

Cultural Survival



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World Report on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities

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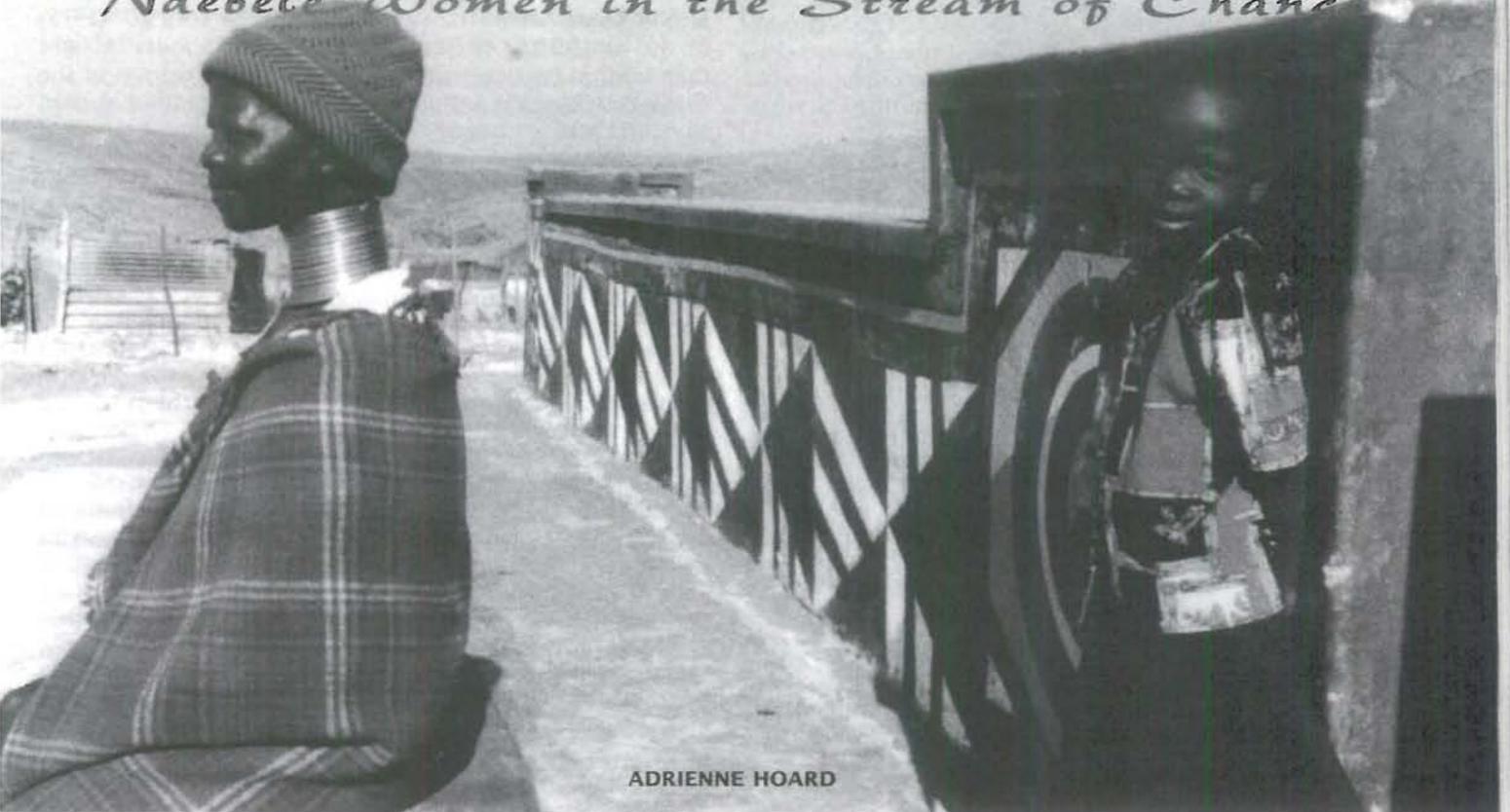
Culture as Commodity



WINTER 2001/US \$5/CAN \$7

THE COMMODIFICATION OF ART

Ndebele Women in the Stream of Change



ADRIENNE HOARD

History

The Ndzundza Ndebele are an Nguni people who originated in the areas of present day Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and the Northern provinces, formerly the Eastern and Northern Transvaal. King Musi, a great diplomat, led his people to settle among the Tswana and Pedi, where they intermarried and engaged in cultural exchange. It is believed that early Ndebele house structure and house-painting strategies were adopted as a result of these relationships. Ensuing family battles caused one group of Ndebele to go farther north into Zimbabwe. Of the groups that stayed in South Africa, the Manala and the Ndzundza, it is the latter who have developed abstract house-painting schema and who are recognized globally as the Ndebele of South Africa. (Van Vuuren, 1994)

