

Iconic bodies: Ndebele women in ritual context

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Ndebele women of South Africa have become prominent visual artworks in the international world of commodity tourism and African art. Pictures of women clad in ritual beadwork against the backdrop of their art on homestead walls have spread since the 1950s. Some of them, like Esther Mahlangu, rose to fame as an individual mural artist. It will be illustrated how this bodily image of the Ndebele woman emerged from a small village north of Pretoria. Evidence will show how the Ndebele tourism body became completely estranged from the ritual bodily context. Following on this, it will be explained how Ndebele women use ritual to raise their statuses within the domain of a male dominated society. It will be contended that these women were not merely passive victims of marginalization but they have become powerful agents to manipulate and advance their own destinies. Arguments have been informed by discourses on the anthropology of the body, the efficacy and power of ritual, the notion of identity, ideas on commoditization and the anthropology of tourism.

Key words: Ndebele, KwaMsiza, body, beadwork, mural art, tourism, initiation ritual, traffic cops, commodity

Ikoniese liggame: Ndebele-vroue in rituele konteks

Ndebele-vroue van Suid- Afrika het prominente visuele kunswerke geword in die internasionale wêreld van kommoditeitstoerisme en Afrikakuns. Foto's van vroue geklee in rituele krale-uitrustings teen die agtergrond van muurkuns op woningmure, het, veral sedert die vyftigerjare van die vorige eeu toegeneem. Sommige van hulle, soos Esther Mahlangu, het roem verwerf as 'n individuele muurkunsenaar. Daar sal aangedui word hoe hierdie liggaamsbeeld van Ndebele-vroue sy ontstaan gehad het vanuit 'n klein woonstede ten noorde van Pretoria. Argumente word aangevoer dat die Ndebele toeris-liggaam totaal vervreemd geraak het van die rituele liggaamskonteks. Voorts sal daar verduidelik word hoe Ndebele-vroue ritueel gebruik of manipuleer ter bevordering van verhoogde statusvlakke binne die domein van 'n mans-gedomineerde samelewing. Daar word aangevoer dat hierdie vroue nie bloot passiewe slagoffers van marginalisasie was nie, maar inderdaad kragtige agente wat in staat was tot manipulasie en die bevordering van hulle eie lotgevalle. Argumente word gestaaf deur diskoerse aangaande die antropologie van die liggaam, die werksaamheid en mag van ritueel, die gedagte van identiteit, idees rakende kommodifikasie en die antropologie van toerisme.

Slutelwoorde: Ndebele, liggaam, kralewerk, muurkuns, toerisme, KwaMsiza, inisiasieritueel, verkeersbeamptes, kommoditeit

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived (Mary Douglas 1970:65).

From 1952 to 1957 the South African artist Alexis Preller exhibited his well-known Ndebele figures. Preller's Ndebele women are clad in full ritual or ceremonial costume (figure 1), mostly in seated positions, and in "Mapogga women" (figure 2) three women are seated inside the courtyard facing each other also wearing ritual costume. The ritual costume consists of beaded aprons, traditional blankets, arm, ankle and neck rings and other artifacts associated with Ndebele ritual.¹



Figure 1
Alexis Preller Ritual Mapogga (1951, oil on canvass, 76.5cmx41cm, Private Collection)
(source: free internet).



Figure 2
Alexis Preller, *Mapogga Women* (1952, oil, 30x75cm, Private Collection)
(source: free internet).

At around the same period Walter Battiss was influenced by the Ndebele bead and mural art motif when he produced his “Ndebele village” in which images of Ndebele mural art foreground the Ndebele women. Ritual attire appears less prominent.



Figure 3
Walter Battiss, *Ndebele Village* (c.1950, oil on canvas, 51 x 61cm, Private collection)
(source: free internet).

Since then and even before these productions, numerous photographic reproductions and other images have spread around the country and the globe. Countless images in the post-card genre in particular, have carried the pictures of beaded Ndebele women and their mural art across the globe. Two categories of images blended into a single aesthetic unity -women dressed in elaborated beadwork against the backdrop of the multi-coloured homestead mural art by the same women. The visual image of the Ndebele developed into a tribal, female and an exotic African artist icon. Both local and international tourism paradigms kept feeding this image and this has since its inception in the mid-1950s not dwindled. The South African 2010 Soccer World Cup and the marketing strategies of the National department of Tourism and its many arms, are proof of this. Almost all the media images were inspired by a single site, the Msiza village north of Pretoria (Meiring 1955, Bakker & Van Vuuren 2004).

Since the mid-1980s the success of another Ndebele icon has received further impetus when a single mother, Esther Mahlangu, accepted an invitation by the French embassy in Pretoria to paint a mural in the Pompidou centre. Steadily the Ndebele image shifted to the prowess of the individual creative artist, as other Ndebele women also received international invitations. Esther Mahlangu, in all her travels abroad, never parted from her ritual attire- beaded anklets and armbands, beaded aprons and blanket- during exhibition time.

In this article it will be illustrated how this bodily image of the Ndebele woman emerged from this small Ndebele village north of Pretoria, and how this site inspired among others the conservation efforts of an academic architect. Simultaneously protagonists of the apartheid ideology worked on a different agenda. Evidence will show how the Ndebele tourism body became completely estranged from the ritual bodily context. Following on this I will explain how Ndebele women use ritual to raise their statuses within the domain of a male dominated

society. Finally, it will be contended that these women were not merely passive victims of marginalization but became powerful agents to manipulate and advance their own destinies. My arguments will be informed by discourses on the anthropology of the body, the efficacy and power of ritual, the notion of identity, ideas on commoditization and the anthropology of tourism.

