie Mahlangu, herself a master of the art. She lives in the small village of Babethu, near the seat of the Royal House of the Nzunza Ndebele at Emthambuthini, Mpumalanga. Her co-op, called Nomhlekhabo Craft Africa, includes up to twenty women who produce and sell beadwork for local ceremonial use and the visiting tourist trade, from a small shop at her home.

At night, after supper, when the family was sitting together, my mother would take out her beadwork. I kept close to her, watching as she organised her needle and thread to start making a piece. I would play around with some loose beads right next to her, so that I could look deeply on the way she did her beadwork. She worked so quickly that it was difficult to keep up with her beautiful designs. Every now and then she would look up at me, as if nothing was really happening!

For me, playtime was mixing beads of different colours, or trying to pick up one bead at a time with the tip of a long, thin beading needle. Starting and completing my first design was a nightmare!
But my passion kept pushing me, until my mother realised that I was trying to find some direction towards realising my own ambition.

By the time I had reached puberty ('itlawana'), it was her participation in the 'Umguqo' ceremony that inspired me. She always invited me to go with her. I would carry her big suitcase. Inside it was her most distinguished traditional attire. Lots of young married women ('amaqhakazana) from various sections around our home on Vantoe farm, near the Transvaal town of Stofberg, would come together for this great competition. They all came, carrying big suitcases containing all sorts of beaded adornments, and most importantly, three or four magnificently beaded blankets, each to be danced to a different song. This was a wonderful time for me, because I was a teenager of about 15 to 16 years old and by now I was almost fluent in beadwork myself. I could create my own designs.

*Haal af!* (Take it off!)

Ndebele women first started buying the umbhelo or ikumbese, with its multi-coloured stripes, in the nearby town of Middelburg. Beadwork transforms the basic Ndebele blanket into four distinct styles. Wearing the oldest style of blanket, umguqo, usually beaded in delicate bands of white and brightly coloured beads, a young married woman proudly presents herself to society. The name urara describes a blanket half-beaded in mostly white beads, for more informal domestic wear. A mother attends the celebration of her son's return from initiation (ukuwela) wearing a red-and-black blanket called ibhindl, along with a long beaded set of umlingakobe (the so-called 'tears of the Ndebele') framing her face and then dropping to the ground in

*FIGURE 8.2. Uphara worn by two members of the uNosinkie Nabomra Bemvelo dancing group. © Helene Smuts and Africa meets Africa. Photographer: Helene Smuts (March 2015).*
multiple folds. A fairly new blanket style is named *uphara*, after the isiNdebele verb *phara*, which describes the forceful slapping of a handful of plaster onto a homestead wall. Significantly, this heavy, fully beaded blanket is created mostly in dark hues of black, blue and mauve.

The *umguquko* ceremonial competitions often form part of the celebration of major rites of passage, such as girls’ initiation (*umnyanya wokukhuliswa komntwana womntazana/iqude*), a wedding (*nakwendwako/endwendwenti*), the welcoming of a grandfather into the bride’s new house (*ukungena kukababa*) and other social gatherings. But for the young married woman participating in it, *umguquko* is all about networking, enjoying and popularising tradition. It is also about communicating with pride, through her beading skill and the visual language of her own designs, who she is and where she is from.

At certain points in the proceedings someone calls *Haal af!* (Afrikaans for “take it off!”). The *amaqhakazana* may now choose to change into another blanket. In the past *Haal af* was merely a matter of shifting the heavy blanket to one side,
slightly exposing one shoulder. The participants would get very hot, after dancing an intensely rhythmic dance in a woollen blanket. Yet it was regarded as highly disrespectful of her tradition and her family for a married woman to bare her shoulders beyond the walls of her own homestead. But nowadays the women actually change one blanket for another, because underneath the blanket they will be wearing a T-shirt of sorts, bearing a message or a political emblem, such as the ANC symbol. Also popular is the image of a respected leader, such as Nelson Mandela or a local traditional leader. “A special song will be sung to celebrate such an inspiring leader,” says Sophie Mahlangu.

**uNosinki Nabomma Bemvelo**

Besides running her beadwork co-op, Sophie Mahlangu performs traditional songs and dances professionally at major celebrations and cultural festivals with her group, uNosinki Nabomma Bemvelo, which is composed of both mature women and young girls. Along with her husband, Witbank Mahlangu, who has initiated a dancing group for young boys, she is committed to sustaining Ndebele ceremonial traditions. Sophie explains:

> You see, as a ceremonial competition umguquko attracts every mature woman who feels there is much to connect her to her tradition.

