



Hidden Messages

Zulu women are using beadwork to speak truths otherwise forbidden.

BY MARSHA C. BOL



Previous: *Courting-Age Adolescent Girl's Apron (Isigege)*, ca. 1960. Zulu-speaking peoples, Nongoma region, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. 9 1/16 x 9 13/16 in. Cotton, glass beads, amalosi seeds. Museum of International Folk Art, IFAF Collection. Gift of Diane and Sandy Besser (FA.2006.77.9). Photograph by Blair Clark.

Above, from left: *Love Letters (Three Pendants) (Ukala Abuyise)*, pre-1893. Zulu (Xhosa?)-speaking peoples, South Africa. 6 1/3–7 4/5 in. diameter. Cotton, glass beads. The Field Museum, Chicago, Illinois. Image no. A114545_04d, cat no. 29016. Photograph by John Weinstein.
Love Letters (Three Pendants) (Ukala Abuyise), pre-1893. Zulu (Xhosa?)-speaking peoples, South Africa. 6 1/3–7 4/5 in. diameter. Cotton, glass beads. The Field Museum, Chicago, Illinois. Image no. A114545_04d, cat no. 29016. Photograph by John Weinstein.

Opposite, from top: *Three Zulu Unmarried Women Dancing*, 1949. Natal, South Africa. Photograph by Constance Stuart Larrabee. Eliot Elisofon Photograph Archive. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. (EEPA_1998_061045). *Young Zulu Woman and Young Man*, 1949. Natal, South Africa. Photograph by Constance Stuart Larrabee. Eliot Elisofon Photograph Archive. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution (EEPA_1998_060963). *Young Zulu Men Dressed for Courting*, ca. 1900. South Africa. Missionaries of Mariannahill, Reimlingen, Germany. 001.Mariannahill. Photographer unknown.

ALTHOUGH GLASS BEADWORK

is an important part of contemporary life among Zulu-speaking peoples of South Africa, it does not have a lengthy history in that culture. Shaka Zulu, who reigned from 1817 to 1828, and his mentor, Dingiswayo, formed the Zulu kingdom at the end of the eighteenth century from among independent clans in the region, still in existence today and located in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. The king strictly controlled the import and circulation of glass beads as a prestige item, reserving them only for himself, his wives and the female court, and high-ranking officials. A visitor to the court in the mid-nineteenth century, George French Angas, observed: “On grand occasions the amount of beads worn by the King’s women is almost incredible, a single dress having been known to consist of fifty pounds weight of these highly valued decorations, so as to render it a matter of some difficulty as well as personal inconvenience for the wearer to dance under the accumulated weight of her beads.”

Around this same time, the third Zulu King Mpande began to loosen the restrictions on European traders, thus providing an opportunity for those beyond the king’s court who could afford glass beads to have access to these expensive items. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beadworking became more generally practiced by the wider population.

COURTSHIP.....

From the time that young Zulu men and women are eligible to marry, they spend much of their time preparing for and seeking their mate. This includes making themselves attractive to as many potential mates as possible. In many societies, the dress that both males and females wear contains cultural signals, sending messages of their readiness to select or be selected as a life mate.

For Zulu-speaking peoples, the use of beadwork reaches its zenith at courtship time. From the time of puberty to marriage, young Zulu-speaking women spend much of their time making a great variety of beaded rectangular panels, necklaces, anklets and wristlets, bands for bandoliers, and aprons for adorning themselves to attract eligible young men. These beaded objects tend to be multifunctional. An ornament can be worn in many different ways—around the neck, the head, the arm, the wrist, the ankle, or the waist. “The range of Zulu beadwork forms is perhaps the largest found in one tribal group” in South Africa, according to African beadwork scholar, Margret Carey.

Unmarried girls spend almost as much time making beadwork gifts for potential sweethearts as they do for themselves, using beaded gifts to indicate their interest. At the time when young Zulu-speaking men become old enough to go courting, they adorn themselves in more beadwork made by young women than at any other time in their lives. As the beadwork gifts hold no pledge of engagement, the young man wears all of the beaded gifts to display the high esteem he holds with various girlfriends.

One type of these gifts, recognizable by its form as a small beaded panel, has been termed a “love letter,” containing an encoded message from a girl to her boyfriend. These love letters have become popular tourist items, with buyers making the assumption that complex messages are beaded into the panel much like a written letter, although realistically, they don’t contain the complexity of such a document. According to Carol Boram-Hays, “These messages are conveyed by proverbs that are associated with bead colors.”





STORIES WRITTEN IN BEADWORK

Contiguous with the continuation of traditional uses of beadwork for courtship and ceremonial purposes, a new form of beadwork, destined for the marketplace, was initiated by Zulu women of the KwaZulu-Natal province beginning in 1980. Initially they produced beaded sculptures in the forms of single figures and animals, finding that tourists were eager to buy these figurines.

