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## Zulu Beadwork 'Speaks' Across Time

BY SHARON F. GRIFFIN

DURBAN, South Africa

June 1995

Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock St.  
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Dear Peter,

On Sunday mornings I sometimes stroll along the Durban beach front to a flea market where thousands wander through a maze of hawkers selling everything imaginable — malachite chess sets from Zaire, tribal masks from Central Africa, T-shirts, kitchenware, hand-woven baskets, shoes, toilet plungers, stereo equipment, potted plants and, best of all, used books, to which I am drawn like a child to candy. Aside from books, there is one other thing peddled at the flea market that captures my fancy: It is beadwork crafted by Zulu women. There are colorful beaded medicine bottles, dolls, belts, neckties, headbands, key chains, spear handles, cups, salad servers and coasters, not to mention costume jewelry such as rings, bracelets, necklaces and the ever-popular Zulu "love letters."

Beadwork is a craft of women and an outlet for their feelings, perceptions and attitudes. Older women teach girls, passing skills from one generation to the next. Beads also "speak." Author Eleanor Preston-Whyte wrote in "Speaking With Beads: Zulu Arts from Southern Africa" that "they employ a symbolic language which may indicate coded love messages, the age and social status of the wearer, the home area from which he or she comes — or simply an attraction to color and pattern. They also speak of ethnic identity or of religion..."

Dozens of women sell beaded designs along the beach front. They are there seven days a week as early as eight o'clock in the morning to as late as midnight.

Beadwork is an important means by which many, particularly traditionalist Zulu women in rural KwaZulu-Natal, earn money to put food on the table and to secure a roof over their heads. To give you an idea of prices, a beaded cup sells for \$7 to \$9, a necktie for \$9 to \$12. Headbands for women and girls range from \$1.60 to \$7, depending on the width of the band.

However much the beach-front hawkers earn each month from the sale of beadwork, it is not enough. I say this because numbers

*Sharon F. Griffin is an ICWA fellow studying the language, culture and politics of the Zulu people. of KwaZulu-Natal.*

of the vendors sleep where they work, which is to say curled up on strips of grass or on the pavement. They take turns keeping watch in the night, fending off rapists and muggers. Many of the women belong to SEWU, an acronym for Self-Employed Women's Union. SEWU is a new trade union for working women who are self-employed or do not have permanent jobs. I talked with a organizer for SEWU — launched in Durban a year ago in July — and she told me that one of most urgent needs of its membership is affordable housing.

Beadmaking has been an important feature of Zulu culture for generations, and the trade in beads goes back to early South African history. W. Knyff, a crew member of the Dutch ship *Stavenisse* wrecked off the Natal coast on February 16, 1685, said in a statement:

"The Natives indeed offered us bread and cattle for sale, but we had nothing wherewith to purchase the one or the other. Nothing is esteemed there but beads and copper rings for the neck or arms... When we were thus reduced to the last necessity, there came to us two Englishmen, who had some months previously lost their ship at Rio de Natal, about twenty 'mijlen' further to the north.

"These men, being acquainted with the country and language, instructed us how to deal with the Natives, and willingly offered us their assistance towards our mutual preservation, together with a share in their merchandise consisting of copper rings and common beads, enough to find them and us also in meat and bread for 50 years."<sup>1</sup>

Without going deep into history, I'll add that at the height of the Zulu empire beads had considerable economic value. Strings of beads were given in exchange for goods and services.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Durban owes its birth to beads. Lt. Francis Farewell, who arrived in 1824, earned the right to live on the shores of the Bay of Natal by bartering beads with the Zulu King Shaka.<sup>3</sup>

Before the middle of the last century, beads were made of ivory, bone, aromatic wood, shell, animal teeth, seeds, egg-shells, plants and, in some areas, of clay. Glass beads of European and Venetian manufacture first entered Southern Africa as trade goods imported largely through the East Coast of Delagoa Bay.<sup>4</sup>