Dancing to traditional songs is thanksgiving for the care her husband gives her; both presently and at hard times in the past, like the apartheid years. “We express our joy by singing songs bearing special messages and dancing to them. We also dance when we are in sorrow.”

Portia Mahlangu, a Grade 9 learner at school, has been a member of uNosinki Nabomma Bemvelo for some time. She dreams of becoming a nurse. Her advice to her “idle” contemporaries who have “become entangled in drug abuse” is to “create something in their lives, like taking part in traditional activities that benefit the community at large”.

Lindiwe Skosana is a third-year student in Finance, Economics and Accounting at Tshwane North College in Pretoria. She has been performing with uNosinki Nabomma Bemvelo since 2009, when she was drawn to Sophie Mahlangu’s traditional style: “I like working with money and I would like to work at the Reserve Bank,” explains Lindiwe. Asked by Petrus Mahlangu whether she would like to go to work in her traditional adornments, she answered: “Absolutely, yes!”

A woman’s beaded adornment also represents her independence and resourcefulness, and the fact that she earns her own money, comments Sophie. Each blanket takes up to two months to bead and the volume of beads required is very costly. In order to afford several blankets, a wife meets her husband halfway: she might raise chickens and goats, or sell some of her beadwork in the city.

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1 *KwaNdebele* was the tenth and last rural “homeland” to be granted so-called “self-governing status” by the South African National Party Government in 1981, but by 1986 it was the first to rebel against the idea of ‘homeland independence’ (Lekgoathi *et al.* 2008: 21).
Also inside the suitcase she takes to the umguquko ceremony are up to three beaded aprons, including a richly beaded itjhogolo. A rich range of beading colours in a woman’s itjhogolo can speak of wealth, especially the colour pink, because pink beads are scarce nowadays and are consequently more expensive. Brass or copper beads (inkozo) signal a husband’s wealth even more powerfully. Inkozo are bought from specialist craftspeople who cut copper wire into beads. Most often just a few rows of copper beads are included in a design made up of glass seed beads. Sophie Mahlangu comments that including a row of copper beads in a young child’s apron (kgabi) speaks of her pride in passing the Ndebele heritage on to a child.

A young bride is welcomed by her new family with a plain goatskin apron (itjhohlo), smeared with a little pig fat and black ash. She could now show off her beadwork skills by beading a second apron (unomdengwana), which was given to her by her in-laws, in small strips of white beads. Her third apron (iphotho) was given to her by her grandmother. This she half-beaded for domestic wear. This apron is identified with junior, recently married women (amaqhakazana) and called isikotiwna. A fully beaded iphotho is for ceremonial use and is called isiphoro. A senior married woman wears a fully beaded itjhohlo, which demonstrates her husband’s wealth and her status.

A beaded apron complements a woman’s collection of beaded blankets. Esther Mnguni observes with amusement that the young women refer to blanket and apron together as a “two-piece”. The additional Nzunza adornments include two beaded headbands: a light string of beads or iqubi, worn around the back of the head; and crossing over this and the forehead, the slightly heavier umkhala.
The 1st lady who visited over the sea (Esther Mahlangu)

Internationally acclaimed artist and entrepreneur extraordinaire, Esther Nostokana Mahlangu, once made an astonishing public statement with such brass beads at a local ceremonial competition.

"I was quite a celebrity at the first umguquko I wore my Brass to!" relates Esther.

No other woman could beat me when I arrived with my apron fully beaded in iinkozo. It was actually more like a full skirt of iinkozo, tied right round at my back and hanging down to below my knees. It was so heavy that I used to carry it to the umguquko ceremony in a wheelbarrow!

Esther Mahlangu is celebrating her eightieth birthday in 2015, and it is perhaps her skill and her personal knowledge of the Ndebele beadwork tradition that may be described as her true bead-wealth. Asked about the essential difference between the brass and glass seed beads, she answers: "The brass beads are about the expression of status, wealth and dignity. For me glass beads communicate creative knowledge, attractiveness and the pleasure of a softer kind of jewellery."

