

# The intricacy of intangible cultural heritage: some perspectives on Ndebele earthen architecture

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Intangible heritage has become a discourse both in the institutionalised heritage domain and in the academic world. This article dismantles the concept, deconstructs existing mythologies, and illuminates some of the core issues which have given rise to the current intricacies and dissonance. By using examples from Ndebele earthen architecture, such as the role of memory in the history of house form, spatial orientation in settlement, the role of gender in space and the intangibility of mural art, it is possible to gain insight into the web that weaves tangible and intangible heritage into a cohesive concept.

**Key words:** intangible heritage, legislation, oral tradition, social life, things, Ndebele, earthen architecture

## **Die ingewikkeldheid van ontasbare erfenis: perspektiewe aangaande Ndebele grondargitektuur**

Ontasbare erfenis het ontwikkel in diskoerse in beide die instellingsgerigte en die akedemiese wêreld. Die artikel ontbloom die konsep, dekonstrueer mitologieë en werp lig op sekere van die kerngedagtes wat aanleiding gee tot die huidige kompleksiteite en onenighede. Met verwysing na Ndebele grondargitektuur soos die aanwending van geheue by die geskiedenis van woningvorm, ruimtelike oriëntasie by woning, die rol van geslag in ruimte en die ontasbaarheidsdimensie in muurverfkuns; word dit moontlik om insig te verkry in die net wat tasbare en ontasbare erfenis saamweef tot 'n eenheid.

**Slutelwoorde:** ontasbare erfenis, wetgewing, mondelinge oorlewering, sosiale lewe, dinge, Ndebele, grond-argitektuur.

This article is directed by a number of issues surrounding the domain of intangible cultural heritage. The concept became the property of the institutionalised discourse on world heritage as embodied by its various protection and conservation agencies under the auspices of UNESCO. There is potential tension between the language used by the above grand protection agencies, which Smith (2006: 299) terms the 'AHD' or 'authorized heritage discourse', and discourses which are informed by scholarly considerations. The author will attend to both views. In this regard, the notion of intangible heritage, as embedded in orality, is essentially meta-cultural and it is entangled with things, objects, commodities and structures in space. The author will present case study material from the ethnographic record and experiences of Ndebele earthen architecture which propose to present solutions in the study of intangible heritage.

## **The range of intangible heritage**

### ***Institutionalised frameworks***

When discussing heritage and intangible heritage, it is important to develop an inventory of the South African and international initiatives which gave rise to the various legislative frameworks. These were intended to preserve intangible heritage in particular. The brief focus here will be on the post-1994 period in South Africa and on the 2003 UNESCO initiative. The landmark White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage in South Africa was tabled in 1996. It contains references to key elements in the intangible heritage sector. Concepts such as 'performance' and 'transmission and study' in relation to the arts are mentioned (1996: 14). 'Oral traditions' are included in the definition of 'heritage' (1996: 15). Chapter 4 on Arts and Culture defines the role of the National Arts Council as promoting 'oral history and storytelling' (1996: 23). Chapter 5 on Heritage contains a message of commitment: 'Means must be found to enable song, dance, storytelling and oral history to be permanently recorded and conserved' (1996: 33).

The White Paper paved the way for the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25 of 1999). In its schedule (xxi), it defines 'living heritage' as embracing 'intangible aspects of inherited culture' which consists of cultural tradition, oral history, performance, ritual, popular memory,

skills and techniques, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), and the holistic approach to nature, society and social relationships (1999: 5-6). The National Estate includes 'objects to which oral traditions are attached and which are associated with living heritage' (1999: 27). These concepts appear to be sufficiently defined for the purpose of heritage impact assessment and legal processes which might stem from these definitions. Some of these notions are problematic, however, in terms of the interaction between the tangible and intangible domains as will be argued henceforth.

International efforts to protect intangible heritage, however, have a longer history and date back to 1989. On 17 October 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted (UNESCO 2003). According to this Convention, the 'domains' of intangible heritage can be defined as oral traditions and expressions with language as their vehicle; performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and universe; and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003: 2-3). The safeguarding of the intangible heritage needs to involve processes such as 'identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage' (UNESCO 2003: 3). South Africa has yet to ratify the UNESCO declaration, despite the fact that a meeting for this purpose took place in Pretoria in July 2007.