KwaMsiza and the creation of Ndebele bodily art

During the aftermath of the 1883 Mapoch War, when the Ndzundza-Ndebele royals were imprisoned, Speelman Msiza and his family settled on the farm Hartbeestfontein (now part of the Sinoville suburb of Pretoria) as labour tenants. The farm belonged to a white farmer known as Oubaas or “Vet” Wolmarans. Among others the Msizas were tasked to pay regular visits to their imprisoned leader Nyabela and provide food and moral support. After his release Nyabela settled close to the Msiza homestead and he was also buried there (Bakker & Van Vuuren 2004: 128).

Wolmarans had apparently maintained sound relations with his farm tenants. Most importantly, he allowed foreign tourists to visit the Msiza family, photograph the village and its mural art, purchase beadwork, and he had the Msizas “dancing and singing” and supplying sorghum beer for the tourists. The mainly Afrikaner residents of the Waverley suburb across the mountain nearby, whose anti-Ndebele sentiments harked back to the Ndebele wars of the late 1800s, protested against the presence of the village so close to a White suburb. They feared the kind of racial interaction that took place at the Msiza village between tourists and the villagers. Their lobbying saw the eventual removal of the Msiza family and the torching of their village in 1953 (Bakker & Van Vuuren 2004:129). The irony of the removal was that the Nationalist Government by means of its State Information Bureau, had made fruitful use of the village to promote tribal Africa and the ritually dressed Ndebele woman (Meiring 1955: 35).

University of Pretoria architecture professor, A.L. Meiring, intervened in the removal of the original Msiza village by documenting the architecture with his students since 1944 (Meiring 1955:27-28). Meiring’s supervision was to ensure the “authentic” reconstruction of this settlement and to preserve it as a tourist and curio attraction, as eventually proved to be the case over the next three decades (Van Vuuren 1983: 159-175).



Figure 4
The original Msiza settlement
(source: photograph by Meiring 1955:30).

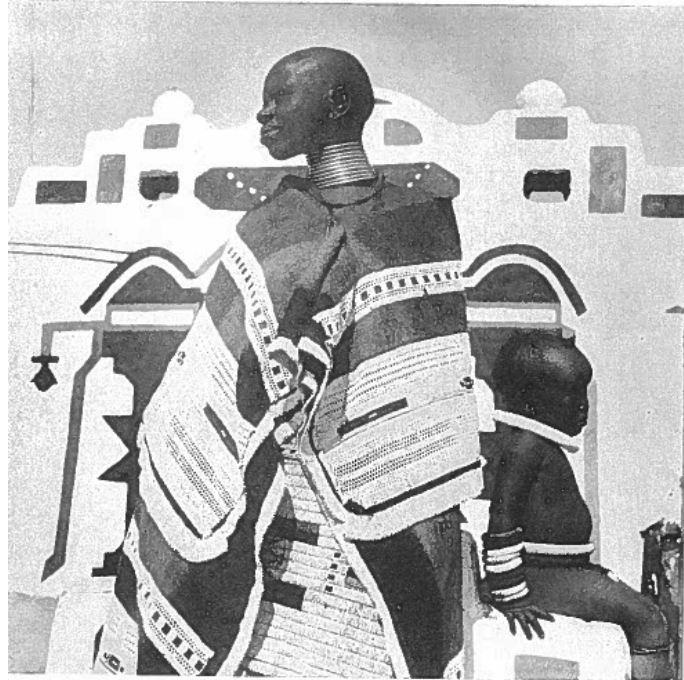


Figure 5
Ndebele woman and child at KwaMsiza
(source: photograph by Constance Stewart, Meiring 1955:33).



Figure 6
Aerial photo of the Msiza complex before resettlement
(source: photograph by Dotman Pretorius, Bowen 1957).

In the ensuing years a number of popular publications (e.g. in *Huisgenoot*, *Lantern*, *Outspan* and *Brandwag*) found inspiration in this attraction and visitors photographed dancing women, clad in ceremonial dress with aprons such as the *itjorholo*, *umaphotho*, *isiphephethu*, brass rings (*iidzila*) and of course the robust and fascinating *iirholwane* ring around the neck. Against the multi-coloured backdrop of painted courtyard walls, visitors could buy an assortment of beaded curios and have themselves photographed with “real” Ndebele – or “Mapogger” (derived from Mabhoko) tribals. The post-card trade flourished and in the process the local and national government used every opportunity to promote the Ndebele as an example of a “volk” who loved their heritage in a primordial or primitive sense (Bakker & Van Vuuren 2004).

The Msiza village, however, also inspired academics, art historians, architects and anthropologists. Apart from Meiring’s architectural drawings, there were the publications of Grossert, Franz, Battiss & Junod (1958), Spence & Bierman (1954) in *Architectural Review*, the Spanish born architect Guedes (1962), Frescura (1984), the Volkekunde MA dissertation of Weiss (1963), and from the art history fraternity, Berman (1974), Bruce (1976), Knight & Priebatch (1977). There were others as well.

Beaded bodies and writing on the wall: the stereotyping of the Ndebele body

The beaded Ndebele did not escape the lens of iconic ‘ethnic’ photographer Duggan-Cronin who (1935: Plate XXXI) published photographs of Manala-Ndebele women who posed in ritual costume as part of a bridal group. Whether he photographed them at the time of the ritual is open for speculation. It should be noted that Van Warmelo published similar photos of the village in his publication in 1930 (Van Warmelo 1930:43, 58). The predominantly white colour of worn beads is noteworthy in terms of the chronology of designs, motifs and colour combinations, since these are probably the earliest photographs on record (figure 5).

