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# Life in a Zulu Village: Craft and the Art of Modernity in South Africa

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## **Abstract**

This article examines contemporary South African baskets as objects that refer to histories and memories. I argue that the manner of their display around urban areas in South Africa *visually* demarcates aspects of the cities as African. But I argue further that this African aura is concocted: these objects belong within a particular space of production denoted (and fenced off) as “authentically” African, because it is not industrialized, and therefore apparently not “modern.” Differentiations between rural and urban, tradition and modernity are argued to inform both the development and promotion of indigenous crafts. I thus review “authenticity” in a discussion of the ways the basket-makers use traditional and imported materials, motifs and techniques as vectors of African identity. Further I argue that in their most sophisticated manifestations, they demand the recognition of the craftsperson as individual artist.

**Keywords:** baskets, African, craft, authenticity, modernity, artists

## **Introduction**

Baskets, originally useful items made of recyclable materials in many societies across the world, are today bought in increasing numbers in Johannesburg and other urban centers, primarily as decorative embellishments for interiors in

homes, offices and hotels, and as collectors' items. They have been widely marketed and new forms have been developed, building on long traditions of basket-weaving among indigenous African peoples. The history of basket-making in South Africa has not been fully researched, but enough has been done to enable the contemporary researcher to link recent developments to past traditions.<sup>1</sup> Basket-making is one of the forms of creative production, defined as a "craft," which was encouraged among black South Africans under the apartheid regime. It fell within the ambit of what was derogatorily labeled "Bantoekuns" (Bantu art) in Afrikaans, because it was seen as inferior to European arts and crafts. Ironically, however, it may have been the effort made by Jack Grossert,<sup>2</sup> who was in charge of "native" education in Natal in the 1950s and 1960s, to promote the teaching of such crafts in the rural schools, that preserved basket-making traditions in that province in particular, and thus enabled the development of new cooperatives in the production of such objects, primarily for sale in the urban areas. Similarly, extensive traditions of basket-making were documented by Margaret Shaw, especially in the Eastern Cape, but these have not survived to the present. The KwaZulu-Natal cooperatives have been built by players from different social backgrounds, including a number of white women, on the basis of indigenous skills. While histories of cooperatives are important to the emergence of basket-makers as named individuals, I will not repeat them here; instead, I make a broader argument about the baskets' position in relation to modernity and African identity.

Objects and images that refer to African histories and memories, and the manner of their display in various fleamarkets around urban areas in South Africa, *visually* demarcate aspects of the cities' commerce as different from other modern cities. But this African aura is concocted: these objects belong within a particular space of production denoted (and fenced off) as "authentically" African, because it is not industrialized, and therefore apparently not "modern."<sup>3</sup> Most of the objects for sale in these markets are handmade, and often (but not exclusively, as I shall demonstrate) by people living in the rural areas. The differentiations between rural and urban, tradition and modernity are easily lost sight of in such an environment. Yet they form the base of both the development and promotion of indigenous crafts. In this article, I review "authenticity" in relation to the development of modern forms of basketry, and discuss the ways in which traditional and imported materials, motifs and techniques are used as vectors of African identity. These crafts are essentially modern: responses to globally traded notions of creativity. In their most sophisticated manifestations, they demand the recognition of the craftsperson as individual artist.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of contemporary knowledge about individual African artists is more a reflection of a lack of modern historical research than it is an index of an indigenous lack of interest in the identity of those entrusted with making specific kinds of objects. Studies like those made by Shaw (1992, 1993, 2004) of Eastern Cape basketwork, or by Broster (1976) of Thembu beadwork, are short on the names of the makers, although Shaw's study

offers a detailed account of techniques and typologies. Individual makers have been excluded from the history of the production and marketing of African arts because anonymity has always served as a sign of the authenticity of African artistic endeavors, and, ultimately, of their continued difference from those of Europe.

### **Spaces of Display: Art Galleries and Crafts Markets**

While tourist markets can be found in many cities across Africa, few have the same diversity of outlets for crafts as those in South Africa. In Johannesburg, there are numerous sites in which handmade objects are exhibited for perusal, appreciation and purchase. The University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries houses the most extensive collection of African art in Johannesburg, and possibly in South Africa, including objects which might be labeled “craft” in other contexts.<sup>5</sup> The intention in assembling this collection was not only to establish these objects as having a strong aesthetic value but also to destabilize the apartheid-promoted notion that black South Africans had no traditions of “art.”<sup>6</sup> Alongside historical African objects, the galleries house collections of contemporary South African art, but no contemporary South African craft that is not “indigenous.” This latter qualifier is problematic, because a very large part of the collection is composed of beadwork from Southern Africa, and the glass beads used in this craft are all imported from Europe and (more recently) China.

The other major site of display of fine art and craft in Johannesburg is the Johannesburg Art Gallery, founded as a museum of fine and industrial arts in 1912. It has a collection

of European lace and furniture and Chinese ceramics alongside holdings of historical European and South African paintings, sculptures and graphics.<sup>7</sup> In 1990, two major collections of historical African art, one of which was previously classified as craft or material culture, were added to the holdings of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.<sup>8</sup> This move threw the question of defining “art” into the public arena, just as the political demolition of apartheid began with the un-banning of the African National Congress and the release of Nelson Mandela. The result was that objects formerly treated simply as craft were, in a number of places, decontextualized in their display as aesthetic objects, and reinterpreted as the “art” of black Africans. A similar migration of objects between different kinds of museums can be traced in other centers in South Africa at the same time, with some objects being exhibited by two institutions, for example the South African National Gallery and the South African Museum in Cape Town.<sup>9</sup> Beside these institutional collections, there are numerous commercial galleries in Johannesburg and other urban centers which deal in “Fine Arts,” from the avant-garde to the kitsch, but most do not sell “craft objects.” There are some upmarket specialist craft galleries, and a national crafts council has been established to help market crafts, especially those generating sustainable income. These typically involve repetition of forms and designs with only minor variation.