These days beads are made of plastic and, to a lesser extent, glass. And to see Zulu-speaking people dressed in beaded adornments, you'll need to attend a special cultural celebration or visit a tourist attraction such as Shakaland or Dumazulu Village in

northern KwaZulu-Natal. Shakaland is sort of the Zulu version of Disneyland. Originally, it was created for the set of the movie "Shaka Zulu." Dumazulu is a "living museum," where five traditional Zulu families live and work. Visitors to both places "experience" Zulu traditions such as beer brewing, spear making, hut building, pottery weaving and beadwork. A highlight of the "traditional experience" is vibrant dancing by Zulu "maidens" and "warriors" dressed in beaded costumes.

The only other place where I've seen large numbers of Zulu-speaking people wearing beaded regalia is at the headquarters of the Holy Church of Nazareth Baptists in the township of Inanda. Adherents of this independent African church — often referred to as the Shembe Church after its founder and prophet Isaya Shembe — wear elaborate beaded designs. The Shembe Church has been described as a unique fusion of Zulu and orthodox Christian theology. The Prophet Isaya emphasized traditional Zulu values and integrated traditional dance and dress into the worship of the Christian God.<sup>5</sup> Part of the dance attire for married women at Shembe

festivals, for example, is strings of beads that hang from head to shoulder. Dance outfits for girls of marriageable age include a beaded apron, thick rings of beads worn around the hips, and anklets. Maiden's outfits, I'm told, run as high as \$333.

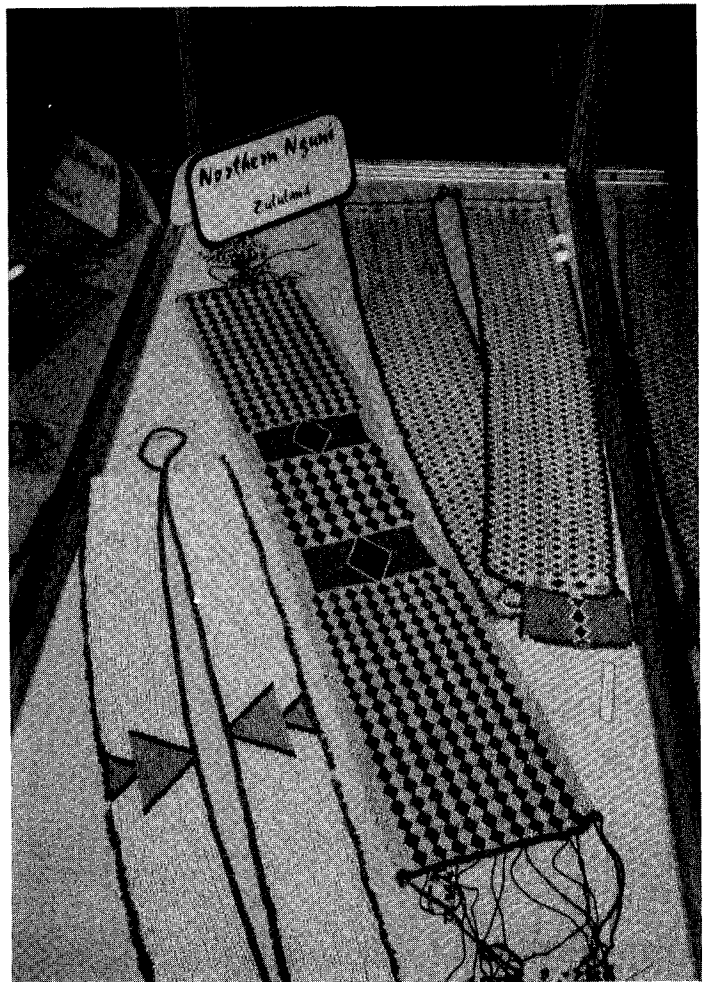
At the indescribably busy Warwick Avenue market in Durban, where mostly black African traders sell fruits and vegetables, you'll also see sangomas (diviners) wearing cascades of beads as headdresses. (The beads are strung in loops because diviners say 'the spirits we call up come and sit on these loops of beads and speak into our ears.'<sup>6</sup>

Rickshaw pullers on the Durban beach front also wear ornate, beaded costumes and headdresses. However, outside of these groups and circumstances, beadwork is not a feature of everyday life. Rarely will you see people either in the city or in rural areas wearing beadwork, an observation that led me to wonder who is buying beadwork designs and for what purpose? The answer is tourists. Tourists keep this art form alive, along with the fashion industry.