Beyond her own community and internationally, Esther Mahlangu is best known for her paintings on canvas, which are sold in art galleries from New York to Venice. Her name and signature have become something of a brand, also in the fashion industry, with her applied designs soon to be seen on the ramps of more than one European Fashion Week. Yet she remains rooted in her rural home in Emthambothini village, not far from the royal kraal and the graves of the great Nzunza Ndebele kings, King Mayitjha III, King Mabusabesabesala kamaMabhoko, father to King Mayitjha III, and the latter in turn father to the current young Nzunza King Mabhoko III. She would not dream of living anywhere else, although in her yard a rather dated sign proclaims: "Here lives Esther Mahlangu, the 1st lady who visited over the sea." Also nearby is the painted homestead, kraal and grave of the late Francinah Ndimande, who died in 2013 and is renowned still for her painting and beadwork skills.
“When you see a woman walking in her traditional beaded attire in front of the homestead she has painted in Ndebele colours and designs, you can clearly see that she is one with her home,” comments Esther Mahlangu.

Nowadays most Ndebele beadwork makers, including Sophie and Esther Mahlangu, produce beaded dolls with clearly defined, fairly sweet looking faces, for the tourist trade. But these should not be confused with an age-old and most often faceless form of beaded figure,
which was not intended as a doll but rather had to do with evoking fertility.

**We use beadwork to bring encouraging messages to our people. We enjoy our freedom! (Esther Mnguni)**

Near GaMatempula, an area inhabited by the Manala Ndebele clan, widowed Esther Mnguni’s peaceful homestead sustains three generations of women. Her mother, Benzangani Mahlangu, (who died on 29th May 2015 at more than 100 years old) and Esther Mnguni’s daughter, Betty Natshabana, supplies spinach (*marogo*) to a local supermarket.

As a mature beadwork artist, Mnguni is a celebrated custodian of Manala Ndebele heritage, with an extensive knowledge of how the Manala style of beadwork has traditionally signalled social roles and rites of passage. She is known for her skilled hand at wall painting with clay pigments in the age-old *ikghupu* style, which also informs her contemporary style of homestead painting in acrylic paints.
The separate Nzunza and Manala Ndebele clans, with their distinctive customs and styles, date back to an age-old succession rivalry between two of the five sons of King Musi, who were named Nzunza and Manala. King Musi resided at KwaMnyama (Bon Accord) near present-day Pretoria. He was the son of King Mhlanga, who was the son of King Ndebele who, in the 16th century, or possibly even earlier, led a group of Nguni-speaking people from the present-day KwaZulu-Natal region northwards, across the Vaal river, to settle in amongst Sotho-speaking peoples. According to Lekgoathi et al., “Some authors assert that the Sotho referred to these enchoaching Nguni somewhat disapprovingly, as the Matebele, and that they eventually appropriated this name, calling themselves the Amandebele” (2008:6). In 1883 Nzunza King Nyabela was defeated by the forces of Paul Kruger’s Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and every Nzunza family suddenly found itself marooned on the new farm of a white baas (boss) as indentured labour. This painful loss of their ancestral land forged a strong Nzunza sense of identity, which was expressed and preserved through many years of adversity in the creative visual arts of Nzunza women. Many contemporary South Africans claim ‘Ndebele art’ as iconic of their own national identity. And yet the current media representation of that finely honed aesthetic is a very superficial one. King Makhosonke Mabhena II rules currently as the Manala king, and the current South African government has declared him king of all Ndebele speakers in South Africa.

Sophie Mahlangu, Esther Mahlangu and Esther Mnguni share a great concern for educating the Ndebele youth in traditional ways, which they feel are in danger of complete neglect in the future, beyond their own generation. Esther Mahlangu has taught a great many young people to paint at her home. Esther Mnguni produces a unique male doll (umsegwabo) to teach the contemporary youth about Ndebele traditional values.
I made this Ndebele boy doll (umsegwabo) because I realise the young people of the next generation will not learn about authentic culture, especially when it comes to responsible behaviour on gender issues. This doll represents the age when young boys are in anticipation of adulthood. When we were young there were no quick ways for boys and girls to communicate their feelings to one another, as they do nowadays almost instantly through social media and cell phones. Carefully making a piece of beadwork as a token of love was the only way a girl had, to get a message across to the boy of her dreams. How many love tokens a young man was wearing at any given time did not matter, either. It spoke of healthy competition! A young girl would make her love tokens with beads her mother, or maybe an aunt, gave her and with the skills she learned as they all sat doing beadwork together.

If you look closely at my umsegwabo you will see that this young man is wearing only one pair of arm-bands, or umqeda, high up on his left arm. This means that he has only one girlfriend. More arm-bands would mean so many more girls! He wears a beaded isikilidi, with its beaded knob-like form, itjhuthana, on his head. The isikilidi covers his ears. The colourful ibedji covering his chest is a love letter made by his girlfriend. She has made him a single belt or umqaniso, hanging across his chest, but she could actually have made him a few more of these! He wears a pure white waist belt, called itjutjhayini, and below that up to eight beaded pins with attractive sounding usotjherere hanging from them. The girl who makes a boy’s neck collar, or irasu, like this one, is usually a favourite and could be in line for a proposal of marriage!