Brincker (1961: 54-55) contributed with an article entitled “Kleurrykste Bantoestam in Transvaal” (Most colourful Bantu tribe in Transvaal). The focus is on photographs presenting women in ritual attire - some posed and others in tourist performance mode many against the backdrop of the murals of the Msiza village. *The Outspan* magazine in 1955 illustrates the Ndebele tourists’ gaze in a powerful way, with tourists lining up to photograph Ndebele women in their beaded costumes. Another photo is entitled “The village belle knows music hath charms” featuring a woman playing the *isigubhe* instrument for entertainment (Moss 1955: 35-36).

Berman’s entry (1974: 206-7) on the Ndebele contains a similar ritual photograph of a bridal party with the face of the bride covered by the veil called *isiyaya*. It seems that the occasion was captured at the Msiza establishment. The anthropologist Isaac Schapera (1949: 408-412) used photographs by C L Stewart in a scientific publication on the Ndebele in 1949. At least three of the photos can be tied to the Klipgat village. Stewart’s work on the Ndebele is well-known. There is the probability that his photographs were taken at the site of the original Msiza village on the farm Harteestfontein. Before the relocation of the village in 1954/5 it served as a tourist site and women regularly posed in full ritual attire, as is visible in Stewart’s photographs. Spence and Bierman’s article (1954: 35-40) featured the same pre-resettlement site. There is not a single reference to the living residents, whose images were captured for use in the article.

One of the few exceptions emerged from an article in *Die Huisgenoot* in 1953. Entitled : “Sy nooi haar gaste met ‘n steentjie seep!” (She invites her guests with a bar of soap). Although the tone of the article was clearly paternalistic and wrapped in the cultural “other” blanket, it provided a brief overview of the girls’ initiation ritual. Although one would not know how

the ritual participants were choreographed by the land owner and /or the white journalist, the article stands as the only one in this genre which contains three photographs of Ndebele women wearing ritual attire at the time of the actual performance of the *iqhude* ritual (Verster 1953: 40-42).

The National Party Government engaged with the Ndebele message at KwaMsiza to further its own ideas. Among a number of official mouthpieces were *BaNtu*² and the *Bantoe-onderwysblad* (Bantu education magazine)³. The former bilingual journal in 1960 featured an article ‘Homeland of the Ndebele’ with photographs which were taken at the Msiza village. Apart from the regular tribal dress images in the article, the contribution had one clear message namely, preparing the reader to recognize the unique ethnic identity of the Ndebele, strongly supported by photos of the Msiza settlement (1960: 367-376). Surprisingly the caption “Homeland” received no further written attention as one would anticipate, advocating a new and separate Bantustan for the Ndebele.

The Msiza village almost disappeared into obscurity during the 1980s to 1990s mainly due to political uncertainty and population movements in the area. During the late 1970s threats by the previous homeland government of Bophuthatswana to expel all Ndebele, caused a major exodus of Ndebele from the area, including the village’s residents. The promotion of the village as a tourist attraction was most probably not on the homeland’s agenda. This isolation resulted in a lack of tourist income with residents seeking other job opportunities and consequently an inability to conduct any maintenance on the structures. During the periods of unrest (the 1976 and 1985 uprisings in particular), peri-urban areas around the area were considered no-go zones to mainly white tourists (Van Vuuren 1992: 487).

During 1997/8 the village received a second life line when the former National Cultural History Museum (now Ditshong) secured funding to revitalize the village and include it as a component of its community orientated greater Tswaing museum project. The village is now promoted as part of a regional museum circuit route for the area (Naude 2000: 26-27). The existence of this apartheid resettlement village as an ethnic enclave, will always be unique, as it would never have had any significance had it not been promoted to serve the tourist market. Its socio-cultural dynamics are even more bizarre as it operates in a somewhat dichotomous way between immediate Tswana and remote Ndebele references.

Origins of Ndebele beads and murals

Existing scholarly writing on the origin and dating of Ndebele beadwork, is still speculative. Archaeologists and historians suggest the entering of glass beads into the subcontinent via east coast trading networks (Schoeman 2007). The possibility of indigenous forms such as wooden, plant or clay beads cannot be ruled out, in particular since evidence of these is today still found amongst older Ndebele in the form of carved wooden necklaces (the *umthamboti*) and necklaces of beads manufactured from plant pulp. Van Warmelo (1930: 42, 58) depicts Manala-Ndebele women (at Wallmannstal north of Pretoria) wearing blankets and predominantly white beads. This being the earliest known photographic document, Levy (1989: 25) suggests that beadwork might have originated with this group and not the Ndzundza. However, the presence of multi-coloured beaded garments with which the Ndebele have become popularly associated, might be as recent as the 1950s, in particular as a result of the Msiza village.

Ndebele beadwork and mural art are closely related as far as design and colour usage is concerned. Motifs associated with this proliferation period resemble clear and distinctive

syncretistic and urban influence: number plates, light fittings and lamp posts, lettering, the well-known razor blade (*itjhefana*), aeroplanes, etc. (Van Vuuren 1983: 337, Schneider 1985: 60, Levy 1989: 29). This period (roughly 1950/60) also saw a clear deviation from earlier paint pigments with the increased usage of commercial acrylic paints.

Ndebele mural art, like beadwork, is characterized by certain regional differences. Murals in remote rural areas such as Dlawulale (Nebo) and Stoffberg (Mahlungulu) near the former heartland in the Mpumalanga province, today still consist of mixtures of natural pigments (ash, clay, dung, plant pulp, etc.), occasionally mixed with synthetic colorants. Nebo residents are generally economically marginalised (poor, unemployed) and have often lacked the urban network ties of other Ndebele. The Nebo murals are predominantly black and white, and resemble step and diamond-type motifs which are more typical of Pedi and Ntwane murals. Schneider (1985: 64) suggested that these murals represent original Ndzundza-Ndebele-style wall decoration.