Legislative measures are necessary local and international instruments for preservation and promotion, irrespective of how idealistic they may appear. Law enforcement processes are always complicated and legislative measures generally follow rather complex trajectories before their actual promulgation. These trajectories involve governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders and gatekeepers. These interest groups have maintained extensive historical involvement with heritage within the discourse, which Smith (2006: 299) labels as 'authorised'. From a scholarly perspective, it is necessary to dismantle the above institutionalised and official measures pertaining to both intangible and tangible heritage.

### **Unpacking intangible heritage**

However analytical, pliable and attractive the distinction between tangible and intangible heritage might appear, the two concepts are interrelated to the extent that their disentanglement appears more problematic than their interrelatedness. Some heritage practitioners also dissect cultural heritage into movable and immovable items. Although it is also possible to include a lengthy discussion on public and academic engagement with heritage, the author will only include those scholarly insights which have a bearing on the case study material on Ndebele heritage.

'Intangible' represents the abstract and nonmeasurable. The notion of orality and oral tradition acts as the main vehicle of the intangible. The elements 'bias' and 'prejudice against the preservation of nonmaterial heritage' have pervaded much of our conceptualisation and appreciation of literate versus oral expressions. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Allen 1992: 834) presents the meaning of 'oral society' as a society which 'has not yet reached the stage of literacy'. This definition negates and precludes the parallel intellectual co-existence of societies which have always emphasised oral genres for communication and Western literate societies.

Tangible heritage is knitted into the intangible heritage domain. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan (1991: 1) argues that oral (intangible) products are the result of interactions between a vast range of different participants and are not simply 'picked up like pebbles' along the way. 'Tangible heritage, without intangible heritage, is a mere husk or inert matter', argues Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (2004: 60). She is also in favour of a clear separation between archive

and repertoire. Repertoire is ingrained in performance, the strong medium of many oral products. It is important to be mindful here of the conventional (Western) definition of theatre and performance as opposed to African manifestations of nonformal and participatory theatre. Drewal-Thompson (1991: 11) cautions, however, against compartmentalised boundaries of 'dealing' with African performance. Finnegan (1991: 103) points to a range of performance variables, namely, verbal aspects, musical features, pauses, shouts, body decorations, kinesics (gesture) and senses. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (2004: 58) presents heritage as a meta-cultural concept. 'Performers are carriers, transmitters and bearers of traditions, terms which connote a passive medium, conduit, or vessel, without volition (choice), intention, or subjectivity.'

The valuation of tangible things and objects can also be viewed in terms of their life histories and commodity status. Following Appadurai (1986: 34), it is possible to distinguish between the cultural biography of an object and its social history. The object moves 'through different hands, contexts, and uses'. The social history of objects is determined by large-scale events and by 'ebb and flow', which changes the meaning of an object (1986: 36). This social history is essentially intangible. Appadurai, however, argues that a reversal of the exchange between the two notions is also possible, yet less predictable. The valuation of things and goods is often determined by a quest for authenticity. Tourist art and craft markets thrive on the competition for authenticity, which is mostly determined by monetary intervention (Appadurai 1986: 26)

According to Appadurai (1986: 41), knowledge of commodities, that is, both the consumption and production end, may or may not be interactive. Some owners and prospective buyers of Oriental carpets, for example, possess and control the production of knowledge, while others are ignorant by choice. In the consumption world of African ethnic and tourist arts and crafts, few collectors have any concern for the socio-cultural context and the cultural biography of the object. The relationship between the abstract intangible context and the tangible properties of an item, have little significance in the consumption market.