Until 1883, the Ndebele were powerful landowners and fierce warriors, able to maintain their vast farm holdings in the highveld area against encroaching Boer farmers. At this time, the Boers (armies of the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek) managed to overcome the Ndzundza under chief Nyabela, confiscate all of their land, and parcel it out to their own farmers. Along with the land, Ndzundza families were distributed as indentured servants to work the farmlands they had owned. This period of indenturement stretched into the 20th century, the final vestiges loosening only in the past four years. Indenturement and Apartheid in South Africa are akin to African American slavery and segregation to the extent that both were governmental decrees and both needed further government action to be ended.

Wall Art

Out of each of these white-on-black repressive experiences, expressive symbols were developed by artists within the subordinate groups. Often, these examples of creativity (images, forms, songs, etc.) were signs which could be "read" as messages by the oppressed group. Like the African American quilts—"instruments of cultural transmission" (Freeman, 1996)—that frequently served as guideposts to slaves in transit, the wall paintings of the Ndebele became guideposts for indigenous persons passing farm buildings set far back from the road. They announced: "We are Ndebele. Ndebele live here." Loubser (1994) confirms that "owing to the difficult circumstances of the Ndzundza, the paintings became an expression of both cultural resistance and continuity." White farmers, who "saw themselves as politically more powerful and culturally superior," viewed this cultural form as decorative and harmless and thus allowed it to continue.

Levinsohn (1985) contends that the initial wall art designs and symbolic forms are derivative of centuries-old Ndebele beadwork forms and patterns. Earliest wall art shows tonal patterns painted by the women with their fingers on the mud/dung walls of their cone-on-cylinder, round houses. Prior to the French introduction of acrylic pigments into South Africa in the 1940s, only natural pigments were used. Monochrome ochres, browns, black, and limestone whitewash were the initial hues. The elements of size, direction, and line pattern were more important than polychrome color in aesthetically pleasing walls.

Knight and Priebatsch (1977) document that the walls had to be resurfaced seasonally, after the summer rains, due to the fragility of the natural pigments. This ritual endeavor, along with the beadwork production, provided two of the main traditional duties for the household's women. These familial activities, often practiced during the initiation process, allowed for the transfer of patterning strategies from mother to daughter, and from female in-laws to new Ndebele wives secured from other indigenous groups.

In addition to conveying self-identity, personal prayers, values, and emotions, wall painting has become deeply ingrained in the family marriage tradition. Courtney-Clarke (1986) depicts the married women of the household as responsible for designing images for the outer gates, front and side walls, and sometimes even interior rooms. Preferring geometric forms even when they are representing realistic, natural, or manufactured items, Ndebele tend to abstract these images and re-create them as symbolic, repetitive icons.

Even though overall Ndebele wall designs show increasing external influence, traveling today in the remote Nebo area of the Northern Province one can still see the traditional black soot lines, limestone whitewash, and red and dark red brown, now complemented by sky blue, deep blue, yellow-gold, green, and occasionally pink. Here, there exists a sense of fleeting authenticity.

Sitting outside her front gate in Nebo, Mrs. Elisabeth Mahlangu's response to me concerning "change" is "Why?" She describes the chevron pattern on her wall as important to her family clan. For the 28 years of her marriage, *mhlope* (white) the overcomer, and *mnyama* (darkness) the balancer, have surrounded her and visually affirmed her and other family clan members. She stresses that her paints are powder and water, not the new paints in the can.