The fact is that these early, probably pre-1883 and pre-indenture origin type murals, and the corresponding predominantly white beadwork, whether they bear Sotho influence or not, did not make the same statement as the multi-coloured Ndebele examples of the 1950s. The diversity in colour in beads emerged at the Msiza village. During interviews elderly Ndebele women explained that their close proximity to traders in the Pretoria area, e.g. Marabastad, exposed them to greater varieties in colour glass beads. Ndebele aprons such as the *itjorholo*, *isiphethu* and *umaphotho*, as well as ankle rings and arm bands (*iirholwane*) of the 1950s and 1960s, bear in addition to white also colours such as purple, pink, dark green and black. These corresponded with painted surfaces in their mural art. Gradually colour diversity in beads (*imincamo*) and mural art (*ukugwala*) diffused to the rural heartland of the Ndebele on farms and on the Nebo plateau. By the late 1970s glass beads were replaced by plastic beads and a great variety of colours emerged (red, yellow, lime green, orange) in the process. This trend repeated itself in the mural art (Van Vuuren 1983: 159-175).

The Esther icon

Esther Nostokana Nagiyana Mahlangu was employed at the Ndebele Museum at Botshabelo near Middelburg as a mural artist. In 1982 the French Embassy in Pretoria contacted the author with the idea to commission a Ndebele mural artist to visit France and paint a mural at the Pompidou Centre. With the assistance of the curator and family Esther volunteered, since the other women perceived the idea as either too alien or challenging (Personal Communication: E Mahlangu, 1985). Accompanied by her son, this venture was the beginning of her international career as a mural artist which to date include numerous international as well as local commissions. Her work became internationalized with commissions in Paris, Tokyo, the Netherlands, as well as locally such as at the Johannesburg Civic centre and the iconic BMW automobile, painted in Ndebele colours. She diversified her talent to the extent that she could vary her media from murals to canvas, ostrich egg shells and motor car bonnets. As a live performer, Esther Mahlangu chose to wear full ritual attire. She would even travel wearing the Ndebele blanket (*umbhalo*) and beaded aprons. One of the reasons for her son being her co-traveller has been to manage his mother's clothing, dress her for the occasions, as well as to take care of the painting materials and instruments. She explained: "When I paint, I paint (*ukugwala*) as Ndebele woman, painting the way I know wearing the Ndebele clothing, people must know who I am" (personal communication: E Mahlangu, 1985).



Figure 7
Esther Nostokana Mahlangu
 (source: free internet).

She is marketed as an individual and she is transformed into an icon of African genius by her brokers and marketing agents. This previously exhibited anonymous Ndebele artist becomes script writer, actor in “her own theatre” at once and obtains the power to rewrite and immortalize the final product. However, what Esther Mahlangu has achieved, one could argue, many other Ndebele painters could probably also do. At home in KwaNdebele, she established her own art school teaching local girls and boys, as well as the occasional foreigner, the detail of Ndebele mural art. She also entertains them with local food and beverage. Her own modest art gallery is stocked with bead work, mural art canvasses, and other Ndebele artworks produced by her neighbours and other locals. Her studio is well signposted next to the tarred road and it appropriately reads: “Esther es aqui.”

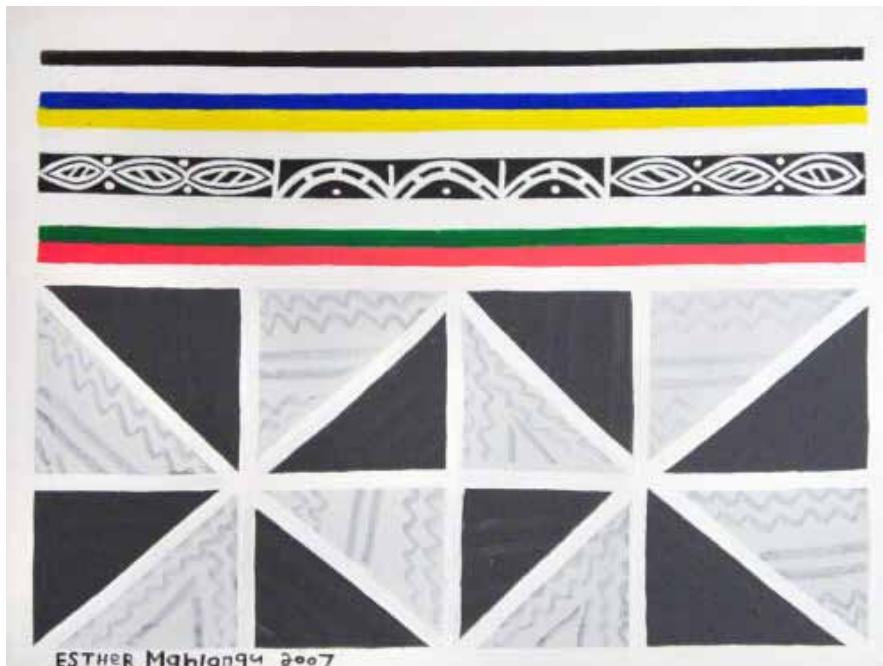


Figure 8
Esther Mahlangu, *Untitled*, 2007, acrylic on canvass, 60x80cm)
 (source: free internet).

The irony of the Esther Mahlangu enterprise lies in the fact that the Western world is still largely ignorant and lacks an understanding of the real plight and context within which Esther Mahlangu operates: her own domestic and household predicaments, the burden she carries to support her household as a single mother, the male dominated rural world within which she earns her living and the meaning of her ritual Ndebele clothing. Not one promoter or agent whom she worked with has made the effort to understand Nostokana, as she is affectionately known amongst the Ndebele, within her own context.

Not only the aesthetic, artistic and tourist bodies of the Ndebele interested the West but also physical differences or tribal scarification.