Thembi Mchunu took her first figure to the African Art Centre in Durban, a development project with a retail store dedicated to encouraging, promoting, and selling to the art-buying market. Mchunu's original creation caught the attention of the Centre staff, who encouraged her to make more. Her fellow beadworkers from the Valley of a Thousand Hills followed her lead and began making figures dressed in a profusion of traditional beaded panels for the Art Centre in hopes of fetching higher prices from their clientele as well. Thereafter, some women began adding additional figures to create beaded tableau compositions depicting scenes of Zulu community life.

These tableaus of three-dimensional beaded figures, constructed from fabric and adorned with beadwork and affixed to a base, created narratives of folks engaged in typical Zulu community scenes. Everyday scenes, such as a mother bathing her baby, a woman collecting wood, a football match, or celebratory scenes such as weddings predominated. But intermittently, scenes depicting social commentary, such as a rich person's house side by side with a rural shack or a small decorated coffin displaying the face of a dead baby, began showing up.

The Centre was instrumental in popularizing the beaded tableaus, so much so that they became in demand by customers. In general, narratives depicted in folk art are an undeniable draw for outsider buyers the world over. Perhaps narratives allow the outside viewer a peek into the inner world of another culture, which is otherwise inaccessible.

In 1996 and 1997, Dr. Kate Wells from the Department of Design Studies at what is now the Durban Institute of Technology offered a series of workshops to improve the Valley of a Thousand Hills (and surrounding areas) beadworkers' technical skills as well as the materials they used. Wells shared, "I learnt about the women through the Africa Art Centre in Durban in the mid-1990s. The women made beaded dolls, but could not access quality fabrics and beads."

During these workshops, the Zulu women discussed problems in their daily lives, in particular the illness suffered by many in their community. As Wells recalls, "We were busy in our creative space, and I could see there was something troubling the women, so I asked what was wrong. They told me about this disease that they were afraid of." It became clear to Wells that the women knew little or nothing about the transmission of HIV/AIDS, so she arranged a series of intervention workshops on this topic. At that time, more than ten percent of the South African population was infected with AIDS, where it is predominantly a heterosexual disease. KwaZulu-Natal, the homeland of these women, had the highest infection rate of all of the South African provinces.

Long-standing cultural taboos have prevented rural Zulu women from discussing matters of love, intimacy, and sexu-



Opposite: Members of the Siyazama Project.
Photograph by Kate Wells.

Lobolile Ximba (Zulu), *Women Crucified to AIDS*, 2010. KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Wood, cotton, wool, glass beads, hair. 20 ⁵/₁₆ × 16 ⁷/₈ × 3 in. Museum of International Folk Art. Purchase funds from the Barbara Lidral Bequest (A.2014.15.4). Ximba illustrates the disproportionately high incidence of HIV/AIDS infection among the women of KwaZulu-Natal and the suffering that results, using the highly charged image of the Christian crucifix.

HIDDEN MESSAGES



Celani Njoyeza (Zulu), *Snake Story*, 2010. Ndwedwe, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Wood, cloth, glass beads, metal wire. 6 ¾ × 12 ¾ × 11 ¼ in. Museum of International Folk Art. Purchase funds from the Barbara Lidral Bequest (A.2014.15.1). In Njoyeza's *Snake Story*, a snake threatens a young girl with the sexually transmitted disease of AIDS, while a healer gives advice to her and her family member. The figures wear the beaded red AIDS ribbon, a visual metaphor for AIDS awareness developed by South African beadworker Happiness Ngoma.

ality. Traditionally the mechanism to express these subjects has been mediated through beadwork, such as the love letters. "All traditional Zulu beadwork relates in some way to courtship and marriage," according to Wells. Thus began the Siyazama Project, housed at the Durban Institute, which developed into an effective HIV/AIDS campaign.

"It happened because the communication mode in which the women were skilled also was the mode used traditionally and historically to circumvent the social female taboo on discussion of matters of emotional and sexual intimacy," Wells says. "The women used the medium of beadwork communication passed down to them by their mothers and grandmothers to express their new understanding of sexual and sex-AIDS interface insights, and their work became untraditionally sexually explicit."

Through these beaded tableaux, Zulu beadworkers are combating silence in a culturally acceptable way, visually

educating other KwaZulu-Natal women about the impact of HIV/AIDS and how to prevent its transmission by using the visual metaphors of beaded stories. Wells says "the women are now regarded as AIDS experts in their community," and are sought out to give advice to others. Their rising confidence to do so has been spurred by the international interest in their project expressed by museums and artists in the U.S., England, Sweden, Australia, and elsewhere.

This includes the Museum of International Folk Art, where some of the tableaux are on exhibit in the *Beadwork Adorns the World* exhibition (through February 3, 2019) and in the accompanying book *The Art and Tradition of Beadwork* (Gibbs Smith 2018). ■

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