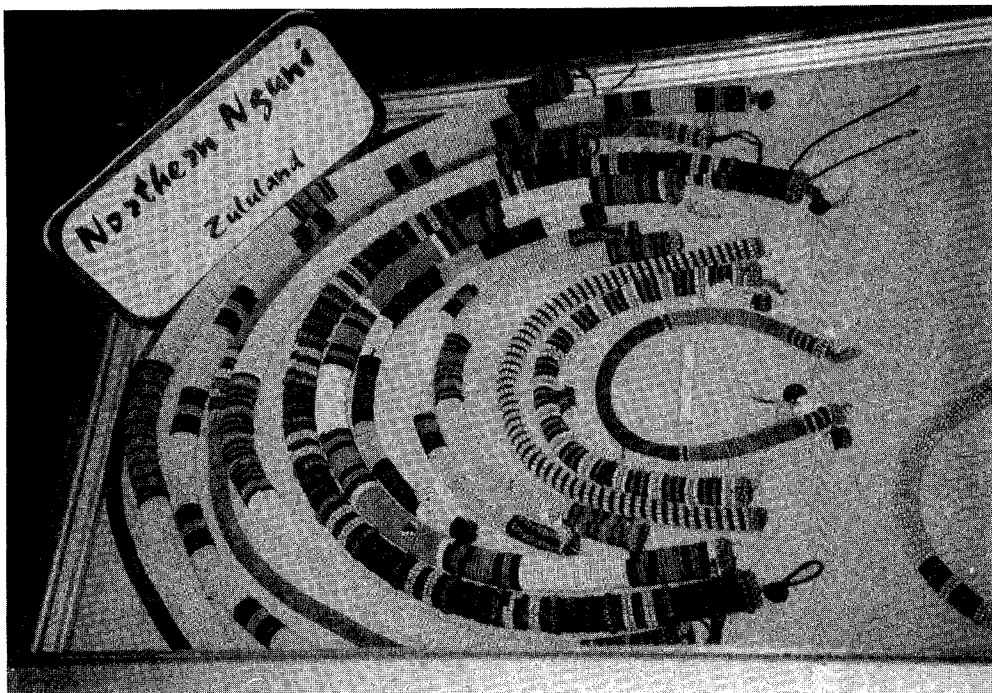
Major tourist routes in KwaZulu-Natal pass through areas where women sell beadwork near and alongside roads. Umgababa is one such place. Umgababa is about 25 miles south of Durban, and it is a favorite stop for vacationers wishing to purchase not only beadwork but wood carvings, woven baskets, crocheted table cloths and other indigenous curios. I bought a beaded bangle there for R4 (\$1.10) and a necklace for R18 (\$6).

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Zulu beadwork on display at the KwaZulu Cultural Museum in Ulundi. Ulundi is about 75 miles north of Durban. It was first established as a capital by the Zulu king Cetshwayo in 1873.



*Hip belts in different widths and designs.*



*Thick rings of beads worn by young women either around the hips or neck.*



*Costumed dancers at Duma-zulu Traditional Village in northern KwaZulu-Natal. Their skirts are made of large, colorful plastic beads.*

Tourist attractions such as Shakaland also create a demand for beadwork. There, souvenir shops sell beadwork similar to that worn by the entertainers who dance for guests. Museums and art galleries also create interest in the craft. You'll find beadwork collections in virtually all museums that house cultural artifacts from the indigenous people of Southern Africa. The Mashu Museum of Ethnology at The Campbell Collections & Center for Oral Studies in Durban, for example, maintains an extensive collection of beadwork worn by men and women, boys and girls.