The burden of the neck rings and the curiosity of physical deformation

Bead and brass neck rings are not alien to Africa for use as ritual attire. Elsewhere in the world the women among the Padaung of Burma wear similar stacked metal rings around their necks. A French team of journalists from *Le Figaro* magazine visited South Africa in 1990 with a mission to photograph Ndebele women who were still wearing beads and brass rings. Having filmed and photographed the Padaung they intended publishing a comparative perspective in particular to the visual aspect. In the case of the Padaung women the downward pressure caused by the weight of the metal rings, resulted in visible deformation of the collar bones as well as some deformation on the vertebrae of the neck.

Among Ndebele women who wear both metal rings and the large bead neck rings it was proposed that similar deformation took place. The *Le Figaro* team thus travelled to Botshabelo near Middelburg and commissioned some women whom they invited to the local hospital and had their necks and shoulder bones X-rayed. The local media saw an opportune moment and a journalist reported accordingly: “Ndebele necks in the European spotlight”.⁴ The curiosity of the French team was probably also inspired by an earlier article on the Ndebele in the *National Geographic Magazine* (Jeffery 1986: 260-262), where the journalists embarked on a similar venture.

Ndebele women used to wear bulky necks rings (*iirholwane*) which were weaved from a specific grass species which was coiled and covered by strings of beads. The final product, when squeezed into an oval shape, would fit over the head of the person. A young married woman (the *umakhothi*) wore these rings until the birth of her first child (see figure 9). Elderly women wore brass and copper rings (*iidzila*) around their necks. These were made by male craftsmen and custom-fit for each individual (Van Schalkwyk 1982: 15-20). By the 1980s these weighty rings were replaced by coiled plastic beading which could be readily fit and detached like an ordinary necklace. Now women make these garments themselves. There are hardly any men left who could still manufacture and fit the original rings.

The X-rayed necks phenomenon once again proved, that the western obsession with the exotic and strange “other” body, stretched beyond every imagination. Thus, how do we comprehend the KwaMsiza women and the mediated impact that they and their bodies had in the tourism domain, on the art and craft genre, or the western curiosity of a physical deformation? What do we know about the everyday Esther Mahlangu? How do we link and contextualise this self-commoditised body with the private body and socio-cultural body of the same Ndebele in her own society?

Beads, aprons and the life stages of a woman

In Ndebele society men and women are categorised in terms of social and biological stages. In western society we recognise both categories. These are not particularly marked - certainly not by ritual and ritual clothing. The range of clothing and bead garments among Ndebele women is quite extensive, and these create sharp visual distinctions among the age groups as is illustrated below.

Age stages in years	Category terminology in Isindebele	Dress code during ritual	Meaning of age status
(1) birth to 3 years	<i>umdrazanyana</i>	small beaded frontal apron(<i>irhabi</i>)	an infant
(2) 3-13	<i>Umdazana</i>	larger apron (<i>irhabi</i>)	a young girl participate in domestic tasks
(3) 13-15	<i>Umthombi</i>		extensive domestic tasks, to be prepared or initiation
(4) 15+	<i>umalokzana</i>	beaded rings around ankles and legs, arms, waist, neck (<i>iirholwane</i>), apron called <i>isiphephethu</i>	to be married and become known as ...
(5) 20 and older	<i>Umakhohthi</i> (young married woman)	same as above, although less elaborativea bride who resides at her in-laws.
(6) adult married mother	<i>Umfazi</i>	copper and brass anklets and armlets (<i>iidzila</i>), front apron (<i>umaphotho</i>), hind apron(<i>isithimba</i>)	an adult woman/mother
(7) 50-60 +	<i>isalukazana</i>	same as above, <i>umaphotho</i> replaced by <i>itjhorholo</i> type apron	an elderly woman with senior status in regular and ritual activities

Figure 9
Female age categories and dress codes
(source: the author).

The garments and beads above are normally worn during rituals and not as part of everyday life. The only exceptions would be essential clothing such as skin aprons, permanent brass and beaded neck rings, and often arm and ankles brass rings. Even if they perform their domestic work, women would remove these rings. As a rule blankets (previously made from animal skin) are worn if a woman leaves her homestead or when travelling, as is still the case. The age markers and clothing distinctions manifest only during ritual, except if these are worn at tourist venues such as KwaMsiza, and the Ndebele Museum at Botshabelo, Middelburg, or at Esther Mahlangu's art venue.

Initiation at puberty dominates ritual life in Ndebele society. Male initiation (*ingoma*) is a large scale quadrennial institution while female initiation (*iqhude*) is performed on an individual basis whenever a girl reaches that stage. In both rituals women perform in full beaded attire. The male initiation ritual has no less than seven consecutive sub-rituals which are spaced over two months. Women in beaded outfits play an important role in these performances. When male initiates “graduate” after this period of seclusion, they are dressed in elaborate beaded outfits (called *amazipha*) which are manufactured by their mothers and sisters (Van Vuuren 1992: 375-377).



Figure 10
Women in full ritual attire performing the *igwabo* dance during male initiation at Matjhirini, KwaNdebele, Mpumalanga (photograph by the author, 1985).



Figure 11
Women control and distribute the beadwork of the newly initiated males at the Mthombeni homestead, Tshaluza, KwaNdebele (photograph by the author, 1985).

The work of female initiation ritual

Girls' initiation lasts for almost three days. Other than the initiate and her instructors, close relatives, friends, neighbours and casual visitors attend this ritual. The entire ritual also consists of minor performances which are demarcated by way of announcement, change in dance, song and ceremonial garb, slaughtering and eating.

