Cover captions:

FRONT COVER: Matseape Phoofolo, (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 (ixama) (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 (isipelti), 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 ANITRA NETTLETON
CHAPTER 7

"A New Chapter for Xhosa Beadwork": Laduma Ngxokolo and his Promotion of a Xhosa Heritage

Christopher Richards

Beadwork has a strange attractiveness and a scientific significance which captures the mind and the imagination... it links intriguing origins of our distant past, so that the story of the beads becomes a part of the story and mystery of mankind. — Joan Broster (1967)

Beadwork was, and still is, a vehicle of self-expression, reflecting the individual styles of both its creator and wearer. – Gary Van Wyk (2003: 12)

Recently selected by Vogue Italia as one of Africa’s emerging fashion talents, Laduma Ngxokolo and his designer label MaXhosa by Laduma are quickly becoming one of the most recognisable and celebrated African fashion brands. As part of African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovation, and Ideas You Can Wear, Victoria Rovine characterised the designs of Laduma Ngxokolo as a form of African fashion that draw[s] from a well of forms to invent dress styles that evoke traditional dress cultures even as they mark a break from those cultures. (Rovine 2015: 154).
Building on Rovine's assessment of Ngxokolo's creations, I will delve beyond the surface of his designs, arguing that Ngxokolo's garments are embedded with complex meanings that celebrate and retain particular cultural beliefs and ideologies, resulting in the creation of a constructed, collective Xhosa identity that reflects Ngxokolo's personal experiences and philosophies. In order to fully understand Ngxokolo's use of beadwork and its contemporary associations with a distinct, yet constructed 'Xhosa' heritage, it is necessary to explore the introduction and manufacture of beaded adornments among isiXhosa-speakers in a historical context. The essentialised representation of isiXhosa-speakers through the photographic documentation of their beaded ornamentation will be emphasised, particularly as it directly influences the designs of Ngxokolo. I will explore an additional thread linking Ngxokolo's designer fashions and the forms of historical beadwork of isiXhosa-speakers, tracing similarities between creating beadwork and knitting wool. Ultimately, Ngxokolo's expressive and distinctive knitwear designs, which can be appreciated and engaged with by a diverse, global audience, exemplify a contemporary African fashion label that preserves specific cultural concepts and ideologies, while revolutionising and expanding them for a 21st-century global fashion market.

A history of isiXhosa speakers' beadwork and the construction of a collective 'Xhosa' identity

The term “Xhosa” broadly refers to a variety of cultural groups who speak isiXhosa and were historically located in the southeastern region of South Africa, namely the independent states of Transkei and Ciskei. As explained by Nettleton, Ndbambi, and Hammond-Tooke, referring to these groups collectively as “the Xhosa” is inaccurate: “the dialect of the southernmost group, the ‘true’ Xhosa was the first to be reduced to writing and gave its name to all the other dialects” (Nettleton et al. 1989: 39). The isiXhosa-speaking people, also referred to as the Cape (South) Nguni, include the following cultural groups: the Xhosa proper, Thembu, Mpondo, Mpondomise, Bomvana, Xesibe, Mfengu, Bhaca and Ntlangwini (1989: 39). One of the most significant visual signifiers of isiXhosa-speakers' identities, as with other South African indigenous groups, is their profusion of beaded adornments. In order to fully understand the significance of Ngxoloko's designs, it is necessary to explore both the historical development of isiXhosa-speakers' beadwork and how this art form, during the early and mid-twentieth century, became a dazzling and iconic representation of a constructed, homogenised 'Xhosa' identity, one that Ngxokolo
is simultaneously referencing and revolutionising through his designer fashions.

Contrary to contemporary representations of isiXhosa-speakers, they did not always wear an elaborate abundance of beadwork. Ludwig Alberti provided an extensive description of Xhosa attire in his *Account of the Tribal Life & Customs of the Xhosa in 1807*, which consisted primarily of mantles and caps fashioned from the skin of oxen or cows (Alberti 1968: 30). Glass beads were added to these forms of dress, but were used sparingly, primarily as embellishments to elite women’s caps, mantles or breast coverings (Alberti 1968: 32, 33). In terms of bodily ornamentation, Alberti documented the use of ivory, shells, copper and various animal teeth worn as bracelets and necklaces, with only a brief mention of glass beads as a form of adornment (Alberti 1968: 33).

