

The *Siyazama* Project: A Traditional Beadwork and AIDS Intervention Program

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This article is first and foremost descriptive: it gives an account of the origin and development of the *Siyazama* Project, both as a design communication and AIDS intervention program among the Zulu women of rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It also is analytic, since it explains the effect and effectiveness of beadwork as a visual metaphoric mode of expression. It demonstrates how the beadwork and craft of the women in the *Siyazama* Project act as reliable and authoritative modes of communication to circumvent the Zulu cultural taboo on the discussion of matters of personal intimacy (*hlonipha*), and the women's lack of English and scribal writing, all of which threaten to render them powerless, silent and invisible in the war against AIDS. The beadwork designs of the rural women of KwaZulu-Natal successfully transcend accepted traditional modes and norms, and challenge socio-cultural, health, and economic issues that threaten their lives and the lives of their families and communities. The *Siyazama* project thus has changed and is changing the self- and community image of those most affected by the AIDS pandemic. It is only a matter of time before such transformation impinges on their society as a whole, providing a significant example of the role of design as an agent of social transformation.

The AIDS Pandemic

It is estimated that some 43 million people globally are affected with HIV, with 95 percent living in developing countries. It also is estimated that 24 million people currently are living with the virus in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa has 4.2 million infected people, amounting to more than ten percent of the population. People aged between 20- and 44-years-old are the most vulnerable.¹ KwaZulu-Natal has the highest infection rate of all nine provinces in South Africa, an observation based on rural and peri-urban women attending antenatal clinics in KwaZulu-Natal.² In KwaZulu-Natal, HIV/AIDS is largely a heterosexual disease infecting many more women than men, because women are far more susceptible to infection than men partly due to their physiological makeup. Empirical evidence shows that the rate of transmission from male to female to be two to five times higher than from female to male.

1 A. Whiteside and C. Sunter, *AIDS: The Challenge for South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau Tafelberg, 2000), 58.

2 *Ibid.*, 51.

The hard-hitting social consequences of the disease, especially on poverty-stricken rural populations, challenge the very existence of many communities. It is clear that HIV/AIDS can no longer be considered purely a health-related problem. The country's economy is particularly vulnerable due to the interdependence between the sophisticated industrial infrastructure balanced against the sprawling, informal rural sector. In such an environment and climate, any AIDS intervention program must address more than the immediate health issues. It must attempt to transform the related socio-cultural context, values, and expectations.

Beadwork Design in KwaZulu-Natal

Historically, the beadwork of KwaZulu-Natal took the form of linear syntax or single beaded strands until approximately 100 years ago when a new form—beadfabric—was developed.³ This is symbolically important because it allowed the development of geometrical patterning primarily based on a triangular representation of the father, mother and child.⁴ The best known example of beadfabric is the loveletter (*ibique*), a popular souvenir with tourists visiting Durban. It generally is sold attached to a safety pin, and has a small card that details its meaning. The design primarily comprises inter-linked geometric forms relating to male/female relationships. All traditional Zulu beadwork relates in some way to courtship and marriage. Colors have significant meanings—both positive and negative. Specific meanings may be emphasized in any given piece by increasing the volume of beads, thus heightening bead color saturation.

In 1980, the women beadworkers from the Valley of a Thousand Hills initiated a radically new direction in beadwork. Thembi Mchunu, one of a small group of expert beadworkers from this region, constructed a doll with scraps of fabric, accessorized with beautiful beadwork. Thembi's fellow beadworkers, including her co-wives, followed her direction and the craft soon developed into a most unusual and fascinating form of social commentary. The beaded cloth dolls sold well, resulting in much needed improvement in household incomes.

It is self-evident that the sustainability of any rural craft industry is dependent on the quality of its craftwork which must be acceptable to a highly discerning international tourist market. This only can be achieved if the crafted items are well-made and innovatively designed. In 1995, it had become apparent in KwaZulu-Natal that the quality of the beaded dolls was not meeting the standards required. Between 1996/1997, Kate Wells from the Department of Design Studies at ML Sultan Technikon, (now the Durban Institute of Technology, D.I.T.) organized a series of workshops to provide the beadworkers with the necessary technical skills and quality materials funded by an international donor. The response was gratifying, and

3 Papini, personal communication, 1999.

4 S. Schoeman, "Eloquent Beads: The Semantics of a ZULU Art Form" in *Africa Insight* 13: 2 (1983).

the quality of the dolls improved to such an extent that they soon were once more in demand by local craft and souvenir outlets.