Informal craft markets in all the major centers of South Africa feature craft items with little ethnic identity, whose authenticity lies in their facture, in the trace of their makers’ toil, but not in their genealogy and even less in their originality. Often these craft objects are found in stalls next door



**Fig 1** The trader “Simba” with Zimbabwean and East African baskets at the African Craft Market, Rosebank, Johannesburg, March 2009.

to displays of African curios, mostly wood carvings from various parts of Africa. Many are claimed as “authentic” examples of “traditional” forms.<sup>10</sup> Also on display are many forms that were originally inventive and witty, but have been deadened by repetition. Most of these are imported from far-flung parts of East and West Africa, and are shown in Johannesburg and elsewhere in a strange

smorgasbord of styles and genres. In the craft markets, African identity is largely connoted in masks and figures, made by the dozen by semiskilled artist-craftsmen in Côte d’Ivoire and Mali, or by Kamba carvers in Kenya. These are supplemented by textiles from Ghana, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, various forms of wooden tableware from East Africa, mats from Swaziland, and baskets from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, Kenya and occasionally Uganda (Figure 1). The only local crafts that are represented in these markets are beadwork, historically a female craft, and beaded wirework sculptures and wire baskets—metalworking being originally, and still mostly, a male skill (Figure 2). These genres are also sold on the roadside in cities and at major out-of-town tourist attractions such as Cape Point, suggesting that these ensembles of objects are orchestrated to create a sense of the South African cultural landscape (Figure 3).

The broad geographical representation of objects from across Africa, however,



**Fig 2** Beaded wire animals face a troupe of dancers in Zulu costume with an East African drum and a dinosaur inflatable at The Mall Rooftop Fleamarket, Rosebank, Johannesburg, March 2009.



**Fig 3** Beaded wire animals and aluminum buckets for sale outside a small shopping center, Greenside, Johannesburg, March 2009.

simultaneously signifies a cultural superficiality. This is a version of Africa which does not respect regional craft genealogies or specificities of style and technique, in which difference is a function of exoticizing the other rather than a reflection of historical developments (Figure 4). Designs originating as individual and unique forms in high-craft spheres, such as wire baskets, or masks and sculptures from specific historical and geographical locales, are found in endless replication on these fleamarket stalls. This is not only a measure of how rapidly designs travel in the global craft economy; it also represents a homogenized idea of Africa. In these commercial spaces, African craft appears as a lowest common denominator—the “indigenous” object made by hand. In none of these contexts is the name (or even the existence) of the individual maker even vaguely acknowledged. This lack is not considered important by most consumers, but is nevertheless an essential feature in the marketing of a



**Fig 4** Tedious Manyawi, a Zimbabwean trader at his stall in the African Craft Market, Rosebank, Johannesburg, March 2009.

genuine, authentic, “primitive” Africa—the Africa sought by tourists, who are a high priority in South African development terms.<sup>11</sup>



**Fig 5** Pedi (Sekhukhuneland, Limpopo Province, South Africa) *seshego* (grain basket). Grasses and tree bark, 42 cm high, 46 cm long. The Museum of Ethnology (WME 038), housed in the Wits Art Museum, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

### Techniques, Traditions and Gender

Basketry is one of the indigenous Southern African crafts that have been developed in a number of collective endeavors in order to uplift the rural poor. It is also one of the crafts that can be used as a vector for an African identity because it has a long history and because, in the past at least, it involved the use of only locally available materials and inherited techniques. Historically, most African baskets were made as vessels for containing various foodstuffs from grain (Figure 5), vegetables, and even liquids such as beer (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>12</sup> They were made in a wide range of sizes, from the very small beer pot covers (*imbenge*) made by Zulu- and Ndebele-speakers, to woven grain storage baskets made by speakers of Northern Sotho (*seshego*) and Zulu, in varying sizes, the largest being big enough to hold an adult human.<sup>13</sup> Flaring conical baskets were made in calibrated sizes by Tsonga-speakers



**Fig 6** Pondomise (Transkei, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa) *izitya* (beer basket). Grasses and roots, 29.5 cm high, 22.2 cm long. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum (93.38.02), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



**Fig 7** Monica Hunter; *Man Making a Sewn Beer Basket in Pondo, Pondoland East, 1932*. University of the Witwatersrand, Wits Art Museum: Ethnological Museum Collection. Hunter no. 71.

for measuring and for carrying grain on a woman's head (Figure 8) (Becker 2004). Venda, Lobedu and Tsonga basket-makers produced hemispherical baskets with lids for serving or keeping food (Krige 1943), and similar baskets were extensively beaded for special occasions among Tsonga-speakers in the same region of the lowveld of Southeast Africa (Leibhammer 2007, Becker 2004). All South African indigenous groups, except the San and Khoi, were settled agriculturalists<sup>14</sup> who kept cattle and had a vast knowledge of the indigenous materials that they used. These forms provided a lexicon for later

developments in the modern forms of basketry. Modern basket-makers largely produce works specifically for sale to European buyers, and in some areas entire villages became involved in the production of baskets (Levinsohn 1979, 1980; Thorpe 1994; van Heerden 1996).<sup>15</sup> Baskets are often favored by tourists because they are easily transported and by interior designers because, being largely neutral in color, they complement a large variety of decorative schemes. They are also desirable, however, because they fit a number of definitions of authenticity and, more controversially, modernity, both in their materials and their designs.