The sparse incorporation of beadwork as a form of attire amongst isiXhosa-speakers indicates the limited access to beads before the 19th century and further attests to the value placed on imported beads as a form of currency and indicator of wealth. As explained by Jeff Peires,

since trading cattle for beads or copper was trading one form of currency for another, Xhosa trade was not primarily the exchange of one use-value for another use-value but a form of financial speculation. (*Peires 1981: 95*)

Peires insisted that beads were valued not only for their dazzling qualities as adornment, but “because they were convertible into the only form of wealth that interested the Xhosa – cattle” (1981: 100). This observation echoes one made in an 1825 letter written by Reverend W. R. Thomson cited by Theal:

> Beads, buttons, wire, &c. are indeed ornaments, but they subserve a double purpose, as they are convertible at any time into value, and constitute in reality the circulating medium of the Country. (*Theal 1897: 178*)

The most persuasive evidence for beads as a form of economic exchange is from the letters of the missionary William Shaw, who likened living without beads among isiXhosa-speakers to “a person without money & without credit in any part of the civilized world” (*Shaw 1835*, cited by *Beck 1989: 217*).

The value of beads as a vehicle for exchange did not preclude their incorporation into isiXhosa-speakers’ dress and adornment, although throughout the early 19th century beaded adornments were primarily limited to elite individuals and served as indicators of their social status. The concept of beads as a sartorial signifier of wealth is best summarised by S. Kay:

> By many, however, amongst the higher classes especially, nothing more than a small apron, decorated with various coloured beads, is used
under the cloak. This is but three or four inches broad, and might seem to be used more as an ornament than as a matter of decorum. (Kay 1833, cited by Shaw & Van Warmelo 1988: 468)

The relatively conservative use of beadwork in the early 19th century can be partially attributed to the restrictive trading policies of the Dutch East India Company, followed by those of the British Administration, which “forbade all contact between the colonists and their African neighbours” (Beck 1989: 211). Prior to 1824, beads were primarily exchanged by missionaries, who were characterised by Beck as

able to barter daily large quantities of European manufactured goods with little or no interference from the colonial authorities in Cape Town. (Beck 1989: 211)

Beginning in 1824, the British Administration introduced “fairs” which allowed specific colonists to trade with various isiXhosa-speakers. The first fair was established at Fort Willshire, followed by fairs at Grahamstown and other locations (Kaufmann 1993: 49). Despite their financial success, the fairs were largely mismanaged by colonists and were discontinued by 1830, when the British Administration agreed to lift restrictions on trans-border trade. According to Kaufmann,

...colonists flooded over the Fish River, penetrating remote regions with their products. Bead currency devalued because of widespread availability, increased consumption and changing patterns of distribution. (Kaufmann 1993: 49)

The influx of beads may have upset established social hierarchies and local economies, but it allowed for the expansion and diversification of beaded ornamentation. By 1849, Thomas Baines described the dress of isiXhosa-speaking women as “highly ornamented and almost as expensive as that of more civilized ladies” (Baines 1842–53, cited by Shaw & Van Warmelo 1988: 626). The creation of beadwork continued to flourish in the ensuing decades. By the 1930s, elaborate accumulations of beadwork, particularly for special occasions, had become a widely practised form of adornment among isiXhosa-speakers. The beaded accoutrements of the Pondo were recorded by Monica Hunter as part of her documentation of Pondo cultural practices from 1931 to 1932. As she recounted,

for festivals both men and women wear quantities of bead necklaces, and coils of twisted brass wire round leg, arm, and waist. One young man’s ornaments which he left in the store before going to the mines weighed 14 lbs. (Hunter 1979: 102)

