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social history and context

Two herdboys from Hlabisa with twine that they made from grass.

BASKETRY HAS FEATURED for a long time in Zulu social life. Baskets and clay pots were interchangeable, as both served as containers for food and liquid and were consequently linked to the rituals that were observed in the preparation and consumption of food and beverages.

In an attempt to reconstruct the history of basketry in Zulu daily life one has to consult the available historical texts. The earliest depictions of Zulu life can be found in written documents such as *The Kaffirs Illustrated* by G.F. Angas. The hand coloured lithographs that illustrate the text offer an invaluable insight into everyday life, for instance two heavily beaded dancers with a small ilala palm bowl on the ground next to them. It is finely woven with a simple design in brown squares and an overstitched design on the edge. From this example, and from others found in old texts and in collections, it is clear that 19th century baskets were simple with little or no design on the surface.

A.T. Bryant referred to Zulu baskets as being plain and only lightly decorated.

"Baskets ... were decorated with patterns (mostly squares) in red and black, the black colour being obtained by boiling strips of ilala palm leaf with which they were woven, along with the indigo plant and the red by boiling them with reddened sorghum leaves."

The indigo plant is one of the most frequently used dyes. In the section on techniques and materials its uses are discussed in detail. The colour it renders will depend upon the length of time the ilala palm strips are boiled or soaked with the dyestuff, and it can vary from a pale lilac to a silvery grey through to dark brown.



G.F. ANGAS
*The Kaffirs Illustrated –
Two of Umpanda's
Dancing Girls.* Note the
small basket in the left
hand corner. It has a
design similar to the
illustration overleaf.

Examples of early baskets with square designs similar to the one illustrated by Angas can be found in old collections, and they are mostly made from ilala palm strips. In the Campbell Collection there is an example of a small necked and lidded medicine basket which is decorated with four black/brown squares.

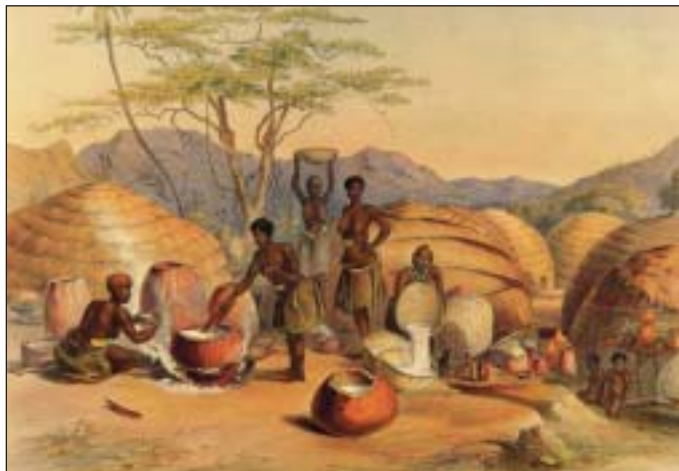


Early necked and lidded ilala palm medicine basket (*iquthu*) with square design in dark brown obtained from the Natal gurry root (*isizimane*).
Campbell Collections
D: 10.5 cm / H: 8cm.

The Local History Museum, Durban, also has an excellent old example. In this instance it is a finely woven large open bowl which has a design of alternating squares in red, black and the neutral colour of the palm. The squares are divided by raised overstitched bands, which create a relief design. This relief design is often found in nineteenth century and early twentieth century baskets (up to 1970), but here it is located on the inside of the basket and not on the outside as is usually the case.

19th and early 20th century Zulu baskets (up to 1970) were made strictly for utilitarian use, as containers for food and liquid, and often for the consumption of sorghum beer. One of the most important rituals in Zulu social life was and still is the making and serving of sorghum beer which is used on occasions such as weddings and funerals and which is also ritually offered

G.F.ANGAS
The Kaffirs Illustrated – Gudu's Kraal at the Tugela. This depicts the process of beer making. Note the open grain basket (*iqoma*) and in the right hand corner the large storage basket (*isilulu*).