Changes in Ndebele Art

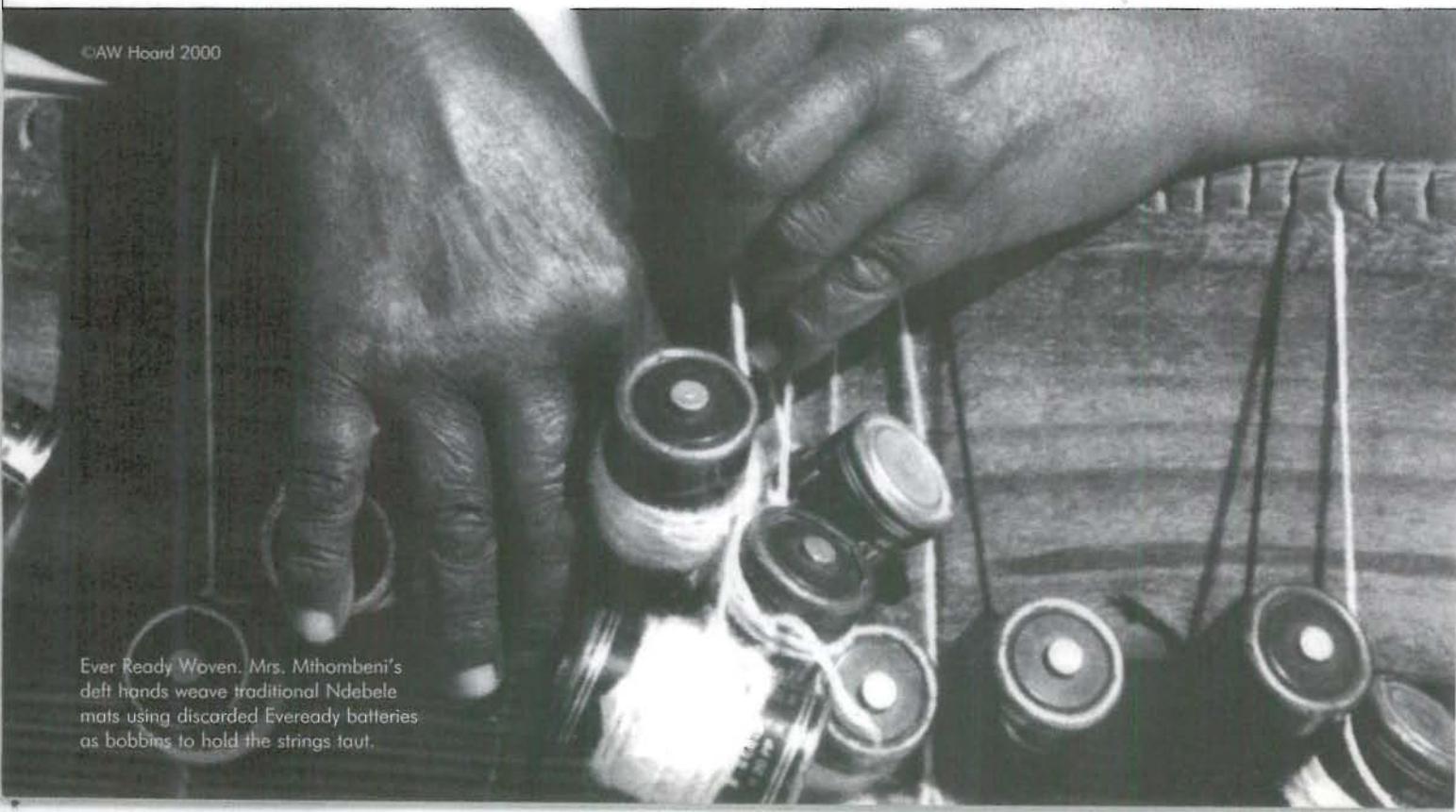
Since the democratization of 1994, South African indigenous communities have experienced the antithesis of Margaret Mead's "non-violent transformation of their society." (1975) At the turn of the last century, European colonists brought their written language and numbering to the regions of the Ndebele, who were influenced to produce traditional bead work and wall art interspersed with these foreign symbols of letters and numbers. Today, design decisions are impacted by a world of cultures setting foot in Ndebele homes wired for electricity, light, and sometimes television. This phenomenon, coupled with the eye-opening global travel of designated "master artists" (Loubser, 1994) such as Francina Ndimande and Esther Mahlangu, has provided Ndebele imagination with new symbol sources and dramatic possibilities for color relationships.

Though exposure to, and exploration of, other cultures by Ndebele women proves evident in their art, former President Nelson Mandela rightly assures us that ". . . some cultural traditions have been forsaken, [but] others still form an integral part of [South African] daily life, often blending with each other and with modern elements to present a fascinating juxtaposition of old and new." (Magubane, 1998) Important also is a new cross-fertilization between visual cultures that once were in conflict, but currently service one another. Ndebele wall art now includes stylized images of airplanes and light bulb fixtures, while current Coca-Cola cans and British Airways airplane tails display Ndebele abstract patterns, and de Beers produces pseudo-Ndebele beaded collars from precious gems. The mainstream has found the Ndebele and neither community remains the same.

Shifts and adaptations in Ndebele wall painting are expressive responses to powerful new external stimuli.