Hunter’s emphasis on the weight of a Pondo man's adornments attests to the sheer extravagance of early 20th-century isiXhosa-speakers’ beadwork. Hunter also documented the rapidity of change in terms of favoured colours and styles of beadwork:

...fashions in colouring and pattern of beads, ornaments, headkerchiefs, and breast-cloths change rapidly. I have seen headkerchiefs rotting on traders’ shelves, which a few years previously had been ‘all the rage’. (Hunter 1979: 102)
The proliferation of isiXhosa-speakers’ beadwork during the early 20th century is further supported by an examination of evidence supplied by the photographs of Duggan-Cronin. The veracity of his and other colonial images has been contested by scholars (Geary 1986; Morton & Edwards 2009; Godby 2010), particularly owing to Duggan-Cronin’s active interventions in constructing and manipulating the physical appearance of indigenous South Africans. As Godby acknowledged:

Albeit without written corroboration, countless photographs in the preparatory albums confirm that Duggan-Cronin regularly supplied items of dress to create a more ‘authentic’ image. (Godby 2010: 61)

Although Duggan-Cronin’s images are generally dismissed as erroneous and contrived, some of his photographs suggest a more accurate representation of indigenous South Africans, with one such photograph included in Duggan-Cronin’s “Xosa and Fingoe” album (1928). The photograph, captioned “Dancing Dress,” shows two isiXhosa-speaking men wearing elaborate and diverse forms of beadwork (Figure 7.1).

Unlike a cascading, multi-strand necklace of white beads that is present in several of Duggan-Cronin’s photographs of the “Xosa”, the majority of the two men’s beaded adornments are unique to their photograph. The originality and complexity of the men’s beadwork, coupled with Duggan-Cronin’s description of the photograph as documenting beadwork worn for a specific occasion, suggests that although the men were posed by Duggan-Cronin, their beadwork ensembles were the product of each man’s self-construction (albeit for a particular and limited occasion).

Regardless of his credibility, Duggan-Cronin’s images mark the naissance of a 20th-century phenomenon that constructed collective representations of indigenous South Africans through the lens of a camera, with an emphasis on historical forms of dress and adornment. As summarised by Godby:

Duggan-Cronin used the elements of his art to create images of a society that was evidently present in front of the camera, yet simultaneously both past and distant. (Godby 2010: 64)

The constructed representation of indigenous South Africans, identifiable by their dress practices, continued throughout the 20th century. By the 1970s, the romantic, homogenised image of ‘the Xhosa’, like many other groups of indigenous South Africans, had become inseparable from their elaborate beadwork. This was due, in part, to publications like Joan Broster’s Red Blanket Valley (1967), Aubrey Elliott’s The Magic World of the Xhosa (1970) and Alice Mertens’ and Joan Broster’s African Elegance (1973). These books, awash with colour photographs of isiXhosa-speaking men and women wearing flamboyant and dazzling beaded adornments, visually presented isiXhosa-speakers as part of a collective ‘Xhosa’ identity. Broster, Elliott and Mertens romanticised the creation and wearing of beadwork, as exemplified by Broster’s suggestion that, among the Thembu,
no matter how poor the home, every man, woman and child wears at least one example of this art; wears a necklace or a head-band with an appreciation of its beauty and a keen awareness of its ritual and traditional significance. (Broster 1967: 18)

The writings and photographs of Duggan-Cronin, Broster, Elliott, Mertens and Morris, albeit romanticised and problematic, were not entirely inaccurate. IsiXhosa-speakers were creators and wearers of elaborate and eye-catching beadwork; however, these publications and their associated photographs aided in the construction of a collective representation of the ‘Xhosa’ as an ethnic group that actively and regularly wore extravagant beadwork. The notion of a constructed, collective identity is best described by James Clifford: “to say that the individual is culturally constituted has become a truism [...] We assume, almost without question, that a self belongs to a specific cultural world much as it speaks a native language: one self, one culture, one language” (Clifford 1988: 92). Additionally, Elizabeth Edwards specifically addressed the impact of photography on constructing collective ethnic identities in South Africa. According to Edwards, the photographic surveys sought to use controlled visualization to retrieve a cultural past that was seen as inscribed in the landscape, across the built environment, and residing in customs and practices, but that existed beneath a veneer of modernity. (Edwards 2009: 68)

Edwards concludes that “it was an excavation beneath the surface of the modern to solidify and objectify “tradition” in the consumable form of photographs” (2009: 68). It is from this legacy of a constructed, universal representation of isiXhosa-speakers as paragons of beadwork production and ornamentation that Ngxokolo’s designs emerge.