For historical African art of the kind auctioned at Sotheby's and bought by museums and wealthy individual collectors to be considered authentic, at least in terms of the etic view of African products, the piece should have been made in Africa, for use in African societies, and prior to major European incursions (Kasfir 1992). Clearly such criteria would render most African products in some sense inauthentic; very few pre-contact objects have survived outside archaeological contexts. Further, African craftspeople have long experimented with imported materials and techniques to make objects which best suited their needs. In addition, they responded to the opening of new markets by making objects for sale to outsiders from the seventeenth century onward.<sup>16</sup> For the most part these outsiders were Europeans, avid collectors of African objects as signs of difference and "primitive" simplicity and sometimes as "ethnographic specimens" (Mack 1990).<sup>17</sup> Artists working for outside patrons, however, developed forms and designs which were intended



**Fig 8** Tsonga (Limpopo Province, South Africa) *xirhundzu* (left) and *xithabana* (center and right) (grain and measuring baskets). Grasses, 45.8 cm high, 23 cm wide (l); 11 cm high, 25.8 cm long (c); 18.3 cm high, 38.4 cm long (r). Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum (98.27.01, 89.58.02 b, a), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

to demonstrate their participation in the modern world, rather than to mark their African identity. Modernity was a motivating factor even where it only involved a process of translating the detritus of the industrial centers into objects of delight at the periphery (Nettleton, Charlton and Rankin-Smith 2003).<sup>18</sup> Many of the baskets discussed here are modern in these senses, but also because they are individual and personal interpretations of particular craft genres and iconographic sets. They are therefore distinguishable not only from objects made according to traditional patterns, but also from those produced under the guidance of contemporary designers—who have formed companies where basket-weavers and other artisans produce objects according to their designs. The latter have

mostly been conceived within a particular modernist, abstract aesthetic, and the basket-makers simply carry out the work.<sup>19</sup> In these instances the reference to African authenticity is limited to technique. The makers' names are effaced by the company label: their individuality is nullified by adherence to a mediated design process. This is often done to satisfy a perceived need for conformity with market standards so that the objects will be saleable (Arment and Fick-Jordaan 2005).

In Southern Africa the most common form of indigenous basketry involved a coiling technique, in which thin bundles of sedge grass stalks are bound together in coils, which are sewn together to form vessels of various shapes, and for a variety of purposes.<sup>20</sup> In many cases the coils were

bound with tree bark strips, thin stalks, or leaves of other grasses, although the use of *ilala* palm leaves for binding among Zulu craftsmen gave their baskets a much smoother surface than those bound with other materials.<sup>21</sup> In a few ethnic groups men wove baskets with warp and weft, using leaf or bark strips to create a variety of forms.<sup>22</sup> Grass and leaf/ bark techniques were largely the domain of men in the past (Krige 1950; Klopper 1992, 2008; van Heerden 1996), but over the course of the twentieth century became increasingly used by women, so that by the 1980s men regarded it as women's work (Fick-Jordaan 2005; Klopper 2008). This was largely the result of migrant labor patterns, in which men from the rural areas moved to urban centers to work (Thorpe 1994), and women had to replace their labor: Old baskets (made by men) generally have simple and sparse decoration subtly integrated into the sewing of the coils, in

some instances involving no color change but leaving raised lines on the inner and outer surfaces of the baskets (Patel 2006; van Heerden 1996). Decorative motifs were also created through the use of differently colored grasses or dyed leaves as the binding materials covering the grass coils. These colored or dyed materials were used to form geometric motifs, widely spaced across the surface of the basket (Figure 9) and visible through the contrast in color: The coiling method of basket-making is similar to that used in making clay pots, a craft exclusively associated with women in Southern African societies in the past, and this may have encouraged the transfer of skills in basket-making (among isiZulu- and seSwati-speakers at least) from men to women.<sup>23</sup> Other affinities with women's crafts can be seen in the similarity between the shapes of many Zulu baskets and those of clay pots, and in the similarity between their geometric designs and those common in the decorative repertoires of women, who created increasingly complex forms of beadwork from the later nineteenth century onward.<sup>24</sup> Thus the increased density of decoration on basketry in recent times may have resulted not only from the demand by buyers in a modern market for handmade craft, but also from the changed gender of the makers.

All historical forms of basketry in Southern Africa have been subject to a variety of indigenous internal modernizations. Klopper (2003) has argued that scholars must acknowledge makers' interactions with a world of global materials: interactions between the rural and the urban, the local and the international. In the sphere of basket-weaving there have been two significant developments in relation to such