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Ever Ready Woven. Mrs. Mihombeni's deft hands weave traditional Ndebele mats using discarded Eveready batteries as bobbins to hold the strings taut.



These are:

- a. the introduction of electricity brings with it the ability to view the outside world and its objects;
- b. personal economics—daily migration on buses into the city for employment limits time for creating;
- c. tourist and local markets have influenced a change in scale from painting houses to painting small portable masonite panels;
- d. global and domestic travel by the artists;
- e. national political consciousness has sparked the use of ANC colors and the current South African flag in beadwork and on walls; and
- f. global corporate patronage.

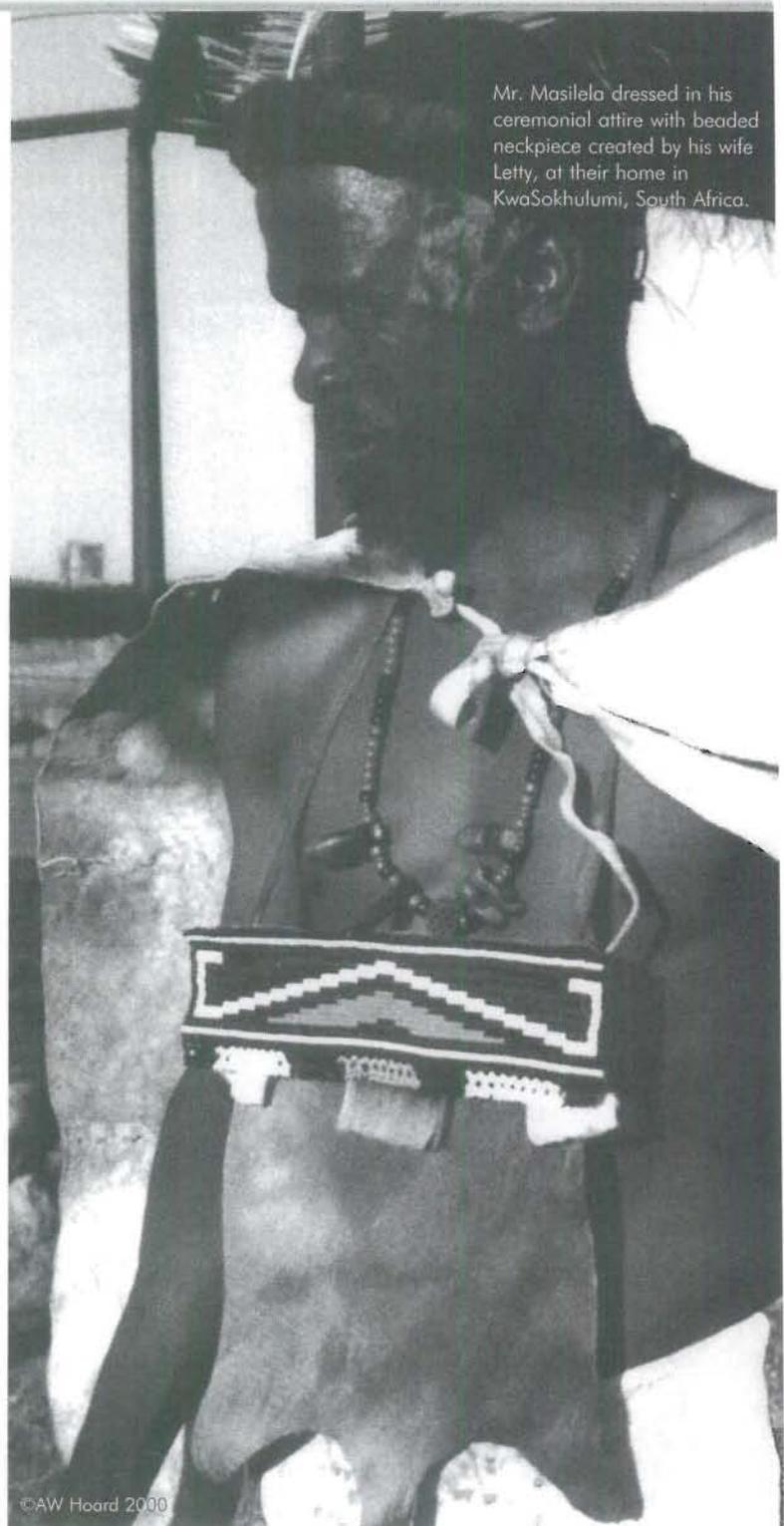
Ndebele women have been observed over the past four years to gain tremendous market experience. These women have now come to understand the changes in the intent behind their ritual endeavor of art making. Originally, their art work was solely the practice of making beaded and painted forms for life as Ndebele people, but today their art making has some economic impetus, not only traditional motivations.