REUBEN NDWANDWE
 Small lidded ilala palm basket (*ukhamba*)
 Collection Tatham Art Gallery
 D: 18cm/H: 18.5 cm



to the ancestors. There are many personal preferences in the making of beer, with slight variations in the recipes, but the main ingredients are sprouted grain such as millet and mealies.

Beer is served in a round *ukhamba* vessel, which is made from either grass or clay. A large necked ceramic vessel or a large pear shaped *isichumo* basket is carried on the head to transport beer over long distances. The shapes and types correspond exactly with contemporary pieces, with small differences found in the shape of the lidded pear shaped baskets used to transport beer on the head. Angas illustrates small *isichumo* baskets embellished with a design of vertical bands in dark brown. Today only large *izichumo* are produced, but they differ considerably in shape to earlier ones being rounder than the cylindrical high-shouldered early *isichumo* baskets

In some instances sufficient information exists to enable one to date old baskets quite accurately. The Campbell Museum owns a small cylindrical lidded basket, which was donated by the Malherbe family accompanied by the necessary historical data. They probably used it as a medicine container during the wagon trek from Cape Town to Wellington in 1810. I was fortunate to receive a gift of a small 19th century bowl from Jean Beaton. It is a very finely woven ilala palm basket with a chevron design on the edge.



NESTA NALA
 Large necked clay vessel (*uphiso*), used for carrying beer on the head .
 D: 30cm / H: 35cm.



AZOLINAH MNCUBE
 Claypot for serving beer (*ukhamba*).
 D: 28cm / H: 26cm

Small cylindrical lidded basket c. 1810, used by the Malherbe family
 Campbell Collections
 D: 7.5cm / H: 8cm.



Small wooden footed ilala palm bowl (*unyazi*), decorated with a beaded *isishunka* design, c. 1945. D: 15cm / H:11cm.



Small open ilala palm bowl (*unyazi*) donated by Jane Beaton. c. 1916. D: 17cm / H: 10cm.

I was able to date it accurately based on the information supplied in a letter accompanying the basket: "My parents Sam and Liz Beatty came from Scotland in 1916 and settled in the Vryheid district. The basket was purchased at that time from a Zulu lady and it was used by my mother to keep cotton wool for the new baby that was due in 1917."

The runners that supply museums and outlets with old Zulu cultural artefacts are now obliged to collect as much information as possible related to the works that they offer for sale. In this fashion Hlengi Dube of the African Art Centre, Durban, was able to trace the history of an old bowl that I purchased at the Amangugu exhibition in 1999, by interviewing the former owner. The bowl is decorated in the *isishunka* beadwork style, which is typical of early twentieth century Msinga beadwork. *Isishunka* is characterised by the use of beadwork bands in seven colours, (yellow, black, green, red, pink, blue and white). The bowl originally belonged to Bhekumuzi Msomi from Msinga, who acquired it in 1945 as part of her dowry. A further embellishment on it is a wooden base with small deeply cut pyramidal forms known as *amasumpa*. Bhekumuzi explained that the base was added for practical reasons, to stand steady when food was served, but she added that she hoped that the *amasumpa* would bring a lot of cattle.

According to A.T. Bryant, grass articles formed an important

part of ritual ceremonies like the umshopi, which was performed during times when ill omens prevailed, such as illness, poor crops or any kind of epidemic. Young girls would leave home at nightfall and sleep in the nude on the banks of the river. The next morning they would return dressed from head to foot in plaited long marsh grass. They would dance and sing, and jump over children, to render them safe from disease. At nightfall they would return to the veld, discard their grass outfits and then wash in the river and fill their mouths with water. This they would squirt out over the land singing songs of purification.

Baskets featured prominently in the lives and everyday rituals of Kings. E.J. Krige refers to the vessel of Kings, which was used to perform important rituals. Foam developed when the King spat into the basket which probably contained some herb that reacted chemically in contact with the saliva.