Certain preparations for the initiation may start months in advance, amongst others the collection of a large quantity of canned jam (usually syrup and a few others- as many as 31 boxes by the mother of the initiate). This jam and a similar quantity of bread loaves are handed out to the many women guests as gifts on the Saturday of the proceedings. Other earlier preparations entail the preparation of a variety of beadwork costumes, and meetings held by the particular “initiation women’s club” of which the mother would be a member.

Immediate pre-initiation activities, involving neighbours, kin and the novice’s initiated age mates, commence on the Tuesday before the weekend ritual. These include brewing beer and painting the courtyard walls around the homestead of the initiate. From this day the initiate (the *umthombi*) is isolated in a room in her mother’s house. The next two days (Wednesday and Thursday) see the continuation of beer making, baking, buying of groceries, and the plastering of the *iqhude* hut floor with cow dung. Ritual engagements commence at sunset on Thursday with singing and the beating of an initiation or *iqhude* drum.



Figure 11
Neighbours of the initiate’s mother cooking during the *iqhude* ritual. They are not wearing ritual attire (photograph by the author, 1996).

Friday is spent on last minute preparations and the arrival of female relatives and neighbours, who assist the mother of the initiate. Friday is perceived to be “dangerous” for men to come too close to the homestead (in particular the backyard, *esibuyeni*). Trespassers run the risk of being the target of derogatory verbal assaults. The first slaughtering takes place during the afternoon when the father offers the *umhlonyane* goat as a gift to the initiate and her entourage (Van Vuuren 1992: 393-395).

The ritual proceedings are marked by strong sexual differentiation and re-engagement over the three main days of the event. The entire event is also characterized by spatial differentiation and even performances are similarly tenderized. The final rite of incorporation is called *ukhlubula* - the initiate’s father slaughters a goat for homestead members, she receives the *umbhalo* blanket, the *isiphephethu* apron and relevant adult ceremonial attire (figure 9) and her hair is shaven - to mark her departure from the order of the girlhood. She then enters the new adult threshold. After guests have dispersed on the Sunday the initiate stays under her mother’s protection, obeys certain rules, and is still partly isolated for another three weeks after the main ritual (Van Vuuren 1992: 403-405).

Ritual clothing: ranking, identity and traffic cops.

Ndebele women, normally without local and tribal political authority and rank in the male dominated world, create their own hierarchies and levels of domination. Within the paradigm of the ritual context, this hierarchy reflects lower levels of entrance into the system and promotion after time to the upper ranks of the internal ritual ranking system. Suffice to say this promotion runs parallel to that of a woman's rising socio-biological status: through marital status, motherhood, etc. A ritual participant enters the *iqhude* dressed in traditional costume as part of a contingent (called *idwendwe*). After a few years she is eligible for promotion to the level of a traffic officer (*ispitikopi*) who authorizes entrance to the *iqhude*; many years later she may reach the highest level, i.e. that of a custodian (*ikosi leqhude*). They are normally drawn from the ranks of respected mothers and grandmothers. Custodians receive and protect the banners of newly arrived contingents for the duration of the ritual (Van Vuuren 1992: 399).

Women dress in a variety of beaded garments, determined by generation and social status, and sing and dance frequently throughout the time that the *iqhude* lasts. These various statuses firstly cross-cut and strengthen ritual rank, secondly, determine placement and movement within the ritual arena, and thirdly, determine verbal participation.

Initiated and unmarried girls, who assist the initiate throughout the ritual, are called *abangenisi*, and wear the prominent *isiphephethu* apron. Their public participation in the audience is marked by frequent flute (*ifengwane*)-and-clap dancing. All married participants exercise their right to wear "full uniform", including the *isithimba*, *umaphotho*, and *itjhorholo* aprons as well as *iidzila* brass anklets. They participate in all song and dance performances outside the initiation hut, as well as attain the role of announcer (of gifts) if requested upon (Van Vuuren 1992: 400).

The innovation (date of inception uncertain) called *amaspitikopi* (the traffic cops) begs particular attention. The traffic cop rite was allegedly instituted during the late 1980s. The arrival of guests on the Friday evening of the weekend's proceedings is announced by a display of authority when each contingent - a minibus taxi with singing women from urban or rural areas - is stopped by whistling women dressed in a combination of Ndebele ceremonial dress and traffic cop outfit: caps, white gloves, sunglasses, police whistles, note books and pens, torches, and even embroidered sashes with the words "spitkop" or "speedcop".



Figure 12
Women 'traffic cops' stopping and fining a vehicle. Note the uniform
(photograph by the author, 1996).

In imitating a road block, the taxi is ordered to enter the premises, then to reverse, to re-enter the gate to the homestead, only to be ordered out again, before finally being allowed to re-enter. At the gate an imitation of a traffic light is erected. The vehicle is then fully inspected for road-worthiness and the driver "fined. The fine may include cash or a crate of beer. More often

it is a mock fine. The arrivals are ordered to line up and their outfits are inspected before they are allowed into the courtyard where they engage in song and dance. The entire proceeding is continued throughout the night and the next morning, with the newly arrived guests joining the original traffic cop line-up for inspection of new arrivals. There is little dialogue throughout the mock inspection and the arrivals stop singing as they disembark from the minibuses.

The significance of the traffic cop performance manifests on a number of levels. The reversal of female-male roles is salient, firstly in the ritual empowerment of women, who transform themselves into authoritative law enforcers within the Ndebele male dominated and patriarchal society. Secondly, by means of ritual, they shunt people about to take charge of resources such as money, food and vehicles (compare Lincoln 1969: 105, Bell 1992: 204).

On the political-historical level, ever since Ndebele women and men can remember buying their own motor cars, they have frequently been subjected to road blocks, inspections, fines and court appearances for failing to pay fines. As elsewhere in apartheid South Africa, black motorists had to bear the brunt of rude intimidation, often with the option to bribe their way out of a road block (Mathako: personal communication, 1987). Traffic officials were perceived to be an extension of the “long arm of apartheid’s “law”. Ndebele women, through adopting the reversed role in performance ritual, are symbolically eradicating more than three decades of injustices by white traffic officials.