During the 1996/1997 workshops, the women discussed the problems that they were encountering in their lives: issues of critical socio-cultural importance. This “gossip,” a form of “information management,”⁵ was highly significant since it revolved around the illness of so many people in the community. What initially was referred to as “Slim’s disease”—the term used to describe the deteriorating condition of HIV/AIDS—included suspicion about possible rivalries in love and power relations, and about forthcoming marriages and other important rituals. From the workshop interactions, Wells became aware that the women were largely ignorant about HIV/AIDS, in spite of the development, in 1996, by Happiness Ngoma of beadfabric in the form of an *ibique* of the AIDS red ribbon that had originated in the United Kingdom. In its simplicity, the beadfabric AIDS red ribbon is a primordial balanced and rhythmic formula consisting of a pair of triangles one, of which is closed and the other open. At first, it had no significance for the women other than it provided much needed income. When the women later became aware of the meaning of this visual metaphor, it conveyed a profound message of life and death, thus effectively triggering awareness of AIDS, promoting care for the sick, and encouraging behavioral change. Currently, there are very few beaded tableaus and dolls that do not feature at least one AIDS red ribbon.



Figure 1
Beadfabric AIDS red ribbon. Created by Happiness Ngoma. Photo by Kate Wells, © Copyright 2004 Kate Wells.

Beadfabric AIDS Red Ribbon

By 1998, Wells knew that she was morally obliged to broach the highly sensitive subject of HIV/AIDS with the beadworkers in the workshops. When she did so, they agreed with alacrity to a series of workshops and meetings with personnel of the Durban City Environmental Health Authority, The National Association of People Living with AIDS (NAPWA), the Kuyasa Devoted Artists, and The Shembe Virgins. During these workshops, they were informed about the origin, nature, transmission, prevention, and prognosis of “Slim’s Disease.” They heard, inter alia, that HIV/AIDS primarily was transmitted through sexual intercourse; that abstinence from sexual intimacy was the only guarantee against contraction of the dreaded and fatal disease; that the use of condoms constituted protected sex; that there was no vaccine or cure for the condition; and that it was transmitted from mother to child during childbirth, and that such transmission would prove fatal for the child in the majority of cases.

The women responded with characteristic silence. Because of the sexual nature of HIV/AIDS transmission, this was a subject of the deepest traditional taboo: *hlonipha*. Consequently, the response of the women to the information provided at the workshops was quiet reflection. After listening intently to the discussions and presentations, the beadworkers left the workshops for the long and often

5 P.J.J. Botha, ‘Rethinking the Oral-written Divide in Gospel Criticism, the Jesus Traditions in the Light of Gospel Research, in *Voices 1: A Journal for Oral Studies* (1998:32), Edgard Sienaret, ed., Centre for Oral Studies, University of Natal, Durban South Africa.

dusty rides back to their huts in the hills where they reported that they “dreamt” their imaged responses to what they had heard and learned.

Within weeks of the first HIV / AIDS intervention workshop in July 1999, the responses of the women reflected their growing understanding and interpretation of the predicament in which they found themselves. The women have “written” their telling accounts in beadwork metaphors, thus challenging many forms of silence and transforming themselves and their socio-cultural milieu.

Socio-cultural and Economic Factors—the Agents of Silence

In rural Zulu communities such as those discussed in this article, *hlonipha* is a series of politeness conventions that dictate the proper behavior, topics, and modes of discussion for women. They include the way that a young bride (*makoti*) will relate to her groom’s family. Traditionally, such behavior would include a demonstration of commitment to the new family through the execution of specific duties. These include being a lifetime partner to her husband, bearing children, and providing services to the groom’s family in the form of tasks as specialized as brewing Zulu beer (*umqombothi*),⁶ collecting water and firewood, mending thatch and scrubbing floors, and cooking and washing. In many instances, she will be restricted from going to the movies (*Angawahambi amabhayisikobho*)⁷ or visiting hotels (*Angawahambi amahhotela*).⁸ The traditional *makoti*’s demeanor also is prescribed. “[S]he will never walk across the front of the hut of her parents-in-law, ... she keeps her eyes lowered in the presence of her husband and members of his family, and is selective about the terms she uses when referring to the members of the family.”⁹ This has and is changing. “What I have observed is that the grooms’ families have changed their attitudes towards *makotis*. These days, a *makoti* can go and seek employment and be employed. The *makoti* can decide with her husband on the number of children they want. It is unlike the olden days where the parents-in-law decided on the number of children that the couple would bear.”¹⁰