Things are slow events (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 59). The existence of any artefact can, therefore, be determined within the parameters of time, process, change and meaning. While many objects become obsolete or are destroyed, some objects and artefacts are renewable and replaceable. These are rebuilt as standardised cultural practice. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (2004: 59) refers to the rebuilding process of the Japanese shrine by means of a tradition known as *shikinen sengu*. The process is ongoing and spans a heritage of 2000 years. Mosques in Mali, which are included in the world heritage list, such as the Djinganbery mosque Timbuctu, span more than four centuries of regular restoration. This process is monitored by the Iman and is supervised by a master mason who teaches upcoming younger masons. The skills transfer process is an oral one and European-based conservations agencies are now documenting it.

The successful transfer of knowledge guarantees the continuation of the above practices. During male initiation rituals among the Ndebele, Xhosa and Sotho communities in Southern Africa, an integral part of instruction involves the construction of the initiation shelter or lodge, called *itonto* among the Xhosa and *umphadu* among the Ndebele. The transfer of knowledge is inter-generational and linear. Elderly men will refrain from instruction, but will supervise the flow of the knowledge process. These initiation shelters are destroyed after the completion of every ritual and rebuilt on a regular basis.

The notions of space and place have received considerable attention in anthropology in recent times. Space and place are not exchangeable, and space is not the same as territory. Jiminez (2003: 139) views 'place' as a conventional geographical phenomenon which can be physically demarcated. 'Space' constitutes a 'field of relations'. Space can be seen as places

being activated and populated. He is critical of Moore (1996) and Bourdieu (1977) who view space as a 'spatial order' and humans' capacity to organise space. His contention is as follows: 'Social relationships are inherently spatial, and space an instrument and dimension of people's sociality.' He argues further that 'social life can no longer be seen as unfolding through space but with space, that is, spatiality' (Jiminez 2003: 140). The author does not dispense with the other perspectives on the space-place discourse, since these have become established arguments by a number of scholars, as also cited by Jiminez (2003: 138-14). The Jiminez approach appears ontologically attractive. Objects and things are created in conjunction with space and place making, for example: A ceramic vessel conveys a specific message in its capacity and position as a beer container in the interior of a house. The house and the vessel, its contents and its position in the house exist as a result of social life.

Memory becomes inextricably linked to the mode of transfer of knowledge. Without memory, the intangible domain suffocates and is rendered void of meaning. In this regard, so-called oral societies also suffered from the prejudice of the literate world. The term 'rote' memory is often associated with the way in which Africans remember. Scholars such as Vansina (1985), Finnegan (1991) and Goody (1987) who worked in Africa describe memory in African societies as the product of 'contemporary social relations' a 'process of communication' and not a 'deliberate exercise of memory skills' (Goody 1987: 175).

Memory is often amplified by means of mnemotechnic devices (Vansina 1985: 44-46), which are manifest in objects, landscapes (place) and music. It was argued elsewhere how the memory capacity of community members benefitted from a site visit by the oral historians in a specific community (Van Vuuren 1993). Graves and cemeteries, battle fields and monuments, objects and archaeological remains are powerful mnemonic tools.

To preserve, conserve and safeguard is to enforce a process of freeze. Museums in the Western heritage were once well-acquainted with the freezing process. It was regarded as a status symbol and as the primary instrument used in the world of the authorised heritage discourse. This form of heritage has become a mark of modernity (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 59). Over the past decades, museums have adapted to critical demands to reveal both the biographical data and intangible contexts of objects on display. They are also challenged to explain 'construction of identity, social formations and culture itself' (Hardin & Arnoldi 1986: 8). This contextual emphasis is a break from the formalist and aesthetic approach which has dominated the exhibition of African material culture artefacts.

In the ensuing discussion, the interrelation and woven interaction between the intangible and tangible aspects in the built environment of the Ndebele will be illustrated.

## **Ndebele earthen architecture**

### ***Chronology in house form: a synopsis***

Ndebele settlement architecture evolved through three major typological stages: a pre-colonial grass (beehive) dome, followed by a cone-on-cylinder ('rondavel') type, and the current square and rectangular shapes. These developments should not be seen in terms of precise datable stages, but rather as succeeding stages which often overlapped as earlier types were gradually phased out (Van Vuuren 1993: 51). The settlement layout of the Ndebele homestead changed considerably over time. The pre-colonial model (the grass dome) was similar to other Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi) patterns, which archaeologists term the 'central cattle pattern' (CCP) (Huffman 2007: 25). This pattern, which is typical of the patriarchal and bovine order, consisted of a cattle byre (kraal) in the middle surrounded by the homes of wives and children, storage

huts and similar facilities. The houses of the wives of the polygamous male head were usually arranged in order of rank and seniority (Van Vuuren 1983: 49-51).