**Fig 9** Zulu basket, artist unknown. *Ilala* palm and grass, natural dyes, 36 cm high, 50 cm deep. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum (1983.05.01, A,B), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

interaction. On one hand, the introduction of many more design motifs on single objects has accompanied a widening range of color. This has been enabled by the use of materials such as plastic-coated copper telephone wire, plastic threads from bags used to contain oranges and vegetables, often replacing beads sewn onto the surface of baskets,<sup>25</sup> along with a development of new “natural” ranges of color in dyes for natural fibers.<sup>26</sup> The change in design density and regularity is visible in two major basket types: large, colorful, lidded baskets woven from ilala palm leaves around grass coils by Zulu-speakers in Natal (Figure 10); and wirework baskets and plates, also largely associated with Zulu-speakers. The range of basket shapes made by Zulu-speakers appears to have been quite stable for over 150 years; Holden (1866) recorded at least

three that are still made today, and Krige (1950) recorded twelve. Pear-shaped ilala palm baskets with lids were originally made to accompany a new bride on her journey to her husband’s father’s homestead (van Heerden 1996). Marriage baskets thus had a special significance as markers of a rite of passage for the woman within Zulu society. Along with the globular beer basket (*isichumo*), the pear shape became the form most favored by contemporary Vukani Association basket-makers in the Hlabisa district (Thorpe 1994) and their successors in Hluhluwe, Zululand.<sup>27</sup> In a departure from older (pre-1950) Zulu forms, the designs on these baskets include such a great variation of color that they are distanced, but not completely removed, from the problematic category of the “traditional.” While large baskets may in the past have been used within the contexts of kings’ and chiefs’ courts (Holden 1866: 254), they were not as extensively decorated as their modern counterparts. Neither the modern nor the older large forms were aimed at general local consumption; both are examples of luxury consumption.



**Fig 10** Salina Mtethwa, basket. Ilala palm and grass, natural dyes, 51 cm high, 54.4 cm deep. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum (90.07), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

### **Plastic-coated Wire: Modernity and Figuration**

Elaboration and adaptation of designs also resulted in the removal of traditional craft products from local circulation in developments in wire basket manufacture in Zulu communities. Old wirework of tightly woven copper and brass was made in a plaiting technique, used for sheathing the hafts of ceremonial weapons and on staffs of many different ethnic groups in Southern Africa (Roodt 1996; Nel 2005; Davison 1991). Small-scale wirework baskets in this

technique were originally made as beer pot covers (*imbenge*). The process, according to Fick-Jordaan (2005), involved plaiting the wire around conical molds, and differed from the coiled and sewn forms made in ilala palm. Coiled wire versions were invented in the 1980s, when steel cores supplanted the grass bundles, and plastic-coated telephone wire replaced palm leaves as the binding material. The advantage of the plastic-coated wire was that, aside from its greater durability, more colorful designs could be introduced, and the baskets could be washed. The original wire *imbenge* forms have been adapted as small-scale conical baskets for sale in the craft markets, where they now appear by the dozen (Figure 11).

Many of the modern forms that use this wire technique and that aspire to “museum quality” have, however, been increasingly flattened out into circular plates—objects for which there is little practical use, but whose shapes allow their formal qualities to be viewed frontally. These flat designs include conventional patterns such as

dramatic spirals of white against deep red and blue backgrounds, and abstract, geometric patterns with interlocking rows of triangles, diamonds and chevrons arranged around the circumference of the coils or in flower-like leaves. The new designs are based on historical forms such as the stitched wire decoration on gourd snuff containers, whose relative subtlety was underpinned by the monochrome materials used in their construction. The new designs are characterized by dramatic contrast or simple, geometric figuration, both of which reinforce notions of the “traditional” as bold and unsophisticated.

The final dimension that has aided the promotion of the wire baskets as artworks within global modernity is the inclusion of figurative imagery. While some apparently nineteenth-century Lozi baskets from Zambia included images of crocodiles and horses, grass and palm baskets from South Africa did not often display figurative forms (Levinsohn: 1979; Shaw 2004).<sup>28</sup> A greater range of figures was introduced into the weaving of Zulu wire baskets from the 1970s onward, including images of humans, animals, boats, houses, trees, insects, flowers and flags, and they have only very recently made their appearance in the ilala palm baskets.

All the wire baskets’ designs are centripetal; the figures stand with their feet pointing to the center of the circle, and there is no horizontal narrative divorced from the essentially radial design. Yet many baskets were made representing particular events such as the wedding of Graca Machel and Nelson Mandela (Arment and Fick-Jordaan 2005), or South Africa’s hosting of the Cup of African Nations in 1995.<sup>29</sup> Others show natural or urban contexts, as in a view of



**Fig 11** Wire plates and baskets on a stall at The Mall Rooftop Fleamarket, Rosebank, Johannesburg, March 2009.

Durban harbor by Bheki Dlamini (1957–2003), complete with a ship and a man in a suit, both images of modernity (Figure 12). The AIDS epidemic in South Africa provided material for many baskets (Roberts 2001; Nettleton et al. 2003)<sup>30</sup> featuring figures, red AIDS ribbons and textual messages.

The apparent modernity of these telephone wire baskets is a result of continuing dialogue between cities and rural homesteads. Wire baskets were first made by migrant workers, mainly night watchmen employed in gold mines and in urban and suburban contexts in Durban, Johannesburg and elsewhere. According to local accounts in Durban (Thorpe 1994; Mikula 2005) these were taken home to rural Natal by migrant workers, a view supported by Klopper (2008). Here the craft was taught to women and developed, through the introduction of the coiling technique, into a creative form under the guidance of particular individuals,<sup>31</sup> with the support of the Bartels Arts Trust at the BAT center.<sup>32</sup> This narrative acknowledges only in passing the history of wirework in Southern Africa, sketched above.

The transfer of wire plaiting from “traditional weapons,” which Klopper (2008) argues was the primary craft practiced by Zulu migrant workers in colonial times, to the sheathing of bottles and other contemporary objects in the cities was not as radical a move away from tradition as the genesis tale might suggest (Mikula 2005).