More enduring is the cultural taboo that forbids the discussion of matters of personal intimacy, love, and sexuality, which often is still strictly applied. In the rural communities of KwaZulu-Natal, the anthropological imperative for the expression of matters of intimacy has resulted traditionally in beadwork as the mode of conveying the innermost feelings of love and devotion, jealousy, and pique. While knowledge is traditionally imparted primarily through the performed media of song and dance, storytelling, and proverbs, taboo topics are expressed in the mediated form of beadwork, an intricate and detailed system of fixed communication describing, communicating, and facilitating ideas of an intimate and sexual nature.

Zulu women beadworkers traditionally are regarded in their communities as opinion-makers and creative visionaries, but their role in modern Zulu society is contradictory. They primarily are sole

6 Z.H. Manqele, “Zulu Marriage, Values, and Attitudes Revealed in Song: An Oral-style Analysis of Umakoit Ungowethu as performed in the Mnambithi Region at Kwahlathi,” unpublished MA Oral-Literacy Studies Centre for Oral Studies, University of Natal, Durban, South Africa, 2000: 15.

7 Manqele, 17.

8 Manqele, 17.

9 Manqele, 16.

10 Manqele, 20.

breadwinners in their rural homes, and have earned a degree of role-model status through their expert beadwork abilities, and thus they still are regarded as opinion-makers in their communities. However, in many instances, they have been and still are simultaneously highly susceptible to HIV infection through their biological makeup, and ignorance of the virus and how they can protect themselves from infection. For the majority of the women beadworkers who have participated in the *Siyazama* Project, the workshops provided them with their first opportunity to hear of HIV/AIDS and its complexities other than via gossip and rumor.

The opportunity to learn about the HIV/AIDS virus notwithstanding, rural Zulu women are disempowered and disadvantaged by the poor educational opportunities afforded to South African black communities, particularly rural communities, during the apartheid era. The rate of literacy even in their mother tongue, Zulu, is very low. In addition, few rural Zulu women in a certain age-range would have had any viable opportunity to learn to speak English.

The *Siyazama* Project—Challenging the Silence

Housed in the Department of Graphic Design at the Durban Institute of Technology in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, the *Siyazama* Project initially was funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and administered by the British Council, Durban. Expert women beadworkers from the Valley of a Thousand Hills, Inanda Valley, Msinga region, and the Ndwedwe informal settlements; undergraduate and postgraduate design students; health workers, doctors, and traditional healers; People Living with HIV/AIDS; medical anthropologists; performers and musicians; and marketing outlets work together on a multiplicity of levels. All attempt to address AIDS awareness while engendering a "breaking of the silence" and "straight talk" approach. The implicated self-informing nature of this process is neither innocent nor insignificant. An intervention such as the one described here has little chance of success unless it provides palpable and immediate evidence of significant long-term benefits to the participants.

What began in 1996 as a simple intervention to upgrade craft techniques developed of its own accord into an effective HIV/AIDS intervention. 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. 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 untra-

ditionally sexually explicit. It is suggested that the shift in beadwork design occurred spontaneously as a consequence of changing worldviews occasioned by the information provided by the HIV / AIDS workers. In turn, the designs resulting from the knowledge of HIV / AIDS then changed the women's worldview, setting up a cycle of learning that transformed both their worldview and their designs.

MAKOTI

by Fokosile Ngema of Msinga, January 2002

Story: As a married woman, the *makoti* often is highly susceptible and vulnerable to AIDS particularly if she is married polygamously or if her husband works away from home in the city.

Tableau description: The doll is 30 cms tall and is made from two long thin pieces of wood that are padded and topped with a stuffed body and head. The entire body and head are made from fabric. The doll depicted here is of a married woman identifiable by her traditional red headdress (*isicholo*). Her traditional dress with shawl show that she lives in the Msinga region of KwaZulu-Natal. Her leather skirt (*isidwaba*) is an important and highly desirable component of every married woman's wardrobe.

