

# Writing in Africa, about Africa, for Africans as an American

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Nine years of photographic and interview data with Ndzundza Ndebele women artists and their families have informed my view of the transitions in Ndebele art and culture since the end of the apartheid era. I am writing an Ndebele story and plan to publish in Africa, about Africa, for Africans, as an American outsider, with insider privileges.

Initially, as an abstract painter, I was writing a paper about geometric abstraction in the African diaspora. I had found and interviewed artists living in North and South America, and throughout the Caribbean, who were all using similar triangular shapes in their art. All of the men and women spoke about abstraction as a visual language. I felt that I needed to locate a symbol source for this painted geometric abstraction on the African continent, and at Christmas time in 1995, was given a book, which introduced me to the Ndebele of South Africa. I knew immediately that I must travel to South Africa to see these remarkable people for myself, and speak with the women who created such phenomenal coloured geometric patterns.

In addition to the first book I was given, I found several other sources in American libraries, in order to prepare for my first trip. I did not want to appear like some 'outsider' authors from developed nations, who arrive unprepared for the indigenous lifestyle they will be witnessing and write definitively about the exotic "other," without significant background to understand the data they collect. I did not realise that I was beginning a journey, which would stretch into the next decade, and become a major focus in my creative life. On Faith, and without financial support from family or institutions, I made my first visit to Pretoria in June, 1996, and stayed for two months.

Ndebele women are well documented for their unique role in the creation of the dominant forms of their material culture. Diane Levy<sup>1</sup> tells us, that "a central role [is] played by material culture and its associated customs in the formation of Ndebele identity." Fortunately, much of Ndebele bead and wall art is intricately tied to those still-maintained ritual practices surrounding living and ageing, initiation, marriage, birth and death. The art continues to have a presence in the seasonal life of the people, whether they live in Gauteng or Mpumalanga or Limpopo Provinces.

The oral tradition is still the primary form of communication within the Ndebele community, so I set about to interview the women artists and their family members. Coming from the USA, the written word is the principal official mode for business communications and cultural documentation, and I believed that the information I gathered, and my subsequent writing



should reflect the voice of the women themselves. With the aid of the guides from 'Super Tours,' I first travelled to KwaNdebele in Mpumalanga, Province, and there, Ndebele women from Mabhoko, sent me to their relatives in the Nebo District in Limpopo Province. During that first visit, women invited me into their homes, offered me a mat on the floor, and I shared their food and candles as we sat and conversed late into the evening. They allowed me to photograph their art and lifestyle in an intimate and personal manner. I was able to meet with a range of women artists, from the very famous Ndebele artist, Esther Mahlangu, to many lesser known artists, who had no contact with western ideas or people.

The women have allowed me access to witness dramatic and subtle transformations, compare and follow life patterns, and document my days and nights here, with my photographs and my personal journal. I have been required to be an active participant, as well as a cogent observer, and have observed significant shifts and adaptations in Ndebele wall painting and body adornment, which I identify as expressive responses to powerful new external stimuli.<sup>2</sup> These catalytic stimuli include:

most importantly, the introduction of electricity, allowing people in the provinces to be able to look comparatively at the outside world and their "things"; a new and renewed national political consciousness, placing ANC colors and the current South African flag in the beadwork and painted on the walls of homes; a shift in personal economics, with numerous family members now having to migrate daily on buses from the provinces into the distant city for employment, limiting time at home for family, aesthetic contemplation and creating, as well as impacting the materials of adornment, trading heavy brass dzilla or rings for lighter-weight plastic renditions; new global and domestic travel by the artists and their families, as I have photographed Ndebele artists in South Africa and in New York City;

global external tourist visitors coming in with their preferences and ready cash seeking non-traditional versions of ritual art forms, as well as a new local indigenous market patron, who desires generic ceremonial forms made by other Ndebele women with the time and resource to create beaded items for initiation; the influx of international corporate patronage, bringing increased exposure and pressure for quantity over quality; self-patronage and the establishment of Ndebele owned schools, foundations and business enterprises; a new physicality to art making and the change in scale from painting walls and houses to painting small portable masonite panels as tak-aways; the rise in Aids awareness and the creation of the beaded Aids ribbons for the local and world markets, now even available on the Internet; and the use of Ndebele art images and body form raising intellectual property issues and the need for governmental protection for the women.

I believe because I came to these women openly, as just another woman artist of colour who sees the world in polychrome, geometric, abstract forms, the Ndebele artists recognised my spirit, took me in. They answered my endless questions and one by one, they guided my developing abilities to see from their life view and to see my own purpose in life as a creator. With the generous support of Hewlett Packard Corporation, Sanderson Industries, Inc., and the University of Missouri, an exhibition featuring my photographs and paintings, along with paintings and beadwork from eight Ndzundza Ndebele women artists opened one month ago at the Pretoria Art Museum. I invite everyone to experience the 163 art works, which will be on public view through 17th July 2005. This exhibition is a form of publication, which highlights the decade-long story of "My Walk with Ndebele: A Visual Journey with Women, Transformed and Self-Defined in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Levy, D. 1993. Women as makers of meaning: tradition and the Ndebele bride. *Jewish Affairs* 48 (2): 147-152.

<sup>2</sup> Hoard, A.W. 2001. Ndebele women in the stream of change: the commodification of art in a South African society. *Cultural Survival*, 16 (4): 37-40.