Through their created art forms (bead and wall art) and their lived art forms (unique style of personal adornment), these women carry the tenets of Ndebele culture in transition. This is a mega-transition, forcing personal ideas and symbols out of the family context and control and into global arenas where control is synonymous with economic or political power. The Ndebele are a sophisticated people who have developed a consciousness for personal art, and for public art, which may be for sale. Their term *isikhethu*, meaning “real Ndebele” and reflecting an idea or creation exhibiting those things they value, can be compared to their term *isikhuwa*, meaning “the foreign ideas of whites” and referring to contemporary colors or symbols suitable “for the informal market.” (van Vuuren, 1994)

In his book *African Art in Transit* (1994), Steiner discusses the perceptual shift of art into commodity, which he believes changes the spirit of the art as well as the social life of the artists. Because of the growing international trade in beautiful, non-traditional versions of Ndebele ancestral art forms, there is mounting debate on the ethics of making modified ritual forms to meet non-Ndebele consumer demand. Supporters claim that the women and their families need the income, while contenders question the formal precedents being established for younger creators.

A Bridge to the 21st Century

The Ndebele Nation is concerned about the dedication of its pre-teen and pre-initiate young women to creatively maintaining Ndebele classic artistry in beaded and painted form. Through the efforts of His Majesty King Mayitjha III, the Ndebele sovereign; his elders; and the two master artists, Ester Mahlangu and Francina Ndimande; painting lessons with both traditional chicken feather brushes and modern brushes take place daily in Mabhoko, the place of the King's *kraal* (power seat) in Mpumalanga Province. This manner of self-education is a more formalized method for transferring the



Mr. Masilela dressed in his ceremonial attire with beaded neckpiece created by his wife Letty, at their home in KwaSokhulumi, South Africa.

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values and skills that are taught during the initiation schooling.

For centuries, Ndebele women, by tradition, have been given the right and responsibility to represent the society through their art forms. Traditional Ndebele sensitivities to form and color, and preferences for geometric symmetry (Schneider, 1985) have survived the beginning stages of modernization, due in part to their annual initiation process, ritually performed by elder Ndebele women with their female adolescents. Initiation provides the vehicle for passing on the traditional skills, practices and attitudes necessary to be a good Ndebele woman. For young Ndebele women—whose



Young Eric spends his afternoons alone as he awaits his mother's return from her position selling non-traditional forms of Ndebele art at the Cultural Village, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa.

exposure to the western world, its images, lifestyles, and value systems exceeds that of their parents—being recognized as Ndebele contributes to a secure sense of self. The art of the Ndebele is at the core of this initiation ritual, which restores balance to the life equation in these South African provinces.

Though not the sole ethnic model, South African Ndebele women artists exemplify the consistent minute adjustments in consciousness necessary always to recognize the self. Given the advent of external cultural influence, with its myriad visual choices and creative and economic purposes, the interpretations of these women artists remain remarkably true to the image of things Ndebele. Their ancestral visual memory appears, to date, intact, in spite of contact with Western capitalism.

Ndebele art speaks no longer just to the indigenous community, but now serves also as an aesthetic commodity, an economic "bridge to the 21st century" for these women and their families. Witnessing an artistic society of women proceeding through their own cultural aesthetic evolution exemplifies the discussions of Shohat (1998) and other authors who call for coalition between so-called first world women of color and so-called third world women of color. Through this coalition, Ndebele women now express their voice on the future of this new commodity, the package of the Ndebele image and material culture. ♦

Adrienne W. Hoard, (M.F.A., Ed.D.) is Associate Professor of Fine Art and Art Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia. As a former Fulbright fellow and Research Leave grantee, Dr. Hoard has lived and worked as an artist/professor in Seoul, South Korea and Florence, Italy. Since 1996, she has been traveling to South Africa to document Ndebele women in connection with her project identifying similarities in visual abstraction among women creating within the African diaspora. In 1998 and 2000, Dr. Hoard served as a visiting professor at UNISA, the University of South Africa, Pretoria. The images in this article are selected from Dr. Hoard's traveling photography exhibition, entitled "Women Warriors: Cultural Guardians of the Ndebele." The complete exhibition may be viewed at www.homegirlinc.com/exhibits.html.

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