

## **Collections create connections: Stitching the lives of marginalised women on the national memory canvas**

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### **Abstract**

In his work *Past beyond memory: Evolution, museums, colonialism*, Tony Bennett asks how museums can “shed the legacy of evolutionary conceptions and colonial science, so that they can contribute to the development and management of cultural diversity more effectively”. This question is of particular pertinence in the South African context where for a long time the material found in public or government-funded museums on those not from the dominant sectors of society presented these marginalised people as “objects rather than citizens and individual actors in their own right”. Issues of inclusion or connection and exclusion are central to democracy - who feels connected to civil society, who does not, and why? Who feels their voice is heard and who does not?”

Over the past few decades a number of community embroidery projects have been initiated in formerly marginalised areas. These projects have made a name for themselves in terms of their artistic merit and have participated in exhibitions both nationally and internationally. Proponents of these initiatives claim that they go beyond connecting these craft artists with a wider audience. This paper will discuss how these collections of embroidered story cloths can contribute to a more inclusive society by combatting disadvantage, empowering communities and developing social capital so that people can have an informed involvement in the creation of an inclusive South African national memory.

### **Keywords:**

Museums; post-colonialism; community development projects; embroidery projects; democratisation; inclusion.

In 1920, J.C. Dana, the renowned American museologist noted that (as quoted in Ginsburgh and Mairesse 1997, 15-33) ‘[p]robably no more useless public institution, useless relative to its cost, was ever devised than that popular ideal, the classical building of a museum of art, filled with rare and costly objects. And it adds to its inutility a certain power of harm.’ The

role of museums as ‘potent mechanisms in the construction and visualisation of power relations between coloniser and colonised’ (Longair and McAleer 2012, 3) and ‘instruments of division and mis-education’ (Keene and Wanless 2002, 45) have been recognised and collection policies and exhibition practices have been adjusted and changed accordingly. Despite these changes, one of the main challenges that museums in the twentieth century faced and still do in the new century is to prove that they can connect in a meaningful way with their public and make a positive contribution to society.

But with another economic crisis crippling the globe, museums’ role in society is increasingly scrutinised. The public is expecting greater accountability and community involvement which will allow for a ‘greater degree of public participation and deliberation in civil society’ (Lynch 2011, 441). This has brought about a shift from museums as “essentially collection-focused” to being ‘essentially public-service institutions’ (441). At the ICOM Meeting on the theme ‘Museums and Sustainable Communities’ held in San José, Costa Rica in April 1998, the delegates agreed that ‘the museum was not merely a potential or desirable instrument for sustainable social advancement but, in effect, an essential one’ (Weil 1999, 237). The question is how museums should go about becoming more accountable and playing a role as agents of civil engagement. In the South African context specifically, museologists agree that museums as institutions of public culture and agents of social inclusion could play a vital role in enabling the South African society to respond to the many challenges facing our new democracy. Apartheid has left not only visible scars, such as poverty, unemployment and illiteracy (Shoba 2005, 26). The need for change extends beyond socio-economic advancement: as the majority of the population has been denied active citizenship for so long, there is a need for spaces to be created ‘in which people define, debate and contest their identities and produce and reproduce their living circumstances, their beliefs and values and ultimately their social order’ (Keene and Wanless 2002, 43) and where the ‘ritual of citizenship’ (43) can be played out.

The role museums can play in this process is reflected in the South African Draft National Museum Policy and the contribution museums can make to economic development as well as urban and rural regeneration projects is acknowledged (SAMA 2014). The policy also underlines the important role that museums as public spaces can play in creating ‘opportunities that allow community members to express themselves and, through programmes, create intergenerational contact and understanding and a sense of belonging.’

(SAMA 2014) Furthermore, museums as agents of social change can play a formative role in developing democratic skills and confidence, ‘specifically to increase social tolerance, appreciation for diversity and working towards social harmony’ (SAMA 2014) between the various communities which have been forcibly separated for many decades (Keene and Wanless 2002, 43).