She wears the message "SAFA" meaning "we are suffering" beaded into her decorative apron (*isigege*). The combination and arrangement of colors are important in decoding messages. The green beads on the large white beaded fabric background could mean that, although she is contented and has achieved a degree of domestic bliss, there is an illness that is causing much discord in her life. The white beads in the traditional Zulu love letter (*ibheqe*) around her neck signify spiritual love, purity, and virginity, and the red ones stand for love and strong emotion.



Figure 2

Makoti. Created by Fokosile Ngema. Photo by Kate Wells,

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Of Polygamy—Multiple Silences

The extended family unit of multiple generations and multiple sibling families is favored for traditional, practical, and economic reasons in many indigenous communities. In many instances, polygamy is formally adopted. In such communities, a *makoti* often will welcome other *makotis* to bear the burden of the daily duties, and so a system of co-wives exists. In a community where polygamy is still practiced and accepted as a norm, fidelity within a polygamous relationship would render such an arrangement safe and reliable, but for the long term effects of apartheid legislation such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and Job Reservation (1948). The Group Areas Act resulted in the forced removal of communities, uprooting them from their traditional homes and resettling them in strange and often inhospitable environments far from sources of employment. In addition, legislated Job Reservation meant that the majority of the men of rural Zulu communities were forced to find remuneration for their labor in the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, a full day's journey by road/rail transport from their homes in the hills of KwaZulu-Natal.

In many instances, the *makoti*, or *makotis*, live with their husband's family while he lives and works in the city. Such arrangements mean that the men spent the year away from home returning only once a year, usually at Christmas, bringing with them money earned and saved to pay for new clothes, children's school fees, and school uniforms and books for the coming year. Under these circumstances, it is not unusual for the accepted traditional norm of rural polygamy to include a co-wife at a distance in the city. Such relationships with women in the city were and are notoriously unreliable for both partners because they are not anchored in the tradition of a settled community. Consequently, such relationships are less stable than their rural counterparts. Men add to or change their sexual partners in a far more random way than the tradition in the rural community would allow. Because of such instability, many urban women engaged in relationships with partners from a rural community hedge their bets by finding additional partners to provide for them. Consequently, city co-wives often are engaged in multiple migrant worker relationships in order to support their children. Such a fluid scenario of sexual interaction provides the HIV/AIDS virus a medium conducive to its optimal propagation. Engaging in conjugal relations with a husband who has spent the better part of the year on the mines in a far-off city could be a death warrant for a rural wife and any baby thus conceived.

UNSAFE SEX

by Gabi Gabi Nzama of Ndwedwe, August 1999

Story: The man knows that he has AIDS, and has not told his partner. He is not practicing safe sex since he is not using a condom, and thus is wittingly infecting her with AIDS.

Tableau description: The tableau measures 16x10 cms. The wooden base is covered with firmly stretched and hand-sewn, black cotton fabric. The two figures, both anatomically well-formed from tightly wound strips of cloth, have tight fitting waist bands comprised of red, black, and white beads. Their arms and legs encircle each other, and are covered in multicolored linear stranded loops of the smallest glass beads. Both figures have formed faces depicting eyes and mouth.

Values that are assigned to bead colors are grouped into positive and negative alternatives, except for white which has no negative connotation.¹¹ The predominant bead colors used in this tableau are red, black and white. An interpretation of the symbolic encoding and meaning of the tableau's bead colors could be the following positive message: Marriage, commitment, and regeneration of the relationship is wanted—black beads. There is much physical love and strong emotion in this relationship—red beads. The white beads signify spiritual love, purity (single partners), and virginity.

The sexual explicitness of the tableau is most extraordinary. The sexual act is profoundly depicted with genitalia fully illustrated. The image is a realistic representation of full intra-uterine penetration, but it is anything but clinical. It expresses the passion, joy, and ecstasy of human lovemaking, and in so doing highlights the paradox that the expression of human caring and pleasure simultaneously creates a predicament in an AIDS-infected world.

11 S. Schoeman, "Eloquent Beads: The Semantics of a ZULU Art Form" in *Africa Insight* 13: 2 (1983).



Figure 3
Unsafe Sex. Created by Gabi Gabi Nzama.
Photo by Kate Wells,
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THE COFFIN STORY

by Celani Njoyeza of Ndwedwe, December 2002

Story: The young woman beautifully attired for the return of her beloved husband from the mines in the north of the country, sits dejectedly alongside his coffin. Every year she awaits his return with keen anticipation for he will bring gifts from the brightly-lit city for her and the children, and money for the family's needs. Now she must bury him and wonder whether she too has AIDS, and how soon it will be before their children are orphaned.