Art galleries do their share to stimulate the demand for beadwork, as well. In the 1980s, Zulu-speaking women in the Thousands Hills near Durban started making beaded cloth figures of people, animals and objects observed in their local environment. These figures are creative responses to market opportunity as well as subtle forms of commentary on the experience of everyday life. The non-profit African Art Center in Durban carries a full complement of beaded cloth figures that sell for \$25 on up to \$100 and more.

Beadmaking is also kept alive by an international demand for high-fashion beaded jewelry. The Mdukutshani Beadwork Project based at Tugela Ferry in the Msinga area of KwaZulu-Natal, for example, specializes in fashion jewelry. It

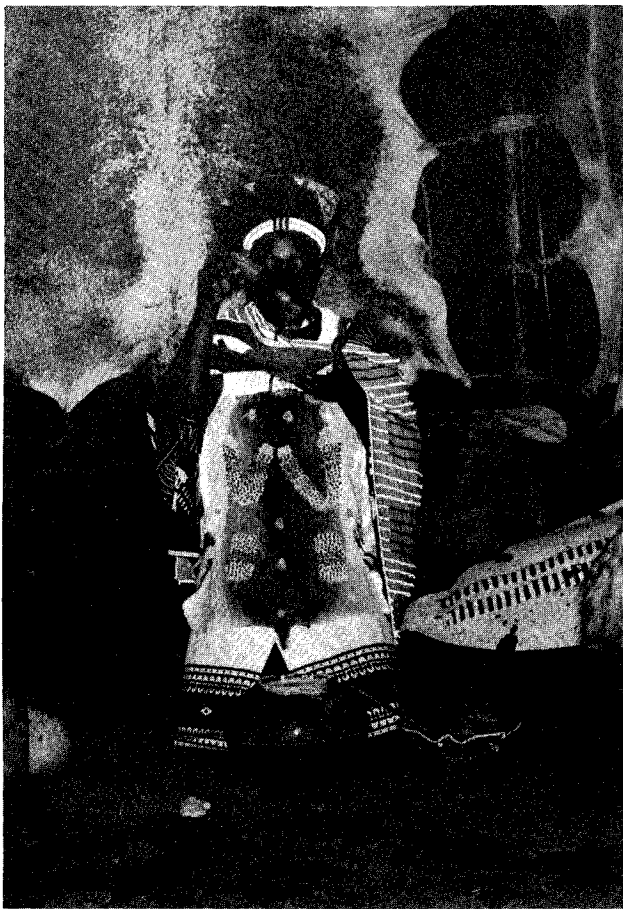
was the first beadwork project to import beads in fashion colors and to plan its range to suit the international fashion market.<sup>7</sup> In up-market department stores and trendy souvenir shops here, you'll find Zulu beadwork sewn on the collar and pockets of women's blouses.



In April I signed up for a beadwork class through a local museum. Nine of us turned out for the course — five Americans and four South Africans, all women except for one American man. I spent six hours making one bracelet and, truth told, the bangle doesn't compare to the intricately delicate designs crafted by Zulu women. I'm not giving up, however. An elderly South African woman who sat across from me in the class said: "Don't get discouraged. The first 10 years are the hardest."

Besides being pretty to look at, beaded designs also possess special meaning, in some cases. That meaning is conveyed through color, style and pattern. A white bead, for instance, represents love and purity, while a black bead symbolizes darkness, loneliness and disappointment. Pink beads signify poverty; red beads, tears and longing. Blue represents faithfulness, while yellow stands for wealth. So a single string of white and pink beads might read, "my heart is full of love (white), but you have no cattle to marry me with (pink)."