Within the economic domain, travel by minibus taxis has become a harsh reality for thousands of Ndebele migrants between the former KwaNdebele, Mpumalanga, and urban Gauteng and between rural Nebo (former Lebowa) and urban Gauteng. Rural Ndebele women, who have become the silent and powerless victims of strenuous long distance daily commuting, are often the innocent passengers in taxi-association disputes, are subjected to tariff hikes and have perished in high-speed accidents. Thus, the girls’ initiation provides them with an opportunity to take command and control of this mode of transport, through stopping the vehicle and inspecting it, and fining the driver and its occupants.

Discussion

Societies construct two bodily orders, the biological-physical and the socio-cultural and these are interlocked. The social categories of a society modify the physical experiences of the human body and they uphold a particular view of society as the anthropologist Mary Douglas argued (1970: 65). The body is a restricted pathway or medium of expression. The socio-cultural “processed idea” of the body regulates the ways in which our bodies are taken care of, are groomed, fed and received treatment and therapies. These include ideas of sleep, rest and exercise, stages and cultural categories it progress through, as we have seen in Figure 9, as well as the pain the body can withstand and emotions (Douglas 1970: 63).

Thus, while the physical body manifests as a social control of the body, it is rendered abandoned during ritual (Douglas 1970: 70-71) and in particular as Willis (1991: 279) argued in non-Western thought, where the body manifests as a pathway for mind, spirit, self and the cosmos. Through the ritual body a society expresses ideas on a multiplicity of identities such as female/male, ethnic/modern, generation, views and sentiments on loyalty, community, etc. Victor Turner has showed us (1957, 1967, 1989) how the social drama of ritual, liminality and communitas establishes regular opportunities for affirmation, social control, creativity and the moulding of identities.

The notion of identity begs further attention. Beadwork and mural art and the ability to express an individual's sense of belonging, need further discussion. Ndebele women contrast "ways of doing" or *isikhethu* (ours), with "foreign ideas" or *isikhuwa* (those of Whites). Elaborating on this concept, *isikhethu* became synonymous with *isiNdebele* (as culture) and *isindru* (that of a human nature, meaning Ndebele) in daily usage. Studies by Coplan (1987) and James (1990) on women migrants in southern Africa led to informative discussions around the concept of *sesotho* (tradition), as contrasted with *segoa* (the ways of Whites)

Observations by the author during the late 1970s were that *isikhethu*, in its polarized inclusive /exclusive application, appeared to belong to female vocabulary. Ndebele women classified early mural paintings and beadwork (e.g., those sewn onto goatskin of an *umaphotho*) as "real Ndebele" or *isikhethu*, as opposed to modern influences where plastic (see Levy 1989: 30) and canvas were introduced- the latter being *isikhuwa*. In the same way, earlier bead types are *isikhethu* while recent types, colors, and even motifs are *isikhuwa*. Ndebele women today still talk about whether certain items are suitable for buyers who prefer *isikhethu* (for the gallery market) as opposed to *isikhuwa* (items for the informal market). It is striking that it is often during the course of the *iqhude* ritual proceedings that women discuss the costume of arriving contingents in terms of adherence or non-adherence to *isikhet hu*.

Peterson (2007: 5) argues that as the body becomes more politicised, there emerges a growing interest in the nature and presentation of the body in culture and the regulation of bodies among diverse authorities. The body becomes more prominent in advertisement, fashion, health, youth, virility, etc. The body is reduced to an aesthetic/erotic exchange value. The body becomes increasingly mediated in popular culture (Peterson 2007: 15) "Bodies tend to be classified according to their worth within the capitalist market-place". The body rise prominent in advertisement, fashion, health, youth, virility, and it is reduced to an aesthetic/erotic exchange value. As the body is increasingly mediated in popular culture (2007: 15) its status as a commodity rises significantly. The service industry has expanded and the consumer world repackages the body of sign which is "pampered, exercised, tanned, pierced, tattooed" (Sweeney & Hodder 2002: 1-4). The commoditised body has become prominent, it trades its own commodity value and it tends to have a "social life" of its own (Appadurai 1986). Ndebele women have reacted favourably to these dynamics in a number of ways.

Commodities such as Ndebele beads and murals are transplanted through commodity phases, commodity candidacies and commodity contexts. Ndebele beads are transplanted accordingly. In the 1960s women started to weave their beadwork around glass bottles, calabashes, walking sticks and cow horns, and the market diversions were lucrative. By the 1970s these were considered "kitsch". Upon the release of Mandela in the early 1990s Ndebele women were the first to add the three ANC colours to aprons, other garments and artworks. They also read and prized their goods on various markets, from large scale curio and African art purchasers to flea and morning markets to the odd visitor to the remote rural villages. What they understood less was what Appadurai termed the "diversion of commodities" or the "complex blends of plunder, sale and inheritance" (1986: 26). Individual collectors have since the late 1980s embarked on a relentless quest to "sniff out" old invaluable Ndebele garments which belong to the early 1930-1950 period (see figure 5). These priceless items were kept as heirlooms by grandmothers for the exclusive wear during initiation rituals. The glass beads in these garments are irreplaceable. The tragic irony is that their unemployed grandchildren often participated in the sale and negotiated the tough bargaining conditions.

The removable artefacts of the body were traded whether these were sentimentally intimate or meaninglessly detached in relation to the body. The tourist and curio commodity world traded beads and art “away” from the body. Yet, Ndebele women were not merely passive onlookers to this phenomenon but they became agents in their own right. They managed to detach the elements of the ritual body (the artefacts) and transform these to the extra-somatic and commoditise these themselves.