### **Memorial museums**

In the light of the greater social awareness amongst museums, commemorative forms of public memorials and monuments which tended to focus on ‘official’ renditions of the past have been found to be ‘no longer adequate to remember and commemorate the past’. (Sodaro 2007, 602) Amy Sodaro (138) investigates new commemorative forms which she terms ‘breakaway genres’ that challenge traditional modes of remembering or musealizing. Countries dealing with past human rights abuses and atrocities have found these new forms of commemoration, ‘spaces of repair and reparation’, as effective means to acknowledge victimisation and past wrongs that move away from ‘hegemonic narratives to the emergence of alternative narratives and a democratic fragmentation of memory’(127). These new ways of ‘framing memory in cultural forms’ are often used together with other ‘transitional justice mechanisms’ such as truth commissions and trials (39).

In their respective articles Richard Sandell (2003), Vikki McCall (2009) and Graham Black (2010) look at the various criteria museums should meet to engage with their users in the ‘great issues of the day’ and to actively support community empowerment.

As memory institutions museums are called upon to collect, conserve, document and represent cultures and life experiences of all those who live within their localities and to work with groups and communities to research and celebrate their memory. This entails developing imaginative events and activities to highlight the diverse nature of heritage and developing user-generated content (Black 2010).

Sandell (2003, 45-46) refers to recent research which suggests that museums as social institutions can contribute towards social inclusion at individual, community and societal levels.

At an individual or personal level, engagement with museums can deliver positive outcomes such as enhanced self-esteem, confidence and creativity. At a community level, museums can act as a catalyst for social regeneration, empowering communities to increase their self-determination and develop the confidence and skills to take greater control over their lives and the development of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Lastly, museums, through the representation of inclusive communities within collections and displays, have the potential to promote tolerance, inter-community respect and to challenge stereotypes. As agents of individual, community and societal change, museums have demonstrated their potential to contribute towards the combating of issues such as poor health, high crime, low educational attainment and unemployment.

This is echoed by McCall who points out that museums can tackle ‘barriers to inclusion and specific problems of exclusion particular groups face and to break down the barriers which currently prevent people from participating fully in society; building strong communities and taking action to strengthen community life’ (McCall 2010, 321). Museums should therefore ‘reach out to welcome, support and represent the many voices within the communities they serve – in partnerships of equals’ (Black 2010, 132).

Issues of inclusion and exclusion are central to democracy: who feels a part of civil society, who does not, and why? Who feels their voice is heard and who does not? As democratic institutions museums should ‘actively promote civil dialogue and reflective participation’ (Black 2010, 138) and represent diverse communities and their multiple perspectives. Museums should be centres for dialogue, national reconciliation, the development of a national identity and social cohesion.

As learning institutions museums can help to improve the quality of basic education by assisting in the development of informed individuals and communities who can contribute positively to decision-making about their future lives (Black 2010, 139). Black underlines the fact that museums should ‘focus on actively encouraging participation and to support the development of their localities as learning communities, so that people can have an informed involvement in decision-making about their futures’ (130). This is in line with the South African government’s imperatives for museums, as set out in the SAMA draft policy mentioned above (SAMA 2014).

For South African museums meeting the criteria is not always easy. With new government programmes such as ‘Transformation’ and ‘Poverty Relief’ enjoying priority, heritage institutions face budget cuts which hamper the implementation of new programmes, let alone maintaining the existing infrastructure (Keene and Wanless 2002, 45). In addition, a large, impoverished rural population and the lack of a museum visiting culture make it difficult for museum to extend their influence. Alternative ways need to be found that will take the role museums play ‘outside’ their walls to build ‘stories on what life is like in the locality now’ (Black 2010 135).

In their study on the impact of museums on identity Andrew Newman and Fiona Mclean (2006) have found that community development projects often include social practices that give them cultural meaning (60) and which could be considered as a way of making ‘meaning through forms of representation’ (58) in a similar manner as museum exhibitions. When considering the South African situation, could community development projects provide a ‘break away’ commemorative form that could fulfil some of the social responsibilities assigned to museums?

In South Africa there has been a growing recognition for community craft projects, especially needle work initiatives. The South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology has included some of these projects in exhibitions abroad and the FNB Vita Craft Now Awards, organised by the Craft Council of South Africa since 1997, has gone a long way to recognise the various projects as well as individual artists work (CAG). This paper will consider community embroidery projects, specifically the Mogalakwena Craft Art Development Foundation (MCADF) story cloth project. This project was started by dr. Elbé Coetsee in the 1980s when she and her husband bought a farm in the far northern Limpopo province, on the banks of the Mogalakwena River. Struck by the extreme poverty resulting from the unemployment in the area, Coetsee decided to teach crafts, such as sewing, screen printing and weaving to the women who helped her in the house with the hope that by selling their products, these women could create a livelihood for themselves. This proved to be a success, and in 1994 the MCADF<sup>i</sup> was founded by Coetsee. Today twenty women are employed on a full-time basis, while another ten work part-time.