The aforementioned authors, and particularly the photographs included in the publications of Broster and Elliott, have had a profound effect on Ngxokolo. As he reflected,

my mother used anthropology books to look at beadwork and see what styles and colours were there. She’d often take these ‘Xhosa’ anthropology books and read them to us as bedtime stories, as she wanted us to know where we came from. She knew it would be valuable information for us to know (Ngxokolo 2014, personal interview).

In a conversation with Ngxokolo, he referenced a specific photograph by Elliott of a group of ‘Xhosa’ men and women (possibly Tembu) wearing a profusion of beadwork (Figure 7.2).

As Ngxokolo explained:

“I was captivated by what I saw in this image. I wanted to emulate the extravagance we once had, but with a modern twist.” (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014)

Ngxokolo has used these historical, constructed photographs as inspiration to create nuanced and thoughtful designs that reference a similar collective ‘Xhosa’ identity, but with the goals of conserving specific cultural ideologies and practices, while encouraging a global appreciation of isiXhosa-speakers’ beadwork and aesthetics.
Communicating the past for the future: The designs of Laduma Ngxokolo

Ngxokolo was born in 1986 and grew up in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He was exposed to fashion design at an early age, as his mother owned her own knitwear studio in New Brighton, one of the oldest townships north of Port Elizabeth. Ngxokolo recollected that his mother, Lindelwa Ngxokolo, created stylish sweaters for a group of fashion-conscious women, but that she couldn’t grow as she envisioned because that was during apartheid in South Africa. She was successful in the sense that she made...
beautiful products for fashion clients, but in terms of commercial success, it wasn’t there because of the political barriers of the time. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)

Ngxokolo’s mother sold her knitting machine to focus on raising her family, but she continued to find outlets for her creative energies. She began making beadwork for sale in curio shops and involved her three children in the process, teaching them various methods for creating beadwork. As Ngxokolo recollected:

I used to help her a lot; she realised I was the best one at making beadwork, so if she got an order, the first one she would call was me. (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014)

In 2002, Ngxokolo’s mother purchased a second-hand knitting machine and revived her knitwear brand, actions that ultimately led Ngxokolo to pursue a career in textile design and establish his own designer label.

Ngxokolo reminisces:

We grew up in a household where my mother never promoted watching television; she preferred us to read books and we couldn’t afford to purchase a television set. When we went into high school, for the sake of being up-to-date with what’s going on in the world, my mother decided it was time to get a TV. We went to a Salvation Army where they sold a lot of second-hand products and we found an affordable television there, but my mother saw a knitting machine as well. The machine was being sold for almost nothing, so she bought that instead. For me, I never knew what it was or how it worked. I was curious because I didn’t imagine that the machine could make knitwear, so she demonstrated it to me and that’s when my interest grew. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)

Ngxokolo assisted his mother in creating knitwear for her clients, but he characterised her later work as more conservative in style, consisting primarily of beanies and scarves. The revival of his mother’s studio was short-lived; Lindelwa Ngxokolo passed away in 2003, but she continues to serve as an inspiration and role model for her son. In 2007, Ngxokolo enrolled in a Bachelor of Technology programme with a specialisation in textile technology at Nelson Mandela University. For his final project, Ngxokolo created a collection of sweaters which he titled “The Colourful World of the Xhosa Culture”, directly inspired by the abakhwetha, the isixhosa term for male initiates (Rovine 2015: 149). Ngxokolo exhibited his sweaters at the 2011 Design Indaba and experienced immediate success:

I anticipated working for a company for at least five years after I graduated, but I had to make adjustments to answer the demand for my sweaters... it was such fast growth. (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014)

Since his 2011 debut, Ngxokolo has created three additional fashion collections and has been featured in a variety of print and online publications, including L’Uomo Vogue. As part of his 2014 Autumn–Winter runway show, Ngxokolo unveiled his first collection of womenswear, which was recently featured on the February 2015 cover of South Africa’s Elle magazine. Ngxokolo is currently enrolled as a Master of Arts student in Material Futures at Central Saint Martins in London, England, a programme that emphasises experimental and innovative design through multi-disciplinary education.
Ngxokolo has created four complete runway collections, each based on a specific theme that promotes a collective Xhosa culture and heritage. His first collection was titled “Makrwala”, the name given to young isiXhosa-speaking men following the completion of their initiation. Ngxokolo’s own initiation at the age of twenty, followed by the gift of new clothes to mark his transition to manhood, served as the inspiration for this collection. Ngxokolo recalled that his siblings and father bought the majority of his amakrwala clothes, describing them as “a more mature type of clothing, a bit more formal and of better quality than I wore” (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014).

Although Ngxokolo appreciated his new attire, he explained that

I thought we could have done better as the Xhosa, in terms of dress code. The whole vision I had was to see the next generation dressing entirely in a Xhosa dress code when they came from initiation school [...] I envisioned them wearing their same knitwear in their fifties and sixties. (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014)

Ngxokolo created a range of men’s sweaters inspired by the patterns and colour combinations of isiXhosa-speakers’ beadwork in the collection of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum. The most powerful aspect of Ngxokolo’s designs was a series of photographs created as promotional images. The photographs featured five men, including Ngxokolo, wearing distinctive and bold sweaters. The potency of these photographs was explained by Victoria Rovine:

... only a second glance reveals that the models are wearing ochre on their faces, the mark of amakrwala – young men who have undergone initiation. (Rovine 2015: 150–151)

This subtle, yet important detail, she argues, “adds layers of meaning to otherwise conventional fashion photographs” (Rovine 2015: 151).

Following the success of his “Makrwala” collection, Ngxokolo explained:

I had to think of other ways to refresh and build new collections. I felt that I had already
FIGURE 7.4. Artist unrecorded, (Xhosa, possibly Thembu or Mpondo, South Africa), collar (ithumbu), date unrecorded (c. mid-20th C), beads, thread, button, 58 cm x 70 cm. Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum).
achieved success from the Xhosa initiates collection, so I felt I had to acknowledge my mother because she was the one who introduced me to the world of knitting. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)

To recognise his mother’s pivotal role, he titled his second collection “My Heritage, My Inheritance”, launching the collection at the 2013 Design Indaba. The collection was also featured at the 2014 Labo Ethnik Fashion Week in Paris, which served as a further homage to his mother:

My late mother loved Paris, the French language, and French fashion, so I thought it was important to showcase the collection in Paris. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)

A much discussed sweater from Ngxokolo’s 2013 collection was emblazoned with the phrase “My Heritage, My Inheritance” (Figure 7.3). The design of the sweater mixed horizontal bands of contrasting patterns with a semi-circular band of repeated diamond motifs, mimicking the iconic form of isiXhosa-speakers’ openwork beaded collars (Figure 7.4). Due to the arrangement of specific patterns, particularly the reference to a beaded collar and the positioning of horizontal bands of designs on the upper and lower arms, this sweater echoed the positioning of actual beadwork on isiXhosa-speaking men’s bodies. The inclusion of the statement “My Heritage, My Inheritance” as part of the sweater’s design, made the reference to his heritage immediately apparent. Reflecting on his choice to incorporate this statement, Ngxokolo stated:

I always avoid text, I only use it if it stands out and is worth sharing; for me, that phrase stood out. I think it’s very powerful. The phrase wasn’t only about me saying that the most valuable commodity I inherited from my late mother was my heritage and learning how to make knitwear, it was also a message to other black South Africans to not overlook our heritage. Our heritage could be our most valuable asset as a nation. We don’t know anything better than who we are. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)
Ngxokolo’s first two collections hinted at the importance of layered meanings in his designs, although this approach is exemplified by his 2014 Buyel’mba collection. Ngxokolo explained that Buyel’mba references the idea of “going back to the old way of living and celebrating it” (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014). As he elaborated:

I imagined how Xhosa people would actually dress in the modern day if they had never been colonised by the Dutch or British and if they were purely a community that lived in their own territory, but living in 2014. What would their ponchos and blankets look like if they were aware of the scientific developments that are happening, if they knew about politics, but [were] still living in their territory and developing their dress code from how they used to dress in the 1800s? So that was the intuitive idea that I had. (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014)

The complexity and layered significance of Ngxokolo’s garments is indicated by his use of isiXhosa words when naming his garments. For his Buyel’mba collection, Ngxokolo created a capelet accented with a design of three horizontal lines bisected by a single vertical line, a pattern that loosely mimics the form of gathered strands of isiXhosa-speakers’ beadwork (Figure 7.5). He named the garment after his elder sister Somikazi, but the name has additional layers of significance. Ngxokolo explained:

Somikazi is a beautiful black bird that would fly around and was popular among the Xhosa homelands. Dark, beautiful girls were often given that name, so I tried to portray that when I created the design. (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014)


The capelet’s colour scheme of navy blue and black invokes the dark colouring of the aforementioned bird while simultaneously referencing a concept of beauty...
particular to isiXhosa speakers. The presentation of this garment on the runway was enhanced because the model who wore the garment had a darker complexion than the majority of Ngxokolo's models, who were white. Ngxokolo's selection of a model with darker skin to showcase his somikazi capelet illustrates the intentionality of Ngxokolo's design decisions and the layered meanings of his creations.

Ngxokolo used the same design of horizontal and vertical lines for two ponchos that he named nkwenkwezi, an isiXhosa word for stars. The colour schemes of both ponchos are brighter than the somikazi capelet and each vertical band is decorated with a mother-of-pearl button, an important embellishment of historical and contemporary isiXhosa-speakers' beadwork (Figure 7.6). Ngxokolo likened the sheen of the buttons to stars:

I like their reflective, diamond-like qualities. Xhosa people looked at stars as one of the ways to tell the time of the year. There's a lot of profound beliefs behind stars, so that's why I use the buttons. (Ngxokolo interview, September 30, 2014)

As with his somikazi capelet, the nkwenkwezi ponchos are layered with significance. The garments are immediately recognisable as inspired by 'Xhosa' beadwork, but isiXhosa speakers and informed consumers can engage with his designs on a more meaningful level. By providing his garments with isiXhosa names that invoke complex cultural beliefs and practices, Ngxokolo's fashions become a means for promoting and conserving his conception of a universal 'Xhosa' heritage. Additionally, adorning his knitwear with actual buttons draws a stronger visual connection between his woven designs and the historical beadwork that has inspired him.

FIGURE 7.6. Artist unrecorded, (Xhosa, possibly Thembu or Gcaleka, South Africa), waistcoat, (uvelhiboyi) date unrecorded (c. mid-20th C), beads, thread, buttons, leather straps, 86.5 cm x 45.4 cm. Presented in 2010 by Nicolaas Maritz to Wits Art Museum.
For his most recent collection, which premiered in November at the 2014 Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Johannesburg, Ngxokolo introduced new materials for his designs, including juxtaposing his iconic knitwear with cotton fabrics. The most unusual garment from this collection was a stylistically simple white silk dress, printed with a geometric pattern comprised of a detailed photograph of one of Ngxokolo’s knitwear designs (Figure 7.7). The contrasting collar of the dress was created from a photograph of a beaded collar, further illustrating Ngxokolo’s continued commitment to playing with the function and wearability of the historical beadwork of isiXhosa-speakers. Additionally, for the first time Ngxokolo punctuated his designs with the inclusion of historical pieces of beadwork, worn as accessories to his garments: one male model wore a
beaded collar (Figure 7.8) and another female model sported a beaded apron (Figure 7.10).