Tableau description: The tableau measures 21x11 cms. The female figure sits with her arms extended as if not knowing what to do. The coffin alongside her is covered with a long strip of multicolored, beaded fabric in the "daisy chain" stitch pattern. Stranded loops of linear beads adorn the coffin identifying the regional Ndwedwe stitch pattern. Her body is made from tightly bound rolls of fabric. Beadwork fabric encircles her arms and legs. These beaded rectangles can be worn either as armbands (*izingusha*) or around the ankles as leggings (*amadavathi*). If taken in the negative context, the use of black and white beads on the armbands mean that there is much sorrow, despair and death in this woman's life, yet there is still hope for spiritual love and purity.

Figure 4

The Coffin Story. Created by Celani Njoyeza.

Photo by Kate Wells,

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AIDS ORPHANS

by Bonangani Ximba of Msinga, January 2002

Story: In Bonangani's words, this tableau depicts the growing numbers of AIDS orphans in her community.

Tableau description: The tableau measures 35x11 cms. Its long wooden base is covered with black cotton fabric. Each colorfully beaded child figure is made from tightly bound rolls of cloth which are then cut with a very sharp knife to form the base. Each head is made from a small bundle of cloth covered and pulled tight to make a ball shape. This then is stitched onto the body. Each orphan figure has human hair embedded into its head. The AIDS red ribbon logo is designed with superb accuracy to fit into the circular beaded loops of the body. Every second loop of each beaded circle is hand stitched into place. The arms are made from rolls of fabric and beaded intermittently with short broken lines.

The predominance of red, black, and white beads make for a powerful combination of meaning. Red beads, in their positive sense, stand for physical love and strong emotion and, in their negative sense, for anger, heartache, and impatience. The text reads: "*izitan-dane ngenxaye hiv*" meaning children who are orphaned by AIDS.

AIDS Orphans—Innocent Victims of Silence

Children orphaned by AIDS are an increasingly common phenomenon in the AIDS-ridden communities of South Africa, and KwaZulu-Natal is no exception. The questions which hang ominously over the children's innocent heads are numerous, demanding, and uncompromising. First considerations for a community are questions of how many of the children are HIV positive and how many will reach adulthood. Who will nurse and care for those whose lives will

Figure 5

AIDS Created by Bonangani Ximba.

Photo by Kate Wells,

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be brief and disease ridden? Who will ensure that they receive the medication that they deserve and need? Who will feed them, clothe them, and pay for their school fees and books? Who will perform their rituals for them so that they grow to be fully accepted and recognized members of the Zulu culture and community? Who can afford to take on the extra responsibility and cost of extra mouths to feed and bodies to clothe? Given the extent of the pandemic, can the government afford to take on this enormous responsibility?

Community grandmothers and mothers are caring for these children as best they can with their limited incomes, but the burden on the grandparents and the children themselves is horrific. That this level of life and death is already a reality in the rural communities is being written in the beadwork messages of the Siyazama workers, presenting viewers with a personal challenge that demands a response.

RAPE

by Gabi Gabi Nzama of Ndwedwe, August 2002

Story: The young virgin seeks help from the traditional diviner (*sangoma*) for an ailment. The *sangoma* treats the young woman by violently raping her.

Tableau description: The tableau measures 25x 9 cms. It is covered in an animal print velvet fabric which in turn is embellished with white beads in the shape of the AIDS ribbon, indicating that the young female is a virgin. The male figure looms over the female figure, and his penis is inserted as he pins her to the ground. Their screaming open mouths are beaded in red beads, and white bead circles make up their eyes. His hair is embellished with blue beads showing ill feelings and hostility.

Figure 6

Rape Created by Gabi Gabi Nzama.

Photo by Kate Wells,

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Rape—Shameful Silence

Rape statistics in South Africa are alarming, and the transmission of HIV / AIDS as a result of such violence is well documented. In addition, the erroneous belief that engaging in sexual intercourse with a virgin will cure HIV / AIDS is prevalent. This is prompting many men to have forced sex with young girls.

VIRGINITY TESTING

by Beauty Ndlovu of Ndwedwe, July 1999

Story: Mothers are checking girls to see if they are still virgins. They realize that, in a rural community, if you are a virgin you are safe from AIDS.