Since the 1980s several humanitarian agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) have started to promote the manufacture of rural handicrafts as a much needed source of income and productive employment, particularly in former 'homeland' areas (Rogerson and Sithole 2001, 149-150). Several sewing and embroidery projects have been established at this time. It should be noted that embroidery and the making of embroidered story cloths had not been part of the customary arts and crafts of indigenous communities in Southern Africa (Tanga and Maliehe 2011, 201). Missionaries who worked toward converting as well as educating these communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries taught them various 'useful' skills, amongst which needlework and embroidery (Rogerson and Sithole, 2001, 150). Story cloths, however, are a more recent skill than the skill to work with needle and thread.

The embroidered story cloth projects that have been initiated over the past three decades in South Africa have several aspects in common. Just as was the case with the Mogalakwena project, the majority of projects were started by outside agencies, either an individual, a charity group or an art gallery. The Kaross™ embroidery initiative was founded in 1989 by Irma van Rooyen, a visual artist who moved to a farm in the Letsitele/Giyani area. The project started small with only five Shangaan embroiderers who sitting on a kaross (blanket) – hence the name of the project - created embroideries depicting their culture (Coetsee 2002, 117; Stevens 2007, 173-174; Kaross 2014). The Mapula Embroidery Project was founded in 1991 by Soroptimists International Pretoria and the Sisters of Mercy with approximately twenty women. From the start, the training, development and coordination was done by a local woman, Emily Maluleke, who was a part time teacher at the D.W.T. Nthate School from where the project operates (Schmahman 2006: 1191-20; Coetsee 2002, 117; Stevens 2007, 193-195).

After the completion of her PhD on Venda folk tales in 1996, Ina le Roux, a then lecturer in Afrikaans literature at the University of Venda, founded another collective Tambani, a quilting and embroidering initiative. In order to preserve the Venda oral tradition, but also to create some way of earning an income in the poverty stricken area, Le Roux encouraged the women to embroider the stories on cloth. These appliqué blocks, containing images of the Venda culture are used by quilters, knitters and crafters all over the world (Tambani).

Isiphethu is an arts-based economic development project that includes tapestries or hangings made with hand-appliqué and fine embroidered details, some with beaded accents. This project was initiated in 1999 by the Carnegie Art Gallery in New Castle who approached a group of women to sew a wall hanging for a Woman's Day project. The project inspired the women to continue creating and a workshop programme was launched in 2000. The National Arts Council provided the initial funding for materials and the reimbursement of taxi fares. In 2000 the project also made a successful application to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to participate in an International Trade Fair which was also supported by the Newcastle Municipal Council and the Natal Arts Trust (CAG).

Another initiative, the Keiskamma Art Project was started in 2000 by Carol Hofmeyr, a medical doctor and artist with the help of Jan Chalmers from the UK and Jackie Jezewski from France. Hofmeyr began teaching arts and crafts to a few women who collected the plastic bags that littered the village and crocheted them into hats and bags. Today over 100 artists and crafters are involved in this project, specialising in commissioned tapestries and corporate gifts (Hinze 2007; Keiskamma).

Andries Botha, an artist, initiated the Amazwi Abesifazane – Voices of Women project in 2001 (McEwan 2003; Botha 2007). After attending the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings in South Africa, Botha felt that the women and their daily struggle against apartheid was to a great extent ignored during these hearings. He developed a 'creative methodology as a means for women's memory to be recounted and held in trust as part of the memory archive of South Africa for future posterity' (Amazwi Abesifazane). The collection of close to 3000 embroidered cloths and recorded personal stories gathered from South African provinces was given a permanent home with the establishment of Africa's first Women's Museum in KwaZulu Natal. The aim of the museum is to enable the "memory retrieval of women and is made tangible through the production of embroidered and appliqué works of art and personal narrative' (Amazwi Abesifazane).