Beads are gradually becoming integrated into Ngxokolo’s garments, as seen on a capelet mimicking the openwork technique used to create beaded collars (Figure 7.9), which was edged with a fringe of black beads (Figure 7.10). Ngxokolo’s growing incorporation of beads onto the surfaces and edges of his garments is creating stronger allusions in his designs to the forms of historical isiXhosa-speakers’ beadwork that continue to inspire his designs.

Ngxokolo’s chosen medium of knitwear shares similarities with the production of isiXhosa-speakers’ beadwork. The form of beadwork is often likened to fabric (Costello 1990; Labelle 2005) and the process of sewing the beads can be compared to knitting (Figure 7.11). As described by Marie-Louise Labelle, the brick-stitch technique, which is commonly used among isiXhosa-speakers, is created when “the beads are passed over and under on different threads, ensuring a
long-lasting rigidity for clothing and other adornments” (Labelle 2005: 102). Dawn Costello characterised beadwork as “linking one bead at a time with an existing row or series of rows of beads” (Costello 1990: 20). These processes of passing fibres over and under each other and building upon existing rows of beads are similar to knitting techniques. Ngxokolo acknowledged the similarities between these two mediums, stating that beadwork is very similar to knitting. “The way you start and finish is like the same technique. They’re both time-consuming. I think they are similar in every kind of way and each has its own specific limitations”. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)
Acknowledging the technical similarities between beading and knitting further reinforces the argument that Ngxokolo’s knitwear is a contemporary reimagining of the historical beadwork of isiXhosa-speakers.

In my interviews with Laduma Ngxokolo, he reflected on his own initiation, explaining he was taught that “learning takes forever” (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014). This sentiment is directly reflected through his knitwear designs, which serve as an unconventional experiment in education. As this essay has demonstrated, Ngxokolo’s garments serve as complex and layered “lessons” on collective ‘Xhosa’ aesthetics, language and cultural practices. Additionally, Ngxokolo’s garments encapsulate his interpretation of a constructed and collective ‘Xhosa’ identity. Ngxokolo acknowledged his promotion of a distinct version of ‘Xhosa’ heritage in his most recent collection, by creating a shirt emblazoned with his own face, a literal patchwork of beadwork patterns and styles (Figure 7.8). According to Ngxokolo,

I put my face on the sweater because I think that the journey I’ve gone through for the past three years has a lot to do with my interpretation of the brand. It’s about me telling the stories of the Xhosa from my own perspective. The brand is very integrated into my identity, my thoughts, and my beliefs. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)

As with the authors and photographers before him, Ngxokolo is crafting a distinct representation of an imagined, collective ‘Xhosa’ culture, albeit one that honours and celebrates the ideologies with which he was raised in an urban setting. Not only are his designs familiarising a global fashion culture with isiXhosa-speakers’ aesthetics and patterns of beadwork, Ngxokolo is creating a brand that ultimately resonates with contemporary isiXhosa-speaking youth and black South Africans. As Ngxokolo reflected:

It seems there is the potential that in contemporary South Africa, people that are Xhosa, Zulu, and other ethnic groups, could start wearing my designs as part of a collective heritage. (Ngxokolo interview, December 22, 2014)

Ngxokolo’s aspirations were reflected by one man’s donning of a MaXhosa by Laduma design on September 24, 2014, South Africa’s National Heritage Day. A young, black South African (who does not identify as an isiXhosa-speaker) wrapped himself in one of Ngxokolo’s elaborate ponchos and posed in front of the Eiffel Tower, an image that was promptly shared on various social media sites. This young man’s embrace of a heritage that is not his own supports Ngxokolo’s aspirations, suggesting that his contemporary interpretation of a collective ‘Xhosa’ heritage, may in fact become symbolic of a unified, black South African identity.