Tableau description: The tableau measures 20x11 cms. The figures are made from rolls of fabric, covered, and then dressed up appropriately. The young girl is depicted lying on the ground between her mother, anxious to know the outcome of the investigation, and the tester who is on her knees poised to examine the young girl's hymen. The young girl has her legs parted, the vaginal passage marked with a red slit at the point of vaginal entry.



Figure 7

Virginity Created by Beauty Ndlovu.

Photo by Kate Wells,

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Virginity Testing—Cheating the Silence

Significantly, the response to the HIV / AIDS information campaign has extended beyond a consciousness of the results of the pandemic, into wider responses from the community. Consciousness of the sexual transmission of the virus and the incidence of rape in the community has triggered a return to the traditional mode of preserving virginity in the Zulu community.

Virginity is highly prized among the Zulu. Traditionally, the loss of the virginity of a girl within the community is not merely a matter of shame for the girl and her family, but for the whole community. Virgin testing is carried out by women of various ages who themselves have been tested for their virginity prior to marriage. If the young woman is shown to be a virgin, the women performing the test ululate with pleasure. Conversely, the women wail, so that the outcome of the test is made public. In literate communities, a certificate will be issued. Such tests are conducted regularly and frequently on young women and girls as young as eight years of age, because public virginity testing in a community also is regarded as a rape or sexual harassment deterrent.¹² The recent resurgence of virginity testing in a significantly large sector of the Zulu community not only addresses the threat of HIV / AIDS, but also has resuscitated traditional values and attitudes, and encouraged pride and re-identification as Zulus. This last is a factor of critical importance in communities that are rendered silent and invisible by their lack of schooling, scribal literacy, and understanding of English.

Virginity consciousness was highlighted in the *Siyazama* Project by the regular inclusion of the performance of Shembe Virgins at workshops. The Shembe Virgins are a group of young people, both men and women, who have pledged to remain celibate until marriage. Followers of Isaiah Shembe number many hundreds of thousands, and constitute an indigenous church of significant influence in KwaZulu-Natal.

12 N. N. Khuzwayo, "Characteristics, Modification and Motivations for Virgin-testing Among the Zulus in the Maphumulo District of KwaZulu-Natal between 1950-2000" Unpublished MA dissertation (Durban: University of Natal, 2000).

HUMAN TOWER

by Beauty Ndlovu of Ndwedwe, August 2002

Story: The young wife, positioned at the top of the human tower, has just learned that her husband is HIV positive. On hearing this, she ran back to her community, who as her sisters, her aunts, and her mothers, protected her by pushing her up to the top of the human tower, out of the reach of her husband. Her fear is that she knows he is out looking for her. How long can she hide?

Tableau description: The tableau measures 26x30 cms. It is firmly covered with black fabric and beaded intermittently with no. 1 and no. 3 size beads. Three small animals are included in this tableau, circling and protecting the human tower. The animals are constructed from inner wire cores which then are padded with fabric before being fully beaded. Seven women stand on the bottom tier of the tower with their arms linked. Their bodies are made from tight fabric rolls, and their arms are strengthened with wire. Four women stand upon their shoulders. They, in turn, support the single figure at the top of the tower.

Figure 8

The Human Tower Created by Beauty Ndlovu.
Photo by Kate Wells,
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The Human Tower—the Silence Is Broken

It is about four years since the inception of the HIV / AIDS intervention workshops in July 1999, which began the process of informing the beadworkers of the *Siyazama* project about HIV / AIDS. The women now are better informed and financially better off than at any time in the past. Yet, ironically, they find themselves still faced with a predicament over which they have limited control. Knowledge and financial empowerment are not sufficient to make the necessary lifesaving choices and changes easy and immediate. Other factors impinge: the most intractable are the traditional gender roles and dynamics in their communities. This intractability notwithstanding, the beadworkers are in the process of changing their subservient and compliant roles, as well as the expectations and perceptions of others.

They report that they feel that their culture has been “pushed” and that they have tested the boundaries of what is considered to be acceptable behavior for women: they have challenged and are challenging *hlonipha*. At a recent public workshop focused on the beadwork messages of the *Siyazama* project, when asked what she considered her role to be, Fokisile Ngema (65 years old) responded to the Zulu male interviewer boldly and confidently. She explained her role as a sex educator using explicit sexual terms in Zulu, terms that she would not have dreamed of speaking out loud to another woman, let alone a man, as little as a year ago in deference to *hlonipha*, and which many of her Zulu sisters still would not do.