The Boitumelo Sewing project was founded in November 2001 by the Lutheran Community Outreach Foundation with the aim of using the arts, including sewing, embroidery, mosaic, and other art-and-craft forms, to develop individual healing and community generation (Sharp 2010, 42-43). Celia de Villiers, a keen quilter, was asked in 2003 to start up another project, the Intuthuko Sewing group. Together with Susan Haycock, Clarence Nkosi and fellow artist

Sonja Barac, de Villiers has been facilitating and mentoring the craft artists as well as developing markets for the group. In June 2010 the Intuthuko group started to re-organise themselves into an independent co-operative (Header).

The projects are either situated in former homelands, such as Kaross™ which is situated in the former Gazankulu, in the current day Limpopo Province (Stevens 2007, 193-194); Mapula in Winterveld, formerly Bophuthatswana and today Northwest Province (193-194); Tambani in former Venda and the Keiskamma Art Project in Hamburg, in the former Transkei. (Hinze 2007; Tambani) Others are found in informal settlements close to industrial areas, such as Isiphethu in the mining town of New Castle, the Intuthuko Sewing Group in Etwatwa Township in Benoni and the Boitumelo Sewing project in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, with a satellite location in Jabavu, Soweto (Header). The Anazwi Abesifazane attracted women from different areas throughout the country, but most notably from the former Kwa-Zulu homeland which was particularly badly affected by violence and Aids (Botha 2003, 136). However, the fact that some of these projects are situated in former homelands does not imply that these women represent a specific 'ethnic' group as determined by the apartheid government. Of importance is that they as black, marginalised women, subordinated at a number of levels are hereby given the opportunity to give voice to their experiences.

Several of the projects have successfully exhibited their story cloths which have enjoyed large public attendance. The Keiskamma project is particularly known for the large art installations it produces. One of two examples is a Bayeux-like tapestry which depicts the history of the South African nation and is housed in the Parliament buildings in Cape Town. The other is an altarpiece which bears witness to the AIDS crisis and performs in South Africa the same narrative function that the Isenheim Altarpiece, a 16th-century masterpiece, did for medieval Europe during the plague. This work was exhibited in churches and cathedrals in North America and England (Hinze 2007).

The Intuthuko Sewing group has won various awards for their quilts and hangings including the FNB Vita Crafts Award for their 'Journey to Freedom' embroideries celebrating ten years of democracy in South Africa. The MCADF craft artists created embroidered panels depicting rock art sites at Makgabeng, in the Blouberg area, an area which is earmarked as a potential National and World Heritage Site as it contains the highest diversity of rock art in

South Africa, namely that of Northern Sotho, Khoehoen and San. Another example is the exhibition consisting of story cloths depicting the local soccer teams of the Blouberg district to celebrate the Soccer World Cup 2010 as well as to recognise soccer sports in rural settlements (MECAA). The panels were displayed as part of a Village Soccer Exhibition hosted at the Mogalakwena Gallery in Cape Town with the accompanying information printed in Sepedi, English, German, French, Italian as well as Braille, giving access not only to the local community, but to international visitors who came to South Africa during the World Cup. The “Made in translation” exhibition, curated by artist Pippa Skotnes and Petra Keene, which was exhibited at the South African Museum in Cape Town is another example of greater exposure (MRC Newsletter 2010; Hand Eye Magazine 2012).

The impact of needle work projects and especially story cloth projects, however, stretches beyond only exposing visitors to the projects and the craft art produced. Deborah Sharp argues that community forms of empowerment are necessary for community reconstruction in the long-term. According to her craft art programs offer ‘examples for how empowerment can and should be included as vital elements in development programs in South Africa and beyond’ (Sharp 2010, 1).

When considering the criteria of museums as memory institutions, the question arises how the story cloth projects allow for the memories of the communities in which they are situated to be researched and celebrated. The playwright and journalist H.I.E. Dhlomo noted that because ‘colonial and apartheid authorities consistently denied the existence of any legacy among Africans worth preserving’ (Peterson 2002, 29) and their insistence that Africans had no history, ‘time and again our position and future have been prejudiced and made insecure by reference to our past’ (29). In the South African context the matter of ‘official or publicly sanctioned memories and histories [that] were shaped around silences and lies’ (Pohland-McCormick 2005, 299-300) extended well into the 1990s with the systematic destruction of records during the apartheid period (Cook 2001a, 22-23; Cook 2001b , 24; Johnston 2001, 213-214).