In the commodity world the camera plays a pivotal role. The camera democratizes and liberates the body, and commercialise it at the same time (Sweeney & Hodder 2002: 2). Post-modern society sees the collapse of the boundary between art and everyday life and the real and the image, and the difference between high-art, mass or pop culture and so-called taste cultures. While aesthetic experiences are embodied, not all embodied experiences are aestheticized (Mascia-Lees 2011: 5-7). The “post-card Ndebele” at KwaMsiza has since the 1950s have become the hyper-real internet Ndebele and young Ndebele women now promote their bodily artefacts either detached from ritual or as the ritual artefact- body. The debate on intellectual or property right of heritage provides impetus to the degree of control which Ndebele women themselves exercise over visual material. Kasfir, with reference to Samburu souvenir spears, describes these as “potent badges” and an “identity inscribed within the material world”. Thus the “artefact becomes detached from social/ritual roles” and is reinvented as art (1999: 82-3). The transplanted beads on curios and the mural art on canvass exemplify these abilities.

With reference to the image of the postcard Samburu (Maasai), she (Kasfir 1999: 67-68) argues that photos and souvenirs (or curios) “exist as fragments of something else as metonymic references”. She refers to a “plethora coffee table books” (1999: 69), the exact medium which made the tribal Ndebele dominate all other works in that genre in South Africa, ironically even in the post democracy (e.g. Courtney-Clarke 1986, Elliot 1989). The postcard acts as a mnemonic which calls for the safari experience and an encounter with the exotic in the East African case (Kasfir 1999: 470) - the phenomenon of Maasai worship and a lost world. Latour’s application (2002: 125) “negrophiliac Europeans” seems appropriate.

Postcards and photos in e-media format also create the “wish- you- were-here-syndrome”. While Kasfir’s Samburu (Maasai) are reported to be impervious to the tourist gaze (1999: 72), Ndebele women at KwaMsiza have since the tourist encounter in the 1950s engaged physically and spatially with tourists. They allowed tourists to pose with them against the backdrop of their murals. This close encounter obviously was not to the liking of the conservative Nationalist politicians at the time. As an undergraduate student in the early 1970s, I once heard that the place was a “breeding ground for racial mixing”. As with Esther Mahlangu and women around her, true ethnic and adventure tourists have become mural artists and bead makers themselves. They are even invited to adopt similar body postures when painting murals or a canvass, use traditional brushes, eat and drink while seated on the woven grass mat - the authentic Ndebele experience. These tourists have transcended what Bruner (2001: 901) calls the questioning gaze and now do not critique the standards of authenticity, credibility and accuracy which are regularly offered at other ethnic venues. In the tourist art world Ndebele women seemed to have survive decades of being inscribed upon and are now writing their own scripts. Tilley (1999: 259) calls it the transformation and negotiation of objectified culture.

Finally: the only body which is not discussed here is the everyday body, the one in ordinary working clothes, the nurturing mother, the commuting body who leaves her home at Matshirini at 04:00 and returns at 20:00- if she cannot afford to overnight in a nearby township. The same body that cooks for her family, cleans her own house, also fulfils the same duties in the home of

her employer in the city. If she is unemployed she has to devise alternative survival strategies for her household, even though she might be proficient in the production of beadwork, mat making, and even be regarded as a senior officiator at the girls' initiation ritual. She is the antithesis of the ritual woman.

Conclusion

The 1950s postcard-body, the coffee table book-body, travelling--body of Esther Mahlangu, the deformed--body, the initiation- ritual and traffic cop--body and the ordinary and everyday labouring--body, all relate narratives of the same Ndebele woman. The symbols of ritual, verbal and non-verbal, are the most powerful messages to convey the deeper significance of identity, status and transformation of both the initiates of ritual and the onlookers. As the ritual body informs the outside world, so does the extra--somatic symbolic efficacy of the painted mural. The ritual social body, which previously emphasized transition and transformation of status from girl to woman, obtained secondary and tertiary narratives and messages. The pre-1950s, pre- KwaMsiza body was less impressive in terms of costume. But, the Msiza family first at Sinovile and then at Klipgat elevated and rendered the ritual body to be considerably more impressive and colourful. Through existing networks, new aesthetic codes were introduced, to the farms and tribal regions rendering the female body colourful. Thus, ritual attire became more colourful and expanded. Simultaneously, at another level, Ndebele women entered the world of the commoditised African artefact, which was disguised as African art and curio.

Yet, they brilliantly and in an uncanny way commoditised the ritual body into an extra-somatic medium by selling off previous bodily ritual artefacts as commoditised goods. KwaMsiza was the generator. Ndebele women became both agents and agency. The ethnic message was not the primary goal. Yet, the KwaNdebele homeland politicians, in which new elites and the royals played an active role, grabbed the opportunity to raise the urgency for a return to land they lost in 1883. Ndebele women might have had little interest in the politics at the time, but their primary goal was to get access to curio markets and endeavour to become financially independent, a daunting task considering the dominating patriarchal system within which they had been living their daily lives since indenture in 1883. The labouring body endeavours to survive in a world of insecurity of unemployment, often aggravated by the challenges of single motherhood.

Notes

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| 1 | Source: http://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/-Wa: 2012/05/15 . | 3 | <i>Bantoeonderwysblad/Bantu Education Journal</i> 1962. Die Ndebele of Transvaal, 8:33 |
| 2 | <i>baNtu</i> 1960. Tuisland van die Ndebele/ Homeland of the Ndebele, June:367-370 | 4 | Bezuidenhout, J 1991. Ndebele Necks in the European Spotlight, <i>Middelburg Observer</i> 25 (January): 8. |

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