Thus, wire plaiting and subsequent coiling techniques are two of the main elements that might be considered to lend these objects their African-ness, along with their bright color, geometric rigidity and semantically simple figuration. All human figures in the wire baskets are composed of triangles or squares, with linear limbs and square heads. (The horizontal bodies of quadrupeds are possibly easier to accommodate in the coiling and sewing process than vertically orientated human forms, yet both appear consistently.) While geometric features are shared by woven craft imagery elsewhere in the world, in many instances the particular aura of these baskets is enhanced by their use of African motifs: lions, chameleons, horned cattle and



**Fig 12** Bheki Dlamini, *Durban Harbor*. Wire plate, 6.9 cm high, 40.6 cm long. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum (98.25.05), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

long-legged birds, “huts,” dancers, shields and spears. These are all tropes of a “primitive” Africa—rural, exotic, and unspoiled—which would appeal to buyers from beyond South Africa’s “African” borders, both internal and external.<sup>33</sup>

In South Africa, and indeed in the rest of Africa, indigenous craft is mostly associated with the rural, with tradition and with history. The grafting of modern craft onto historical traditions, in partly synthetic ways, always reflects that distinction between the rural and urban that Mamdani suggests predominates in postcolonial Africa:

The Africa of free peasants is trapped in a nonracial version of apartheid. What we have before us is a bifurcated world, no longer simply racially organized, but a world in which the dividing line between those human and the rest less human is a line between those who labor on the land and those who do not. (Mamdani 1996: 61)

Agricultural laborers are also supposed to have links to the “natural” world. Much of the craft made by rural groups has been executed in materials linked to that world and thereby to historical traditions.

But, because craft in Africa has also always been subject to change induced by experiment with new materials, which were often used as substitutes for older, now unavailable ones, modern forms of craft have emerged from contacts between the rural and the urban in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. One of the main vectors of change has been the migrant labor system, where people labor in the cities but maintain a rural home. Most of the ilala palm basket-makers, whose products

are sold largely in the urban markets, remain domiciled in their rural villages.<sup>34</sup> This maintains the appeal of their works for tourists and city dwellers, but this pastoral image masks the real links between the supposedly traditional setting where the crafts are made and the “modern” cities where the objects are sold. Similarly, the promotion of wire basket forms as the products of Africans living “townships” calls on a romantic view of those spaces as different and “other,” as embodying danger and resistance. Either way one is dealing with the trope of the “wild.”

### **From Craft to Art: Named Artists and Unique Objects**

The emergence of named individuals among these craft workers, through their institutional elevation to the status of “artist,” is a direct index of the increasing romance attached to the handmade object. But as crafters ascended the art hierarchy, the objects they made also changed in function and form; from being beautiful objects useful in indigenous contexts, they became largely use-free beautiful objects sold beyond local communities. The Vukani collective (Hlabisa, KwaZulu-Natal) was established by basket-makers with traditional skills with the help of the various church missions (Klopper 2008 and Leibhammer 2004), but its success as a viable market venture depended on the development of new techniques and natural dyes for coloring the (still natural) materials (Thorpe 1994), quality control and refinement, and marketing opportunities within the urban centers. The transformation of conical baskets into circular wire plates for two-dimensional picture-making, and of grass/ilala palm basket vessels into

large sculptures, used only for decoration (Leibhammer 2004 and Sellschop 2004), are both indices of the impact of the market on these crafts.<sup>35</sup>

Master basket-makers were not referred to as “artists” until their work was marketed through upmarket outlets including the African Art Center and the BAT<sup>36</sup> Center in Durban, art and craft markets held in shopping malls in well-to-do suburbs of Johannesburg and Cape Town, and at craft galleries such as Kim Sacks and Art Africa in Johannesburg.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps indicative of the status of these baskets as “artworks” carrying the “authentic” mystique of the rural artist is the fact that very few of the large ilala-weave forms and woven telephone wire plates appear in the fleamarkets.<sup>38</sup> The stalls in Johannesburg are dominated by multiple editions of Zimbabwean, Botswanan and Zambian grass baskets (see Figure 1), along with a growing number of beaded baskets from Kenya and Uganda. The works of named individuals carry not only the “artistic” value attached to the trace of the individual hand, but also commercial exclusivity.

Some named individuals among the Zulu basket-makers, such as Reuben Ndwandwe (1943–2007), a founding member of the Vukani Association, became famous.<sup>39</sup> Yet similar baskets continue to be sold as anonymous products of Zulu origin (see Figure 9). One of the named masters, Salina Mtethwa (see Figure 10), learned to weave only after she turned 40, but her baskets are recognizable by their intricate patterns, and display extraordinary skill. Jo Thorpe (1994: 33–34), founder of one of the main craft outlets for these works, the African Art Center in Durban, singled out wire basket-maker Bheki Mkize as a “master,” and Paul

Mikula (2005: 23), who designed the Vukani Basketry Museum in Eshowe, names both Mkhize and Bheki Dlamini as “artists” and their works as “masterpieces.” The value attached to these makers is reinforced by the apparently ecologically sensitive use of natural, sustainable resources (ilala palm) or supposedly recycled materials (telephone wire).<sup>40</sup>

Although these new objects are of a different genre, the “Zulu” ilala palm baskets are marketed as traditional through identification with historical types and techniques. These associations are exploited in the introduction to the Ilala Weavers’ (a Hluhluwe-based, fair trade cooperative) website:

Feel the mystery and essence of Africa with these superb Zulu baskets, each one unique and lovingly hand-stitched. In this age of modern technology and mass production, it is a joy to see and feel the dignified elegance and beauty of a rich Zulu heritage that has become a collectable art form, preserving an age-old tradition proudly safeguarded and handed down through the generations.<sup>41</sup>

To obtain these South African “master baskets” one has to visit the African and contemporary art/ craft outlets in the suburbs or on the web, where one not only pays very much more than in a fleamarket, but also learns the name of the maker and gains assurance that one is getting a “genuine” article as opposed to a debased copy. The buyer obtains an object which, rather than coming from a traditional and possibly “raw” imaginary past, is located within a modern Africa, but with its history and “primitive” traces still attached. Almost

all of the baskets with the names of the makers attached are sold as unique objects in a non-repetitive range, and as finely crafted works of art. The objects in the fleamarket, in contrast, have striking family likenesses within their genres; repetition reinforces the appearance of authenticity because African artefacts in the past supposedly replicated the templates provided by deceased forebears in ancestral canons. This (inaccurate) view of African creative genealogy reinforces the legitimacy of endless replication specifically for tribal romantics in search of genuine Africa. Repeated designs become ciphers for a particular undying African identity, and connection to the earth through the use of “natural” materials.

It is quite clear, however, that within the domain of the fleamarket economy, once a design or a form is displayed openly, it is quickly copied and reproduced. This has resulted in the relatively recent appearance in the stalls of wire baskets by unnamed makers. These are often of substandard quality, and sell at a significantly lower cost than those marketed in the art/ craft outlets. Multiples of the same design are sold openly, but under the guise of being somehow “traditional.” By the same token, these baskets are emptied of specificity and significance; they simply reproduce the trope of an African identity. The telephone wire plaiting technique has been used to cover various objects in urban areas since the 1960s,<sup>42</sup> but ilala palm baskets could only be made in areas where the materials are easily available and the weaving technique had been handed down from one generation to the next. Initiatives to ensure survival of this craft have focused on creating a skilled workforce whose livelihoods will be

sustained both by their skills and by the aura of individuality that attaches to them. It is thus almost impossible to find baskets woven from ilala palm in the fleamarkets. Because they are difficult to copy, the “genuine” items can be carefully marketed for substantial sums of money. In addition, the fact that rural dwellers have started growing the materials needed for basket production to prevent destruction of natural ecosystems (Klopper 2008) enhances their appeal.

### **Figurative Iconography: “Reading” Baskets**

Baskets in both wire and ilala palm have tended toward what Nelson Graburn (1976) termed “gigantism”: the production of very large versions of older forms. This increase in scale is obviously part of an attempt to escape the category of tourist “craft” and enter the arena of artworks. A good example of this tendency is a very large basket (Figure 13), 1.45 m tall, which cannot be imagined as a useful object. It was selected for the exhibition “Skin to Skin: Challenging Textile Art, The Stories in the Shadows”<sup>43</sup> which investigated aspects of gendered art-making, and made its way from an international craft biennale (in Kaunas, Lithuania) to one of Johannesburg’s primary art galleries. Its presence in this exhibition, in close proximity to both performance art pieces and more conventional craft works, suggests some fluidity between categories of art and craft.

However it is categorized, the basket is beautifully made, or made to be beautiful; it exerts the kind of enchantment that Gell (1992) suggests is at the root of all art. It was woven using the traditional coiling technique by Angelina Masuka in 2007. She covered



**Fig 13** Angelina Masuku, *The Zulu Village* (2006–7). Grass, ilala palm, natural dyes, 145 cm high, 73 cm deep. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum (2008.7), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

the surface of the basket walls with abstract geometrical motifs that simultaneously define two-dimensional fields, within which images of human and animal figures are arranged, apparently randomly, in overlapping registers and without any immediately recognizable narrative structure. It is possible to read the differentiation in sizes of figures as the result of the need to fill empty spaces in a version

of *horror vacui*, or as denoting a difference between adults and children, or important players and incidental characters. The difficulties presented in reading this object lie in the fact that it cannot be done in relation to a preexisting canon.

The work is titled *The Zulu Village*, and it is said in the promotional material from the exhibition to represent scenes from life in such a village.<sup>44</sup> One can make certain deductions about the individual motifs if one has some ethnographic knowledge. Images of simple pitch-roofed houses, the “huts,” figures and animals—cattle, goats, dogs, chickens and crocodiles—are easily identified. They constitute a list of what one “finds”<sup>45</sup> in a Zulu village, and some depict ceremonial activities. The human figures in profile, with arms out in front and one knee bent up high, have cloaks and leg rattles quite clearly indicated. They possibly represent a Zulu men’s dance, which involves high, bent-legged kick-stamping, and contrasts with static frontal figures whose gender is differentiated by props or clothing: those bearing shields and spears must be men while a variety of aprons indicates women. The figurative images in these baskets are all “epitomizing signs” (Sahlins 1999a: 402) of rural or other origins, whose specificity one cannot uncover through an examination of the object itself.<sup>46</sup> The figures on many of the wire baskets are possibly less opaque because they lack ethnically specific content. Their subjects are either natural forms such as butterflies, antelopes or lions, or clearly urban and contemporary, and easily read.