Annette Blum regards artworks produced by the women as ‘historic records of visual culture because of the subject matter – violence against women, trauma, racial and gender discrimination and, more recently HIV/AIDS (Blum 2011, 14-15). Craft projects and

specifically needlework projects are regarded by Elsa Barkley Brown and Bettina Aptheker, historians interested in the lives of African-American women, as providing a record of their cultural and political past and serve as vernacular interpretations of a community's history (Lewis and Fraser 1996, 437).

According to Andre Brink such art and craft projects are traces and fragments of visual narratives and by patching together these diverse fragments of memory, we are able to construct what is perceived as 'real', contributing towards filling in the 'gaps and silences' of South Africa's traumatic past (Blum 2011, 19). The women's visual narrative allow for incorporating local communities' voices and life experiences into the creation of a new, inclusionary social memory (Blum 2011, 14-15).

### **Economic and social empowerment**

As already mentioned, most of the projects have been established in response to the abject poverty of marginalised communities in the former homelands and shanty towns which find themselves on the periphery of the economic mainstream of South Africa. Although projects such as Kaross™ and the Keiskamma Art Project also include men, the overwhelming majority of the participants are women (Stevens 2010, 173-174; Hinze 2007). Often they are the sole breadwinners in their families and support up to ten family members (Krüger and Verster, 2001, 244-245). The aim is therefore to generate an income for the women and empower them economically.

Even though needlework has been considered a social and personal activity, the use thereof as a means to economic survival is nothing new. African American slaves could sell quilts they made to purchase their freedom and there are recorded cases of slaves supporting their masters for extended periods (Barnett Cash 1995, 36). In the 1960s quilting networks were once again established which enabled especially rural black American women from the most economically depressed areas of the country to earn an income and to uplift their standard of living (37).

The American scholar Deborah Carryl Sharp (2010, 66) is critical of projects focusing solely on economic empowerment as this, according to her, compartmentalises women in certain sectors of the economy and force them to conform to the demands of the market economy,

thereby constraining their empowerment. However, most scholars emphasise the importance of memory projects such as embroidered story cloths, rooted in the material empowerment of previously oppressed peoples. They agree that changing the inequalities black women suffer will require not only political representation, but also the redistribution of economic power (McEwan 2003, 507 & 753). A number of articles that focus on the development of community projects in third world countries highlight the fact that these initiatives can indeed empower those on the margins of society (Kelly 2009; Galloway 2009; Tale and Alefaio 2009).

This notion of empowerment thus gives another perspective on the importance of material culture products which due to their economic value form part of a visible cultural trade (Lemire 2009, 85). An expanded definition of the role and importance of community projects is called for - one that recognises that economic and social upliftment might be one of the foremost steps towards enabling previously marginalised women to become part of the recorded narrative and historical process. Community craft projects can play a similar social role as museums, making a positive contribution towards combatting unemployment, allowing for the equitable distribution of resources and improving access to resources and opportunities, including knowledge and jobs.

### **Safe spaces**

What the effect of these embroidery projects will be on the local South African communities in the long-term is difficult to predict. In the short term however, the establishment of craft centres fulfil the important function of creating safe spaces where the participants can connect with other women and where meaningful friendships can be forged (Becker 2010, 116; Blum 2011, 20-22). During my second visit to the Mogalakwena Craft Art Centre in January 2013 one of the members returned after having lost her daughter to AIDS whilst another woman's grandchild died after having drunk paraffin. The other members showed visible concern and empathy for these two women and stepped in to help with practical aspects such as the catering for the funerals. The embroiderers who were involved in the creation of the Keiskamma alter cloth, indicated that it not only provided them with an outlet for their grief, but that they found comfort and reassurance in sharing their feelings with other women who had similar experiences (Schmahman 2005, 49, 62). Both Hofmeyr, founder of the Keiskamma Art Project, and Sharp describe these centres as places where art and healing interject to create meaning and hope to a population struggling from decades of abuse and

poverty (Keiskamma Trust; Schmahmann 2005, 49, 62; Sharp 2010, 42-44). A sense of camaraderie is also evident amongst women in India who produce *phulkaris* or embroidered cloths. Michelle Maskiell describes the *trinyan*, the gatherings where they come together to spin and embroider, as ‘the sociability of female work and exchange’ (Maskiell 1999, 381). Over centuries women have used these opportunities in these spaces to ‘celebrate their own bonds to each other, bonds that had to be negotiated within and around the patriarchal girders of their family lives’ (381).