"The most powerful instrument of the King was a certain vessel by means of which he could not only overcome all enemies, personal and tribal, but could also find lost cattle. If the king hated a person he would spit before sunrise while churning Ubulawa (white frothing medicine) in a basket. While doing so he would laud his ancestors, mentioning the name of the enemy he wished to overcome, and this man would be forthwith subdued. He would churn saying, so and so will happen, and his wish would be effected. In the same way the chief's vessel can be used to recover lost cattle. Cattle dung and some of the earth from the footprints of the lost cattle must be churned in the king's vessel and put in the ink'atha. The chief's vessel is then placed on this and the cattle will be unable to escape."

This vessel obviously played an important part in royal rituals and it is tempting to speculate that it could have contained special designs to distinguish it from everyday vessels. The Local History Museum, Durban, owns a small lidded basket donated by Lillian Bristow in the early 20th century. It is decorated with a complex design, which differs dramatically from the simple designs usually found on older baskets. On the



Small lidded ilala palm basket (*iquthu*) decorated with protruding loops. Local History Museum D: 16cm / H: 14cm

acquisition card it is referred to as *ingungu Ingunbane* being a porcupine in isiZulu. The basket is loosely woven, and with its small size taken into account it is not likely that it was meant to hold beer, but rather to contain medicine or tobacco.

The unique surface design, which consists of a series of projecting loops, must have taken a long time to execute, and it suggests that the basket was made for a special purpose.

The loops were made as follows: after every three stitches the foundation grass that forms the coil was split in two. The one half was then shaped into a loop and thin strips of ilala palm were wrapped around it. The two split sections were then rejoined, the coiling continued, and three stitches later the splitting and looping was repeated. Forty rows on the surface of the basket are covered in this looped design, as well as the entire lid.

By far the most important grass object in the Zulu royal household was the *inkatha*, which symbolised both the power of the king and the unity of the nation.

A smaller version of the *inkatha* is still used today as a cushion to transport beer pots on the head of the carrier. It is usually made from broad plaits of a durable material such as ilala palm, which is plaited and twisted around a circular coil of grass. As a matter of fact these *izinkatha* are used all over Africa for practical reasons, not only to cushion pots, but also as a base to turn clay pots while they are being made.

However, for the Zulu nation it took on a powerful symbolic meaning, originally signifying the unity and strength of the kingdom and its power to conquer the enemy. Latterly it was taken as the name of the political party headed by Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi who is also a prince of the Zulu Royal House.

Two important role players in the latter history of twentieth century Zulu Basketry were Jack Grossert and the Vukani Association.

J.W. Grossert was appointed as Organiser for Art and Crafts in the Natal Provincial Administration in 1947. This entailed supervising and promoting the work produced in Zulu speaking schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

His initial reports refer to the excellent quality of craftwork that was being produced in the schools. Craftwork previously fell in the domain of the inspectors of woodwork and technical subjects who promoted crafts in Zulu speaking schools. In this capacity J.Nixon was an early advocate of the importance of traditional crafts in the curriculum of Black schools. In 1941 he arranged for local craftspeople to teach in some of the schools in an attempt to maintain the important link with indigenous culture.

Grossert continued in this vein and encouraged teachers to compile their own work programmes for art and crafts lessons, in consultation with the learners, based on their previous knowledge as well as the availability of raw materials.

The yearly agricultural shows in the different districts served as an important link with local crafts persons as well as a showcase for top quality crafts. By 1953 there were a total of 106 annual shows in KwaZulu-Natal. The Eshowe show is one of the few that still exist in this context and their catalogue caters for an extensive range of indigenous craft items made from grass.

To advance the teaching of art and crafts in Zulu schools Grossert established Teacher Training Colleges at Ndaleni, Uphumulo and at Marianhill. In 1952 the Ndaleni Teacher's Training College near Richmond, Natal commenced with the training of the first art and crafts specialists.