The implication of simplicity is to some extent belied by the use of lettering in many of the wire plates. Text has been used as a sign of modernity in South African crafts

and arts over the past 100 years, as in an old Pondomise beer basket (*izitya*) (see Figure 6) in which the raised letters on the sides are more apparent to the touch than to sight. Text was often used in this way, in combinations that did not spell actual words, but created patterns and the illusion of utterance. But in contemporary wire baskets, lettering is both literate and literal: it gives the work both legibility and modernity. Its absence from wire plates sold in the fleamarkets suggests that such modernity is inappropriate where the product is sold simply as a vector for African identities. In this respect, wire baskets neatly illustrate the distinction Mamdani draws between the rural and the urban citizen in Africa: one unlettered, the other literate. Angelina Masuka's basket contains no lettering and no explanation of its imagery. Its absent, implicitly oral explanation is an index of its rural origins, and marks the difference between this basket and those of other Ilala Weavers that are accompanied by decidedly ethnographic printed texts, placing the baskets within an indigenous history and context.

The complexity of the objects discussed in this article belies narratives of "progress," leaving the viewer with a picture of conflicting systems of value. If, however, one abandons notions of progress as inappropriate in the postcolonial context, (Sahlins 1999b and Appadurai 1996), then contemporary crafts in South Africa (and elsewhere on the continent) emerge as *the* creative forms which allow retention and transmission of traditions, but within a framework of modernity. It is, however, equally evident that too great a rigidity in adherence to "pure" pasts prevents

development of new ideas, and plays into primitivist, even atavistic, notions of authenticity and identity.

## Notes

- 1 See for example, Shaw's articles in the *Annals of the South African Museum* (1992, 1993, 2004) on the basketwork of Southern Africa, which cover questions of technology, shape and function.
- 2 See Grossert (1978) for a discussion of crafts in the context of education in South Africa.
- 3 See Stoller's (2003) discussion of a large New York warehouse for traders of curios from West Africa, where a special space has been demarcated as "African."
- 4 Welsh (2004: 404) writes: "Art objects made specifically for sale to foreigners living hundreds or thousands of miles away would never be expected to have static meanings, but will inevitably have social lives that are partly aesthetic and partly economic." I am approaching baskets from a similar angle here, and am not concerned with questions of authorial intention.
- 5 These included a variety of object types from across Africa. They were included from 1978 onward deliberately in order to challenge generalized hierarchies (see Charlton 2003 and Nettleton 2009 forthcoming).
- 6 See Nettleton (1989) for a discussion of the political history of defining art in South Africa.
- 7 See Carman (2006) for a discussion of the origins of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.
- 8 This was the Jaques Collection of African headrests, on loan to Museum Afrika for a long period. See Nettleton (1993) and Davison (1991) for a discussion of some of these issues in relation to the Lowen Collection, and Dewey (1993), Becker (1999) and Nettleton (2007) for a discussion in relation to African headrests.
- 9 Both of these museums have collections of African material. The South African Museum also has items from other parts of the world. In the South African National Gallery, a small number of West

African objects were added to the collections in the 1980s when Raymund van Niekerk was the curator. After 1994 some Southern African material was added to the collection. The South African Museum and the South African National Gallery have since collaborated on exhibitions of African material in a more extensive way (see Oliphant et al. 2004, Bedford 1993)

- 10** See Kasfir (1992), Shiner (1994) and Steiner (1994) for discussions on the issue of authenticity in African arts.
- 11** Kasfir (1992) and Price (1989) see anonymity as an index of the Euro-American patron's lack of interest, but Vogel (1997) maintained that the artist was often insignificant in African patrons' eyes in the past. Geary (1988) has shown the importance and fame of artists in Cameroon, however, as have Picton (1994), Walker (1998) and others for the Yoruba.
- 12** Beer baskets (Zulu *isichumo*) were generally most common among Nguni-speakers. They were watertight both because they very tightly sewn, and because the leaves from which they were made would swell with the liquid, allowing the container to sweat but not leak. See Shaw (2004) and Cunningham and Terry (2006).
- 13** Examples of these baskets are held by Museum Afrika in Johannesburg and The National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria. Examples from Natal are illustrated in KwaZulu Cultural Museum and the Local History Museums (1996: cover and p. 139).
- 14** Nel (2005) erroneously states that the Zulu were nomadic and that they therefore had a limited set of personal possessions. Shaw (1992) discusses the basketwork of Khoisan peoples, showing that even those who were nomadic developed these crafts.
- 15** The Vukani Association, founded in 1972 under Reverend K. Lofroth, was one of the best known, largely because local and overseas exhibitions were held to promote it (van Heerden 1996).
- 16** The most notable were the so-called Afro-Portuguese Ivories (Bassani and Fagg 1988), although other African objects appeared in European cabinets of curiosities (Bassani and McLeod 1985). Baskets were first made for sale to settlers early in the history of contact on the border between the Cape Colony and Xhosa-speakers' territory in the early 1800s (Shaw 2004: 68).
- 17** See the articles in the volume edited by Schildkrout and Keim (1998) for a discussion of various motives for collecting.
- 18** The postcolonial subject's active identification as modern is discussed by both Sahlins (1999a and 1999b) and Appadurai (1996). In contrast, I suggest that the process of modernization in craft is dependent on the existence of a particular market.
- 19** An example is Fick-Jordaan, who founded a company called Zenzulu; its weavers, from Siyanda, produce very slick versions of Zulu wire baskets for use as lampshades or incidental accents within interior design schemes (Arment and Fick-Jordaan 2005: 190–98). Significantly, many of those with African iconography were designed specifically for game lodges.
- 20** Klopper (2008) has written a comprehensive history of the developments of basketry for sale to outsiders in Southern Africa, and I have not attempted to replicate this here. See Shaw (1992 and 2004) for a detailed account of techniques. More superficial accounts can be found in Levinsohn (1979, 1980), and Cunningham and Terry (2006).
- 21** This technique was also used in making sleeping mats in the past. In Swaziland, women have transformed the appearance of these mats by replacing palm leaves with sweetie (candy) wrappers to produce mats of ever-increasing complexity (Patel 2006).
- 22** These include the Venda and Lobedu who made hemispherical baskets with lids, and Tswana-speakers who made cylindrical and rectangular baskets for grain storage. Some Zambian baskets use a similar technique.