Nadia Seremetakis’s (1994, 15) observation that embroidery brings moments of stillness and reflection, allowing a woman to step back from her current surroundings, is echoed by one of the women of the Tambani project who stated that ‘when I quilt my thoughts become like a deep quiet pool of water’ (Tambani). It fulfils an important role in providing a space where they feel comfortable to tell their stories. Whereas black South African women were previously excluded from the *kgoro*, the traditionally male site of giving voice to one’s life, the craft centres have become their own “courtyard” or arena that they claim as a rhetorical space for themselves (Hofmeyr 1993; 7; Hamilton 2009, 219; Blum 2011, 19).

McEwan sees the combination of creativity and memory - sewing and orality - as significant modes of communication in many cultures and historical contexts. She describes it as a ‘personal reclamation in written and pictorial form’ (Becker 2010, 130) when for various political and sociological reasons, written disclosure is not possible (McEwan 2003, 748). Already in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries African-American women found solace in the opportunities provided by quilting gatherings to give meaning to their shared experience ‘under conditions of enslavement, persecution, and subordination’ (Aptheker 1989, 74). As they had neither place nor opportunity to make their voices heard in public, they ‘unconsciously created their own lives’ which served as “the voices of authority on their experiences’ (Barnett Cash 1995, 30). As Floris Barnett Cash points out ‘the voices of black women are stitched within their quilts’ (30). The *phulkari* of India are also seen by some scholars as ‘a means of communication’ (Maskiell 1999, 378). It is said that through ‘the stitches, colours and motifs’ of *phulkari* embroidery, ‘a Punjabi woman... pours out her soul, her emotions, dreams and aspirations’ (378).

Morongoe Tsaoli, a facilitator at the Amazwi Abesifazane projects remembers how deeply she was moved on viewing the cloths for the first time. The realisation dawned on her that each of these women is

breaking the silence, talking about whatever she wanted to talk about; it is a relief for her and at the same time it makes her proud to know that somebody out there appreciated her work, that somebody can actually buy her work. So it's appreciation, healing, dignity, pride... as much as they are breaking the silence, they also find business. They find courage, dignity, everything, history in empowerment as well as telling her story not history. It's about healing – what is seen is so important... the work empower the women, it is actualisation, knowing someone cares. Their name has to be there, too (Blum 2011, 20-21).

In her study of the Mapula and Keiskamma embroidery projects, Schmahmann has come to a similar conclusion as McEwan and has found that these embroideries provide a forum for members of the project to articulate concerns they might otherwise feel unable to express. For example, the question of AIDS is still taboo to speak about in many black communities in South Africa. However, Schmahmann (2005) points out the creation of story cloths portraying aspects of the illness, including the infidelity of spouses, seems to have remedied the silence that normally accompanies topics that are considered shameful. Furthermore, whereas they would be careful or unwilling to voice their political opinions publicly, the women of the Mapula project use story cloths to speak out. Not even the ANC leadership, including former presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, are exempt from the women's criticism, despite the North West Province being an ANC stronghold (60).

Apart from the creative and design processes as well as the skills transfer, many of these projects conduct social consciousness workshops to help the participants to engage difficult topics, which in turn increase opportunities for hope and healing. This healing process is considered 'essential for individual and community empowerment and expands the potential for wider social transformation and successful long-term development' (Sharp 2010, 1). Craft projects can therefore open up learning opportunities and improve the quality of basic education, which allow the women to make informed decisions about their and their children's lives and health. In addition, the combined effect of acquiring marketable skills in an informal educational setting and a measure of economic independence, coupled with more opportunities for self-expression, can be seen as a development towards "selfhood" which

could lead to greater independence on other levels (*Women creating the future* 2000, 3; Blum 2011, 15-16). Julia Murphy found that though some of the women complained about their lack of freedom within a patriarchal society, they agreed that their perceptions of themselves had changed and that ‘they had different ideas about what kinds of work they could and could not do’ (Murphy 2004, 164). They also had more self-confidence and a sense of self-worth due to the fact that they could earn their own living and take care of their families (Murphy 2004, 164; Sharp 2010, 43-44).