*A married woman at Shakaland sipping traditional beer. She is wearing a decorated pregnancy apron made of animal hide sacrificed to her husband's ancestors for the protection of the unborn child.*

There is a poetry to the "bead language," and in recent years more and more scholars have devoted themselves to better understanding the complexities of "bead literacy." Traditionally, beaded "love letters" were given by a girl to her fiancée. The message woven into each article was very personal. The meaning associated with the colors could only be fully understood by a few close friends of the maker. That's because color alone does not signify meaning. The size of the beads, their placement in relation to adjacent beads, the material from which the beads are

made, the length and size of the finished piece, and the fact that each color, except for white, has a positive and negative connotation all influence the message.

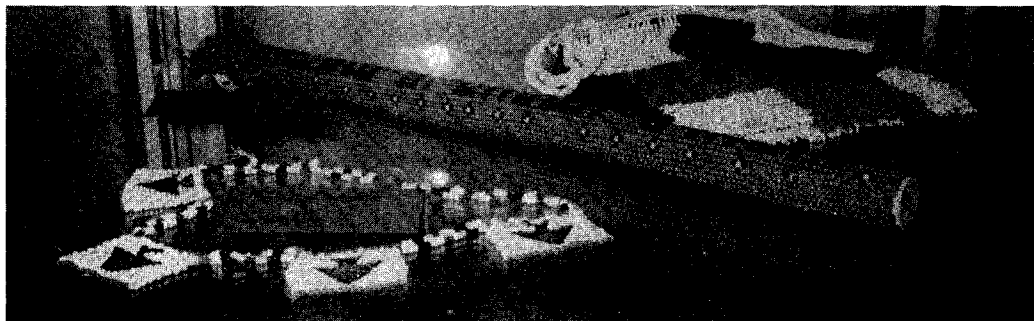
Scholar B.N. Mthethwa described beadwork as an "oral tradition." He wrote in "Decoding Zulu Beadwork" that "the theory of Zulu beadwork codes is embedded in the idiomatic expressions of language. The vocabulary and the grammar of the code is created by different colors and shapes. The colors are grouped into 'families,' with each member of the group suggesting a certain idiomatic expression. On the whole, the latitude of the meaning depends on the context of the bead arrangement. However, since the beads are works of art, creative demands might be foregrounded so that the basic function, which is the message, becomes secondary. Hence the meanings of colors and shapes are not rigid. The bead message, being deliberately coded, are meant to be puzzles, sometimes taking days and months to unravel."<sup>8</sup>

While it's true that "love letters" defy precise interpretation, Princess Magogo Constance (Ka Dinuzulu) Buthelezi — the late mother of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Minister of Home Affairs in the Government of National Unity — interpreted messages for a range of colors. For example, a ruby bead is called *umlilwane* and its meaning is "when ever I see you my heart goes on fire through love" or "my heart leaps from flames of love." Today, Zulu "love letters" are among the most popular items snatched up by tourists. They generally sell for between \$1.50 to \$3.

Beadwork is a dynamic art form; it is by no means static. Colors, patterns and styles are constantly changing in response to new ideas, as well as social, economic and even political pressures. It is as Zulu culture itself, intricate and in a state of transformation.

Sincerely yours,

Sharon F. Griffin



*Foreground:  
Necklace — Loveletter.  
Mid-20th Century.  
KwaZulu Cultural  
Museum*



#### Works Cited:

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## Current Fellows & Their Activities

**Bacete Bwogo.** A Sudanese from the Shilluk tribe of southern Sudan, Bacete is a physician spending two and one-half years studying health-delivery systems in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State (India) and the Bronx, U.S.A. Bacete did his undergraduate work at the University of Juba and received his M.D. from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. He served as a public-health officer in Port Sudan until 1990, when he moved to England to take advantage of scholarships at the London School of Economics and Oxford University. [THE AMERICAS]

**Cheng Li.** An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life with a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

**Adam Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Cynthia Caron.** With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

**Hisham Ahmed.** Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

**Sharon Griffin.** A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

**Pramila Jayapal.** Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**William F. Foote.** Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

**Teresa C. Yates.** A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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