An important innovation by Grossert was to supply bundles of ilala palm to schools to use for basketry. Learners were also

encouraged by teachers to locate local grasses and dyestuffs, a practice still followed when I first encountered the Ndaleni trained teachers in 1989. A teacher like Stephen Mbuli at Madadeni College proudly displayed charts prepared by his students with all the local grasses identified. Furthermore local dyestuffs were also identified and used during basketry lessons. Grossert embraced the principle of "education through art" which implied that the teaching technique used in all school subjects should enable the personal contribution of learners to take precedence over the learning of established material. It aimed at increasing the sensibility of students to the aesthetic qualities of expression and it also encouraged knowledge of materials and their characteristics.

Ndaleni trained many of the later prominent black artists and teachers, like Eric Ngcobo and Wiseman Mbambo. Although the focus eventually became wooden sculpture, traditional crafts (and basketry) were also taught at the college, which resulted in a high quality of craftwork being produced.

I found that high quality crafts were being produced in schools where former Ndaleni students were teaching, and learners were also producing some exceptional wooden sculpture.

With the dramatic political changes after the 1948 elections in South Africa and the takeover of the Nationalist apartheid regime, the Department of Bantu Education took control of all Black education. The Nationalist regime introduced the policy of Bantu Education, which led to Black learners receiving a separate and different type of education to that offered in White schools. This had very little effect on crafts education which continued being taught in Black schools as it was not considered to be a threat to White supremacy, even though it advocated a link with the past and thus a strong Zulu identity. With Grossert at the helm, crafts education flourished in the schools and a strong team of art and crafts specialist teachers who had recently graduated from the Training Colleges supported him.

The second important player in the field was the Vukani Association which played a significant role in the marketing and promotion of Zulu basketry

Rev. Kjell Lofroth of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) formed Vukani in 1972. He and his wife Bertha came to South Africa in 1951 and worked at the Ceza mission in Mahlabathini until 1956.

Lofroth went back to Sweden in 1956 to further his studies and returned to Dundee in 1961. In May 1965 he was called to Rorkes Drift to take charge of the diocese of the ELC South Eastern Region, and became actively involved in the Art and Craft Centre which specialised in printmaking, pottery and weaving. To uplift the community a self-help project involving the production of craftwork was initiated. This led to Lofroth being offered the post of Consultant for Home Craft in Zululand, and the formation of the Vukani Association.

The Lofroths arrived in Eshowe in July 1972.

"I have accepted the appointment with the understanding that the projects begin at "grass-roots level". To me this means closest possible contact with the people concerned, finding their interests, abilities and then to establish their involvement in running the project. The engagement of people in the initial stage is essential, as well as to take care of their creative gifts. This will secure a continued interest amongst the people."

Crafts people either brought in grass articles to the various collecting points in Nkandla, Melmoth, Ubombo, Mahlabathini and Hlabisa or groups were visited in these areas. Work was evaluated looking at technical skill, form, size and colour.

"At the meetings I demonstrated quality, right size and good finish – the craft workers were made aware that articles should be marketable," he said. Good, medium and poor quality work was accepted in the beginning to encourage the craft workers, but by 1972 all shoddy work was rejected and "many producers

have now accepted that articles should be of a high standard." The early articles submitted were mainly beer strainers and mats. The weavers were also encouraged to make lampshades and grass blinds.

Miss E.M. Shaw, an ethnologist from the South African National Museum in Cape Town, visited KwaZulu-Natal around this time (1972) to collect baskets and found articles to be of poor quality because the availability of plastic containers had led to a decline in the practice of basketry.

She was mightily surprised upon her return in 1976 at the high quality of the basketry, and organised an exhibition at the South African Museum in 1978.

What had happened in the interim is that in 1973 Vukani appointed Miss Bodil Nyberg, a designer from Sweden, as handcraft consultant and Mr. Elliot Dladla as a trainer in basketry. He was an expert basket maker who was taught basketry by his parents, and he was also very knowledgeable



NTOMBI BUTHELEZI
Small-necked pear-shaped ilala palm basket (*isichumo*)
c. 1950
D: 20cm / H: 16cm

about dyes, encouraging the use of local dyestuffs to execute designs in colour on baskets. They conducted regular workshops at the various collection points and the quality of work was strictly controlled.