De Villiers, the co-ordinator of the Intuthuko Sewing Group, also mentions that the combined effects of a guaranteed income and the fact that the women know that their work will be appreciated internationally, has had an effect on their self-esteem. Furthermore, she remarks that it ‘definitely makes them innovative and motivates them to uphold their reputation concerning their skill and artistry’ (Header). This aspect is also mentioned by Lara Lepionka in her research on the story cloth projects in India. She points out that when the story cloths were introduced as income-generating projects, the craftswomen ‘poured their innermost feelings through talented fingers’ (Lepionka 2007, 161) which not only empowered them economically but also psychologically. If the role of arts and craft as ‘instruments’ to make sense of one’s world is considered, story cloths could be seen as the means through which marginalised women can make sense of their lives. Needlecraft and embroidery specifically were seen in the nineteenth century as a means to reinforce women’s submissive position and seclusion from the ‘outside world’ and were supposed to expose native women in the colonies to Western civilisation and encourage them to adapt to a Western life-style. There is therefore a poignant irony that embroidery has become a modern vehicle of artistic expression and economic empowerment that has given women the opportunity to create meaningful work that takes them out of the ‘cycle of poverty and invisibility’ (161). What was envisaged as a tool of subjection has become a voice to speak out and expose the Western world to their way of life (Becker 2007, 119; Daly Goggin 2010, 41).

Story cloth projects could possibly be seen as social practices that have enabled marginalised women all over the world to imagine their identity. Lepionka (2007, 163) refers to projects in India that have become

their means of conquering the confines of their landscape and their limited lifecycle – a *sujuni* worker’s way of transcending the dependence and drudgery of her arduous, anonymous being. Through discovering a creative skill and

strength that is uniquely hers, she has rediscovered her femininity, identity and self.

These projects have helped to develop an identity based on a sense of worth (Olick and Robbins 1998, 110) and pride in the positive contribution their stories can make in their respective countries. This delight in their work and strengthened cultural awareness are evident in a number of embroidery projects in South Africa and countries such as Palestine and India. It is echoed in statements such as '[e]mbroidery is our heritage. We love embroidery... and we are proud of it' (Allenby 2002, 107-108) and "[t]he patience and labour expended on them would not tire us out because we would feel happy and proud with the sense of achievement' (Maskiell 1999, 381). Craft projects could therefore play an important role towards individual and community empowerment and greater social inclusion.

### **For greater South African society: closest of strangers**

A concern raised is the fact that the majority of leaders of South African craft enterprises are white and this has come under criticism. Brenda Schmahmann describes the whites as 'outsiders' whose assistance, however well-meant, has the potential to hamper the process of creating managerial, creative and economic independence, aspects vital to ensure that these projects empower the communities not only economically, but socially as well (Schmahmann 2006, 119-120). Okwui Enwezor (1997, 27-28) argues that such a situation of white women in leadership positions over black women equates to a continuation of colonialist paternalism '[s]ince [the black subject] can't speak for himself, he is spoken for'.

Ingrid Stevens agrees with Enwezor's criticism to an extent. She sees the phenomenon of whites serving as intermediaries and service providers for black producers as indicating some racial polarisation in the crafts that 'surely reflects the previous history of South Africa and the privileged position of these female leaders in particular' (Stevens 2007, 272). However, when considering Anthea Josias's (n.d.) research on the uncertain future of community projects in South Africa, as well as Steven's findings on the devastating effects on the craft artists if such a project fails, one could concur with Steven's argument in countering Enwezor's censure. She highlights that the very fact that these white women are well educated and middle class has equipped them with the necessary market experience to identify 'the needs, aspiration, fashions and desire of their clients', for the market for these 'relatively or very expensive decorative products is certainly the middle to upper classes, the

wealthy, urban dwellers and tourists' (Stevens 2007, 272). Without the experience, knowledge of and connections with this client base, the growth and sustainability of these projects will be seriously hampered (272-273). This is also very much the case with the MCADF where many of these women are illiterate and have received limited education and therefore do not have the necessary experience. Furthermore, due to the isolation of the village and limited access to the outside world resulting from poor infrastructure, the craft artists conveyed to me on 14 and 15 January 2013 that they do not feel confident enough to take on the project on their own.