The layout patterns changed considerably after 1883 (the Mapoch War), particularly as a result of the introduction of large courtyard walls (*iirhodlo*) and square and rectangular house forms (called *iirhaesi*: derived from 'house') (Van Vuuren 1983: 44-45; Meiring 1955: 81-82). The cattle kraal (*isibaya*), now four-cornered in shape, still occupies a central position, but the general layout resembles an elongated 'n' shape. The pattern, although still in existence in rural areas, has largely disappeared.

### **Memory and the cone-on-cylinder house**

The written record (Meiring 1955) on this house form presents some limitations: there is little data on house form variation, on building materials used and on socio-cultural practices. Meiring was an architect and his documentation focused on the measurable and tangible substances in Ndebele earthen architecture, for which he deserves credit. By 1978, the use of this type of house, a thatched conical roof on a double earthen wall, had lapsed, as had the knowledge base of its construction. At this time, the author located almost 30 sites in the Middelburg district, Mpumalanga, which contained archaeological remains of early cone-on-cylinder houses. A decision was made to access the oral records as far as possible. A major challenge, however, was locating and interviewing those Ndebele men and women who possessed the necessary oral knowledge.

The author took note of the existence of a unique local dating system which is ingrained in the Ndebele initiation age class system. In brief, the system operates as follows. The Ndzundza-Ndebele allocate 15 regimental names (*iindanga*) in a fixed cycle to males who are initiated every 4 years. The cycle repeats itself after approximately 60 years. It is possible to backdate each regimental date of installation to at least the 19th century. Men remember their own *indanga* names as well as those of all the members in their male lineage. Ndebele women also associate themselves with the regimental names of their husbands for comparative purposes.

Example: If a man named Peter Sibiya was initiated in the Dzibha regiment in 1939, it would be possible to calculate his approximate date of birth to 1919 (1939 minus between 18 and 20 years). This would place him in an age-time category during which he would have gained some knowledge on the cone-on-cylinder houses from at least the 1930s onwards (see also Van Vuuren 1993: 52-54).

The author decided to put the system to test. A number of these 'dated' elders were identified and accompanied to some of the previously mentioned (by then still) unidentified settlement sites. The men who were initiated in regiments in the period 1907 to 1923 exhibited vivid memories. The author obtained important information, such as the approximate diameter of house and perimeter walls (*iinrhodlo*), the spatial arrangement of structures in the homestead complex (*umuzi*), and indigenous terms for various construction components and processes.

This abstract reconstruction process had other benefits. The history of sites and residents could be linked in some cases. In most cases, the author was able to establish the ownership of early homesteads and trace many descendents using the genealogical method. Neighbours in the area provided invaluable assistance. These site visits contributed to the amplification of oral knowledge as was argued earlier. (Van Vuuren 1993). These men were also able to supply data on building material --- some of which had strong regional variables. Sub-chronologies for this type of house were also established. The approximate settlement histories were established for about 90% of the case sites.

With regard to memory, the elderly men's recognition of tangible remains such as plastered and stone walls, earthen built platforms such as the *umsamo*, access routes around the homestead, and domestic objects such as grinding stones, polishing stones, wooden pegs, and so on served as powerful mnemotechnic instruments.

The exercise also underscored Kirschnblatt-Gimblett's (2004) depiction of things as slow events. Memory in this case did not contribute directly to the dating of sites or to the understanding of the social life (Appadurai's term 1986), of settlement and object; but in a referential and indirect mode through the exploration of an indigenous dating system in that society. Tangibility and intangibility manifested in a logical synthesis.