The much smaller female doll Mnguni makes wears the distinctive Manala umphayili on her head that she herself as a married Manala woman wears. The doll wears a fully beaded waist belt (umbhingo) and back apron (iyerhana). Her stiff front apron (iphepethu) is similar in shape to the one worn by Nzunza girls. Mnguni has chosen to bead the doll’s apron in the colours of the South African flag. “These colours talk of the long struggle history of our country and honours the great leadership of our first president, Nelson Mandela,” she explains. “We use beadwork to bring encouraging messages to our people. We enjoy our freedom!”

Mnguni’s male doll also carries a stick. Teenage boys learn how to use fighting sticks for self-defence, but adult men, particularly from the age of forty onwards, carry a walking stick or staff (idondola) as a sign of their mature status. In a sense these staffs are a contemporary version of the spear, shield and fighting stick carried by men in former centuries for self-defence and as signifiers of status within their societies. Nowadays, when a man enters another man’s home, as a customary sign of respect for his host he will drop the top end of his walking stick into his left hand, holding it horizontally across his two hands. This gesture also signals that the visitor is listening, waiting for the host to speak first.
"Looking deeply on the way my mother does her beadwork"

**FIGURE 8.9.** Artist unrecorded, (Nzunza Ndebele, South Africa), Bridal Veil (inyoka), date unrecorded (c. early 20th C), beads, thread, 190 cm x 22.5 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).

for the bride. She would keep it after the wedding and not share it with anyone else. The short top fringe of stringed beads is worn at the back of the head and the longer middle piece covers the bride’s face. The two sections at the sides cover her ears. Mnguni observes that this piece demonstrates how styles of beadwork changed over time. “Here you can see that black beads were becoming popular; they were used here to frame the blue ones,” she says.

**FIGURE 8.10.** Artist unrecorded, (Nzunza Ndebele, South Africa), veil (siyaya), date unrecorded (c. early 20th C), beads, thread, 22 cm x 28 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).

“This white *siyaya*,” observes Sophie Mahlangu, “would have been worn by a virgin bride only.” The bride’s mother or an aunt she is close to might make this veil

If you don’t have pink beads, you are sort of a penniless someone (Esther Mnguni)

As mature beadwork artists, both Esther Mnguni and Esther Mahlangu take great pleasure in looking at older examples of beadwork and the quality of the very earliest beads their mothers and grandmothers used.
"The old beads were very small" comments Esther Mnguni, "and very fine but easy to work with, because the hole at the centre of the beads was bigger than most beads nowadays."

Initially Nzunza and Manala beadwork looked the same, with mostly white beads being used and very small designs in primary colours (imivango) in the centre of an apron. Then beads were sold with a number for each size. "Most of us use number 3."

As women became more competitive with their beadwork, they introduced a single line of black beads here and there. And eventually much more. Using many different colours together in one apron became popular, especially the colour pink, because pink beads are scarce and more expensive.

"Wearing pink beads in one's apron means that one's husband is wealthy enough to afford them. And if
you don’t have pink beads, you are sort of a penniless someone!"

After 1994, when our new democratic government came to power, women made more and more patterns in bright celebratory colours, with less white. You could recognise the ANC colours in beadwork from that time, too. “Personally I like the Manala style,” declares Esther, “which does not use the many colours Nzunga women use. We keep to the traditional white mostly, with some blue, red and pink.”

Esther Mnguni identified this child’s apron, or irhabi, (Figure 8.13) as coming from the Mahlunngu area because of its black and blue beads. Sophie Mahlangu observes that this irhabi would have been worn by a child who has no siblings. As soon as the sibling was born, her mother would make her another one, with bright colours.
The dark colours of this child’s apron (*irhabi*) (Figure 8.13) reflect changing beadwork styles, comments Mnguni. “An older *irhabi* would have included more white.” She also points to the different styles of beadwork to be seen here: the beadwork at the bottom of the *irhabi* is much coarser than the middle section. A row of large plastic beads (*ingolombi*) separate the top from the bottom section.

Esther Mahlangu remarks that the very earliest beads were made of eggshell. She also remembers being taught how to make beads with the natural resources around her: crunching leafy twigs, mixing them with calf dung and then shaping the beads with one’s fingers. They were called *ibhula* and were sewn with a twine or thread made of tree bark.