Judith Lutge Coullie (2001, 1) uses the term 'closest of strangers' to describe the relationship between black and white women. Even though these women met on a daily basis in the workplace, often in the intimate setting of the white woman's home, the historian Cherryl Walker (as quoted in Lutge Coullie 1990, 343) points out that barriers between different groups of women were rigid even before the National Party government adopted the apartheid policy in 1948, making it very difficult, if not impossible to have normal social interaction (Lutge Coullie 2001, 5). In the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto uprising the white Afrikaans author Elsa Joubert investigated the 'possible forging of a common consciousness between these two races of women in South Africa...' 'who at this level would normally be separated by the cultural and social dogmas of our society' (Schalkwyk 1989, 254-255) in her novel *Die Swerffare van Poppie Nongena*. She concluded that although such a meeting is possible, it is not 'without its ideological ... complexities' (256).

The manner in which the working relationship between black and white women is structured in these projects has allowed, in many cases, to break the racial and cultural barriers. In the case of the MCADF the story cloths do not form part of the commercial range produced by the Craft Art Centre, but grew quite spontaneously out of the personal relationship between Coetsee and the local women. Born and bred in Cape Town, Coetsee admits that when she and her husband acquired the farm in the Limpopo province, she knew very little of the women and she started to enquire about their daily lives. To overcome the language and cultural barriers, the women found it easier to "tell" their stories by means of embroidered story cloths. Coetsee was astounded by the wealth of information on the indigenous culture and traditional knowledge systems contained in these stories. As a result, in the year 2000 the members of the MCADF started documenting their everyday life by means of embroidered story cloths (Joubert 2009; Richards 2011, 55). Le Roux of the Tambani

collective, Hofmeyr who founded the Keiskamma Art Project as well as De Villiers who is involved in the Intuthuko Sewing group echo similar sentiments.

This is not a unique phenomenon to South Africa and throughout history quilts have served as metaphors for community and ‘integration, inclusiveness, [and] the breaking down of barriers’ (J. Lewis and M.R. Fraser 1996, 437). Barnett Cash describes how from the mid-1800s black and white women in the northern part of the USA formed interracial quilting societies which supported moral, political and reform issues. Furthermore, with the economic depression of the late nineteenth century black and white women crossed ‘traditional racial barriers’ to join in ‘situations that enhanced mutual respect and appreciation’. (Barnett Cash 1995, 32, 34)<sup>ii</sup> The opportunities provided by these projects take the possibility for national reconciliation and social cohesion from a mere hope closer to a reality.

### **Meaning**

In conclusion the question has to be asked whether community craft projects can, in a similar way as museums, contribute to their communities as agents for civil engagement. In her article on community museums Nonceba Shoba outlines the socio-economic, environmental and cultural contribution that these projects could make. When the community story cloth projects discussed here are measured up against the criteria, as well as the SAMA definition of the role of museum in society (SAMA 2014), their impact is clear. The craft-art collections created through these initiatives allow for connection and cooperation between the community and public; they provide therapy through art and other creative activities for the victims of trauma; they allow for story-telling to change attitudes and improve self-image; the sale of arts and craft made by the community helps to address poverty and unemployment; through their work the community’s indigenous knowledge systems are acknowledged and finally these projects assist community empowerment by allowing the community access to education. (Shoba 2005, 26) Craft projects provide dynamic spaces that both shape and manifest the consciousness, identities and understanding of communities and individuals in relation to their natural, historical and cultural environments through the rhetorical space that they provide to previously silenced and marginalised groups (26).

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<sup>i</sup> The mission statement of the MCADF is: To create employment opportunities for previously disadvantaged women and young school leavers living in villages under the authority of traditional tribal chief, Kibi, in the Blouberg district of the Limpopo Province; promote and redevelop the traditional craft art skills inherent in rural communities, but which has become dormant due to poverty, and to enable more members of the community to become self-sufficient and less dependent on unemployment government grants and pensions; record and preserve indigenous knowledge of living oral cultures and nurture and develop creativity of children living in remote rural communities (MCADF).

<sup>ii</sup> In exchange for scraps of material, black tenant farmer women would piece two quilts, one for themselves and one for their white neighbours.