### **Spatial orientation in the settlement**

The human body often serves as a source of inspiration for orientation, direction and measurement. This notion is not uncommon in Africa as Tilley (1999: 45) reminds us: 'Human metaphors in architecture are grounded in the use of the body as a model for comparable structural, decorative and symbolic forms.' In the same vein, spatial orientation and direction stemming from the bodily metaphor are reflected in architecture.

The Ndebele homestead (*umuzi*) used to be occupied by a male and his wives. Homestead remains dating back to between the 1930s and 1950s reflect layout patterns which were typical of the three generational polygamous types, such as a man with four wives and his descendants. The early Ndebele homestead was divided in two halves along the 12:00-18:00 axis if one uses the analogy of a watch. These halves are intangible and invisible, and consist of a right-hand side (*ububene*) and a left-hand side (*ikhohlo*). Right and left are determined by turning the back on the 12:00 position of the homestead, thus facing the main entrance (06:00 position). The house (*indlunkulu*) of the principal wife is placed at the 11:00 position and that of the second (*ikhohlo*) wife at the 13:00 position. Third, fourth and lower-ranked wives are placed on either side of the abstract line, thus third and fifth wives right (10:00 and 09:00 positions), and the fourth and sixth wife on the left-hand side (14:00 and 15:00 positions) (Van Vuuren 1983: 43).

This dualism in orientation is not uncommon in the South African homestead, particularly among Nguni-speaking communities such as the Zulu, Swazi and Xhosa (Kuper 1980). The left/right-hand dichotomy varies in terms of the position of the body, that is, whether or not it faces the entrance of the homestead. In the Zulu and Swazi communities, left/right dichotomy is the opposite from the Ndebele (Kuper 1980: 9).

This intangible left-right dichotomy is still maintained, to a certain extent, within the Ndebele house. The house (*indlu*) is divided into right and left sectors. The right-hand sector is known as the *incamadoda*, literally 'of men', while the left-hand sector is known as *incabafazi*, meaning literally 'of women' (Van Vuuren 1983: 200-201). This gendered dichotomy depicts binary oppositions between the daily worlds of the male and female. The dividing line is abstract or intangible, running from front door entrance (called *umnyango*) to the back of the *umsamo*, which is an elevated earth-built bench. The abstract line functions as an indicator of perceived male and female space even within the modern square and rectangular house. In this case, though, the back is not turned towards the 12:00 position of the house.

Kuper's (1980: 15) suggestion of a dichotomous orientation, that is, a diametric (left/right) and concentric (inner/peripheral) orientation, is convincing. Symbolically, the left/right dichotomy often accounts for the categories of left (evil/female) and right (good/male), and front (the living world) and rear (the ancestral world) (Kuper 1980: 14).

The polygamous homestead in Ndebele society has lapsed and the knowledge basis of the

old dichotomy became eroded. Residues of the male-female space dichotomy emerge during community ritual such as during male and female initiation ritual, weddings and religious events. Within the modern homestead, men remain seated on the right and women on the left. Ritual and performance remains the principle agent of transfer of knowledge and the maintenance of an intangible rule, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (2004) argued earlier.

## Gendered space

The male-dominated order in the Ndebele homestead is also embodied within the design of thoroughfares and corridors in the homestead. Houses in the Ndebele homestead are interlinked by an impressive courtyard wall system. Each house is surrounded by a courtyard (*isirhodlo*) which accentuates privacy and ownership, and provides protection against nature. Tilley (2006: 24) argues that the house serves as the domestic, creative centre and personal 'other' of the public domain. Before the 1950s, these courtyard walls were built to a height of up to 180 centimetres, but this has largely fallen away since the 1980s (Van Vuuren 1983: 261). A courtyard wall, constructed along the 09:00-15:00 axis of the house, divides the front and rear sections. The rear section is known as *isibuya* and the frontal section as *isirhodlo*. *Isibuya*, as space, equals female territory, that is, space to rear children, prepare food and beverages, and to dispose of domestic waste behind the rear wall. This section, which includes the house, symbolises a female and private domain, while the front section of the courtyard, or *isirhodlo*, is regarded as male and public space.