The early glass beads were imported from India and Czechoslovakia, but my mother could buy them nearby in Middelburg and in Pretoria, where our women still buy beads. They were a richer colour white than the white beads you buy nowadays. You wanted to look at them and look and look! Now we buy the better beads in Pretoria. You always buy beads sold on a string, never a packet of loose beads.

**FIGURE 8.13.** Artist unrecorded, (Nzunza Ndebele, South Africa), child’s apron (*irhabi*), date unrecorded, beads, (glass and plastic), thread, twine, 24 cm x 23 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).
Both Esther and Sophie Mahlangu agree that, with a growing demand for beads and their mass production in factories, quality has suffered. Esther Mahlangu bemoans the fact that the odd broken bead can cut through one’s cotton, and that the pink beads sold today are simply not of the same colour and texture as those imported before. “And pink is such a fundamental colour in Ndebele beadwork!” she exclaims. “The young ones talk about ‘Fonkong’ when they describe the bad quality of the loose beads sold in packets”, laughs Esther Mnguni. Sometimes, after just one year their colour comes off! The new beads you buy nowadays are brighter in colour and very often shiny. I don’t like the shiny beads myself, but when my customers ask for them I do work with them. We work for business now. Change brings new things, too. Now we also have the new, thicker, blue bead called unongoro, used especially on umpharo, remarks Esther Mahlangu.

The woman who beaded this cape did not count! (Sophie Mahlangu and Esther Mnguni)

Looking at this beaded cape (linaga) (Figure 8.14) on different occasions, as impressed as both Sophie Mahlangu and Esther Mnguni were at how old it is, they were most amused to see that the beadwork along the bottom edge is not symmetrical. “The woman who beaded this cape did not count!” they both exclaimed.

I would have folded the piece in half to find the middle and then I would have beaded from the edges towards the centre, counting each bead as I work, so that the two sides are the same by the time I have finished the piece, commented Esther Mnguni.

Making beadwork calls for a good eye and a sharp mind. One needs to calculate continually, adding and subtracting the number of beads in each row to create a regular pattern that also plays out symmetrically. Even in the earliest photo documentation of Manala and Nzunga women in their full beaded adornment, such as the early 20th-century photographs of Duggan-Cronin, one observes a fine sense of symmetry and proportion in both the pattern generated within a single piece of adornment, such as an apron, and in how the Ndebele woman interprets the proportions of the human figure with the full range of adornments that her inherited tradition prescribes.

“I grew up finding my grandmother wearing copper rings with beaded bands together, in the Nzunga style,” relates Esther Mahlangu.
I still remember the colours of the beaded leg rings she wore with her copper leg rings (idzila); one white bangle at the bottom of the copper rings on each leg, then 2 colourful ones in the middle and then one white one at the top, with the copper rings in between. Idzila are really our Ndebele wedding rings. We never take them off; they are as permanent as our marriage is permanent, also. Your husband buys the idzila you wear around your neck by your biological parents. Idzila must be worn with beaded leg- and arm-bands to carry their full meaning.

Despite the international acclaim she enjoys and her continual professional travel all over the world, Esther Mahlangu continues to define herself by Nzunza Ndebele custom, rites of passage and adornment. Asked about the many places she has travelled to (she mentions more than 20 countries) she has been heard
to say: *Hulle is almal dieselfoe* (they are all the same). Her passion lies in preserving her heritage.

Once a year, both the Nzunza and the Manala Ndebele communities commemorate a historical leader with a celebratory cultural festival. The Nzunza commemorate King Nyabela, at Roossenekal, and the Manala celebrations honour King Silamba for his resistance at the site of the former German mission at Wallmashal, now known as Komtjeketjeke. At these festivals the Nzunza and the Manala kings address their people. At both festivals, similarly, traditional ceremonial music and dance performances find their place alongside the music of contemporary music bands. The audience includes the entire community. Teenagers wear jeans and T-shirts and young girls perform traditional dances on stage dressed in their traditional adornment. At these festivals Ndebele tradition and contemporary fashion integrate in fascinating ways. At the most recent King Silamba Day celebrations in both 2013 and 2015, the brand logos of Nike, Adidas and Lacoste were seen integrated into the beaded aprons. It seems the pervasive visual language of Ndebele beadwork will continue to interpret and redefine tradition in ways we cannot, as yet, imagine.

*FIGURE 8.15. Contemporary branding and fashion effortlessly integrated with the multiple sophisticated messages communicated by Ndebele beadwork over centuries. © Helene Smuts and Africa meets Africa. Photographer: Petrus Mahlangu (2015).*