The Hlabisa area became the main producer of ilala palm baskets, as it was close to the ilala growing areas around Hluhluwe up to Kosi Bay. Traditionally, well made utilitarian ware had been produced in the Hlabisa district as can be seen in the undecorated small-necked, pear-shaped ilala palm basket dating from the early 1950s that I purchased from the 80 year old maker Ntombi Buthelezi in 1999. By the early 1980s large finely woven large-necked vessels and small bowls with designs in brown emerged and these were followed by the mid-1980's with multicoloured designs. Other areas like Nkandla and Mahlabathini concentrated on mats and more traditional vessels with simple designs in brown using local grasses.

Overseas and local exhibitions also encouraged the maintenance of high standards. At the outset the only colour used for designs on the baskets was dark brown. But as the work started selling well in overseas outlets the demand grew for a much wider range of designs in natural colours, and new sources of colour, such as fruits, barks, etc. were found in the surrounding areas.

Vukani regularly kept back outstanding pieces, and this formed the core of the Vukani Museum now housed in a stylish building in Eshowe designed by Paul Mikula. The demise of The Vukani Association is a sad tale indeed. When I first encountered them in 1989 they were flourishing and the shop was filled to the brim with outstanding baskets and other craftwork. By 1993 the weavers were complaining that Vukani was no longer collecting baskets on a regular basis and the shop in Eshowe was virtually empty. The reason for this collapse seemed to coincide with the gradual withdrawal of church support in an attempt to establish the independence of the management team that ran Vukani.



BETTINA MLOTSHWA
with a large necked
pear-shaped ilala palm
basket (*isichumo*),
Hlabisa, 1999.

A certain amount of controversy arose around Vukani's yielding to the demands of western markets and the consequent emergence of highly personal styles of weaving. At the outset the aim of Vukani was to promote traditional forms of crafts, and if one peruses the catalogue which was published in 1976, showing what was available in the shop, the goods were still very traditional, varying from small eating mats to medicine containers with simple designs in dark brown. By 1982 the so-called "individual" styles emerged as can be seen in the large large-necked vessel by Bettina Mlotshwa in the Vukani museum. Although the colour was still only brown the design had evolved in a creative variation on simple triangles. Artistic evolution had taken place and was to develop much more in the hands of master weavers such as Reuben Ndwandwe or Beauty Ngxongo.

Fortunately Carol Sutton was by this time running a successful basket outlet at Ilala Weavers near Hluhluwe, and this served as an alternative source of financial support for the weavers. Her original suppliers were from the Hluhluwe area, where there is an abundance of ilala palm. They basically wove the same type



BETTINA MLOTSHWA
Large necked pear-
shaped ilala basket
(*isichumo*) Black dye,
Natal gurry root
(*isizimane*) c. early 1980's.
Vukani Museum
D: 32cm / H:25cm

of vessels as the Hlabisa weavers, and there could have been an interchange of ideas as some of the original suppliers of Vukani lived in the Hluhluwe district. Eventually, as Vukani collapsed, Carol Sutton became the main source of support for the weavers. Some of the weavers that I knew well such as Reuben Ndwandwe and Beauty Ngxongo urged me to assist them and for a few years from 1993-1996 I went to Hlabisa every three months taking with me gallery owners who purchased the baskets. Thus contacts were established with the weavers and eventually they became independent of my support.

Presently there is a small nucleus of outstanding weavers in the Hlabisa area who are consistently producing high quality baskets for the western market, with strong multicoloured designs. They also act as entrepreneurs, marketing their own as well as other weavers' baskets. The late Reuben Ndwandwe ran a shop from his house where he sold his own work as well as other baskets from his area. Beauty Ngxongo across the valley also sells baskets from her house, including her own as well as those of her neighbours. Both supply retail outlets in urban areas such as the African Art Centre, Durban, and the Bartle Arts Trust Centre. Angeline Masuku and her family have emerged as a new generation of masterweavers and they supply the African Art Centre with outstanding large pieces.