Interlinking courtyard walls between houses are accessed by several corridors and thoroughfares, called *imikgothana*. To the ordinary person, these corridors obviously provide mobility for residents between sectors. From an intangible perspective, these corridors arrange for the flow and maintenance of the *ukhlonipha* rule in Ndebele society. According to the *hlonipha* principle in Nguni society (Krige 1957: 30-31), a bride honours and respects her father-in-law by observing a range of rules of avoidance, for example: She should not face him, address him, or enter the same room or a restricted space where he sits and stands. If, during her daily movements around the homestead, she comes into close proximity to him, she must utilise these courtyard corridors to avoid him, even if it involves walking through a neighbouring courtyard to her destination (Van Vuuren 1983: 64).

*Hlonipha* avoidance practice is essentially a performance and a repertoire. Many practices in intangible heritage, such as *hlonipha*, are transported via everyday performance and regular ritual. Tangible items in the built environment, such as courtyard walls and corridors make sense in the intangible domain where their regulatory capacity is valued. During the 1980s, Ndebele men blamed the decline in *hlonipha* respect on a lack of 'proper' homestead design, in other words, on a design which did not have corridors to allow for the 'flow' of *hlonipha* principles. In this regard, Moore (1996: 162) argues that space is 'an objectification of the male world view'. Conversely, the present Ndebele homestead in rural areas is still built with corridor walls, but the previous knowledge base built on the old rationale for building them, has lost its currency among younger people.

Female initiation ritual (*iqhude*) in Ndebele society transforms the social rank, status and control of space and resources of women in that society. Although it is a temporary situation (mostly over weekends), the ritual nevertheless empowers women to reverse the previously indicated male-female dichotomies in settlement space. During the female initiation, male space becomes female space which is dominated by female relatives and age mates of the initiate. Women occupy central positions in the frontal courtyard (*isirhodlo*), the interior of the house and the public space between the front of the homestead and the cattle enclosure (Van

Vuuren 1993: 7). Women outnumber men and men are marginalised to outer areas around the core homestead. Men are invited back during ritual occasions and announcements, and even the girl's father is 'told where to sit'. Women occupy central positions in the frontal courtyard (*isirhodlo*), the interior of the house and public space between the front of the homestead and the cattle enclosure (Van Vuuren 1993: 7).

The claiming of male space during the girls' initiation ritual becomes a victory in what Lincoln has termed (1969: 93) 'the battle of the sexes'. The interaction between men and women is mediated through space as a medium, both territorially (where to enter and where not) and conceptually (only women here). Ndebele women knit and weave this 'invisible fabric of space', as Jiminez (2003: 150) calls it, but under their own conditions.

### **The invisible dimension in mural art**

The Ndebele of South Africa has captivated the world with their specific style of mural art and bead work. This mostly geometrical, multi-coloured and visually inspiring style of wall painting has drawn the attention of both the popular media and academic scholarship since the 1950s (Bakker & Van Vuuren 2004: 124). Elaborative glass bead work on aprons, necklaces, anklets and armbands which are worn during community ritual formed and integrated artistic and stylistic unit with their mural art. Themes and motifs on vertical wall surfaces were often duplicated on beaded aprons.

One trajectory in the academic scholarship entertained the notion of classifying types of mural art motifs in terms of their variation in symmetry (Weiss 1963). More recent scholars, such as Schneider (1985: 60-68), traced the origins of regionalism and symbolism in the designs. Questions such as the following were often posed: What does this multiplicity of motifs, designs and colour combinations tell us? Schneider (1985: 62) argues that these designs do not constitute specific cosmological or religious concepts, but rather are representations of ethnic identity which were developed within a specific socio-political environment in South Africa (Schneider 1985: 64). Regional identities can indeed still be traced up to the middle of the 1980s (Van Vuuren 1983: 165). The national and African identity of the Ndebele mural art is indeed the dominant narrative.