- 23** Krige (1950) discusses Zulu crafts briefly, and more are discussed in KwaZulu Cultural Museum and the Local History Museums (1996: cover and p. 139).
- 24** The relationship between the designs on baskets and beadwork has been remarked on, but not explored by Levinsohn (1980), Cunningham and Terry (2006) and van Heerden (1996). Exactly how this transfer was made has not been fully investigated.
- 25** Since the 1950s beads have been used by Tsonga-speakers to cover Venda- and Lobedu-style baskets completely. See Leibhammer (2007: figure 15, p. 31) for an extraordinary example.
- 26** The insistence on the “natural” quality of the dyes and the “natural” origins of the fibers plays into another dimension of the notion of the “authentic,” as it removes the makers and their products from the sphere of the modern and the industrial. Yet the development of such materials has been part of a research initiative undertaken by the South African Center for Scientific and Industrial Research and the National Research Foundation under their Indigenous Knowledge Systems research initiatives.
- 27** See [www.ilalaweavers.com](http://www.ilalaweavers.com) (accessed on March 27, 2009).
- 28** Cunningham and Terry (2006) illustrate some of these, but they do not indicate where their examples are from, nor the documentary evidence for their dating.
- 29** See Arment and Fick-Jordaan (2005) for short biographies of the makers of these baskets, together with more examples of their work. Also see Klopper (2008) for a history of the development of individual artists’ styles and forms.
- 30** See Nettleton et al. (2003) for other examples of these soccer and AIDS plates.
- 31** Fick-Jordaan (2005) mentions Tessa Katzenellenbogen, and Klopper (2008) relates this to other players.
- 32** This support was provided in the purchase of telephone wire and the marketing of the baskets. The degree to which it was philanthropically driven is possibly debatable.
- 33** There are many different internal culturalized boundaries (Appadurai 1996) within South Africa. Large numbers of tourists buy baskets, and many permanent residents do so too. These are customers who do not consider themselves as African in any sense.
- 34** Fick-Jordaan (2005) records the places of residence of many of these makers; many of the cooperatives are rurally based.
- 35** According to Klopper (2008), the early production of lidded baskets in the nineteenth century was a result of missionary interventions.
- 36** The Bartels Art Trust, a not-for-profit association, helped source materials and provided a market for the makers’ products.
- 37** See Allara (2003: 10) on the expectations of white audiences in relation to individual authorship in embroideries by rural artists.
- 38** A search of the Rosebank fleamarket on successive Sundays in February and March 2009 yielded only one Vukani-style basket for sale: larger numbers of wire baskets, mostly small examples, appeared on traders’ shelves.
- 39** Ndwandwe was the only male participant in the original Vukani Association. By 1994 he was operating as an independent entrepreneur (see Thorpe 1994), taking work by members of the cooperative to the African Art Center in Durban for sale. A brief history of Ndwandwe’s career is available on the web page of Durban’s African Art Center; along with images of his baskets from a 2004 exhibition at the center: See [www.afriart.org.za/contentpage.aspx?pageid=2358](http://www.afriart.org.za/contentpage.aspx?pageid=2358) (accessed on March 25, 2009). Also see Klopper (2008) for a fuller history of Vukani.
- 40** For example Cunningham and Terry (2006) examine the ecological footprint of the use of traditional “natural” resources and means for replenishing them and Klopper (2008) gives a historical view of this environmental impact.

Wire was often stolen or bought for this purpose.

- 41 From the web site [www.ilala.co.za/basketrya.html](http://www.ilala.co.za/basketrya.html) (accessed on March 25, 2009).
- 42 My parents employed Moses Tshabalala as a nightwatchman in the 1960s. He was a Tsonga-speaker whose day job was as a *sangoma* (diviner/ healer). He made a variety of beadwork items and did extensive telephone wire weaving over empty liquor bottles. My father bought many of these bottles and converted them into table lamps as gifts. Many of my friends have similar recollections and support the view that the technique was quite widely known before the emergence of the wire basket phenomenon. The wire was, however, often stolen and this put enormous pressure on the efficiencies of the national telephone provider. See Fick-Jordaan (2005) and Klopper (2008) for accounts of this problem.
- 43 The exhibition was curated by Fiona Kirkwood and shown in the Kaunas Craft Biennale in Lithuania in 2007, and at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg in April 2008.
- 44 *Skin-to-Skin: Various Artists*, Standard Bank Gallery, May 2008.
- 45 Crocodiles, of course, were never found in Zulu or any other villages. People going to wash clothes or draw water in large rivers may in the past have encountered crocodiles. Their inclusion here plays into the trope of wild and primitive Africa.
- 46 Sahlins's (1999a: 402) observation that while they approach a "kind of self-parody, the epitomizing signs also endow the native culture with a spurious 'timelessness,' 'coherence,' 'unity' and 'boundedness'" captures the ways in which the signification of otherness is constantly recalibrated.

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