Unfortunately, most male partners still are not receptive to the new information and awareness, and reportedly at times are aggressive and abusive to the women. This immediately puts the women under further threat. They now have to find new ways of negotiating around issues of sexuality within the familial construct in which they were, and still are, extremely vulnerable to HIV / AIDS because of polygamous practices. Leaving the marital arrangement seldom is a viable solution, because they often are the sole rural income generators providing for their extended households. *Ubuntu*, the Zulu sense of community responsibility binds them fast.¹³

The ironies of this cruel and paradoxical predicament are not lost on the women. These days when it becomes known in the community that a man is sexually active outside of marriage, whether monogamous or polygamous, he is regarded as potentially HIV positive. In such circumstances, *ubuntu* once more prevails and the women of the community will provide the kind of support emotionally and physically that will place a woman beyond the influence of the man’s persuasion and force. Ultimately and often, this is the only protection that the women of the rural communities of KwaZulu-Natal can rely upon.

13 Yvonne Winters, personal communication, 2001.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates the operation of beadwork as a reliable means for the authoritative communication of messages that have a direct and critical impact on the livelihoods and lives of people disempowered, silenced, and rendered invisible by multiple hegemonies. Faced with the pandemic of HIV / AIDS, restricted by cultural taboos, limited by a lack of scribal writing, and with no command of English, the Zulu women of rural KwaZulu-Natal have developed a code and mode of metaphoric messaging that transmits the ironies of their life-threatening predicament powerfully. Through beadwork, they have addressed a multiplicity of silences and effected socio-cultural transformation, thus quite literally changing themselves and the world in which they live. This has been achieved both qualitatively and quantitatively. Their output has been prodigious. To date, the *Siyazama* collection numbers two hundred and forty individual examples of the visual metaphoric messages with which this group of Zulu women of rural KwaZulu-Natal are challenging the silences that have disempowered them and which threaten their existence and survival.

“Siyazama... we are striving to make a positive difference”

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Glossary of Zulu Terms

Abathakathi: medical magic or witchcraft

Amadavathi: leggings

Amadlozi: The ancestors—those who have passed from the present state of consciousness to that following this. The Zulu people do not think of death as an end, but as living in another state of consciousness.

Amatonga: ancestral worship

Hlonipha: a mode of expression/behavior denoting respect for males and their families

Ibique: a Zulu “love letter” of beadfabric carrying a message of intimacy from a woman to a man

Inyanga: a herbalist, usually male with a comprehensive knowledge of traditional medicine ground from leaves, bark, stems, bulbs, fruits, flowers, seeds and animal parts. Scarification is also employed and is seen as analogous to vaccinations. Izinyanga (plural) are highly trained over an intense lifetime period graduating from novice to expert over a long period of time. (personal communique, Dube)

Ishoba: a brush made from animal tail hair held in the left hand of the sangoma

Isicholo: traditional red headdress of a married Zulu woman

Isidwaba: leather skirt worn by a married Zulu woman

Isigege: a decorative apron

Izingusha: armbands

Nkulchu: a chicken

Kuyasa: the sun is rising in the morning

Kwa: in the place of

Makoti: a Zulu bride or daughter-in-law

Mame or **mamekazi:** the aunts of the mother

Malume: the mother’s brother who takes the place of a “male mother” (uncle)

Muthi: a remedy

Sangoma: is usually a female called upon to become a sangoma by the ancestors, who bestow upon her clairvoyant diagnostic powers. Isangoma also throw bones to read into a patient’s problems. The bones are thrown randomly onto a skin during the consultation period and a message is received after intense concentration. Isangoma spend many years in training, eventually graduating from novice to expert, (personal communique, Dube)

Siyazama: literally means “we are trying,” but is taken to indicate that “we are making a positive difference”

Ubuntu: humanism and a sense of mutual care and support, and pride in the past and in the African renaissance

Umzulu: traditional Zulu cosmology. This Zulu religious system, although influenced by Christian missionaries, adheres to a complex belief system.

Unkulunkulu: God, or the first man—the “Greatest of the Great”—who involved himself in the Tradition of Creation and matters of life and death

Zulu: a little piece of heaven