### ***How is the intangible part of the artistic expression revealed?***

Ndebele mural art has earned this community a distinguished cultural identity. Ndebele women and their daughters paint their houses and courtyard walls according to what they term *isikhethu*, or 'ours' or 'our culture'. This style has also become contrasted with modern tendencies in style variation mostly advocated by younger Ndebele women. It has become a generation identity. Since the 1883 Diaspora of the Ndebele and the introduction of the farm life period (roughly 1883-1970), regionality in style (eg motif, colour and paint) has become a clear marker of differentiation (also see Schneider 1985: 62-63). Modern acrylic paints were introduced in areas closer to the urban fringe, while earthen pigments are still used in rural areas (Van Vuuren 1983: 165).

Apart from geometric designs (steps and triangles), Ndebele women introduced a new range of themes. These included the shaving blade (*itjhefana*), aeroplanes, automobiles, urban icons such as lamp posts and facades, motor registration letters, pot plants and many others. These designs, therefore, provide important gender-related information. According to Lina Matjiya (aged 58), in a patriarchal-dominated society, Ndebele established and maintained social networks in urban areas mainly by resourcing kinship ties: 'I visited my aunt in Pretoria



and we walk around church square and I see the buildings and I paint these, when I return.' It gives her freedom and enhances her creativity; she is also able to tell the (male) world where she has been.

The frontal courtyard (*isirhodlo*) might be male and public, but its dominating visual impact is entirely female. An Ndebele woman freely and elaborative paints the outer frontal wall — she might also add further rows to the front and model a bridge with anthropomorphic figurines at the entrance, without any interference from the male head of the household. In brief, the homestead is a woman's world, that is, a female world of how the Ndebele woman projects herself. Regrettably, from a heritage perspective, this has all changed. The modern lifestyle demands and economical realities have left few Ndebele women with the opportunity to continue with this famed tradition.

The intangible dimension in Ndebele mural art is woven into the wall surface art product. Ndebele mural art has become a well-known tourist commodity since the 1950s, and Esther Mahlangu has catapulted this art from into the global arena. An Ndebele woman paints from memory, and her knowledge of pigment mixtures and designs is based on oral knowledge passed down from elderly women. She can eventually decide on her own variations. The process is essentially a repertoire as is clear from the performance of intangible culture. Ndebele men do not contest a woman's right to take command of space and place in the homestead, and 'live' her *ukugwala* (to paint).

Ndebele women have adapted astoundingly in the volatile world of commodity and consumption. Cultural patterns in the mural art of the 1950s were multi-coloured and design motifs have since adopted the symbols of the modern world. Some of these women have also conveyed the messages of the new South African democracy by using the colours of the ANC in mural art designs and on beads. Probably the most powerful development in Ndebele mural art has been the transfer from the medium of homestead wall surface to shopping mall walls, murals on public buildings, painting entire automobiles in Ndebele colours and selling mural art on canvas. Clearly, the ability to 'read' change in the world of commodity gave Ndebele women an edge and has added new meaning to the notions of ethnic art, identity and the life history of mural art. Mural art has always been subject to change. For decades, new motifs have simply been painted over old ones. The layered wall thus accommodates both cultural biography and social history. The intangible heritage of this form of mural art presents its own intangible narrative apart from its visible and touchable qualities.

## **Conclusion**

Once the fabric of the intangible domain in cultural heritage is dissected and linked to its tangible components, the heritage of a thing or artefact, a building or place makes sense. The dismantling of the heritage by means of the above dichotomy is symptomatic of the institutionalised discourse which focuses on the analytical dimension based on Western perceptions of heritage. The 2003 Convention on Intangible Heritage, nevertheless, was an effort to provide a specific inventory of intangible heritage, which was previously ignored.

Traditional earthen building style in Ndebele society has not survived modern trends. Ironically, earthen building techniques have survived with economically marginalised and mostly rural Ndebele families. The knowledge base on earthen building and its intangible components has also become eroded.

One has to understand the complexity of the socio-cultural systems in African society in order to comprehend the nonobvious, invisible and intangible aspects of socio-cultural

practices. Such are those aspects of earthen construction and design which are not apparent to the outsider and the inexperienced researcher. Oral tradition (and its manifestations) is one repository to explore in order to expose the intangible domain. The other action lies in what anthropologists typically do, namely, participatory research such as observing ritual, during which the intangible aspects of the utilisation of space are revealed.

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