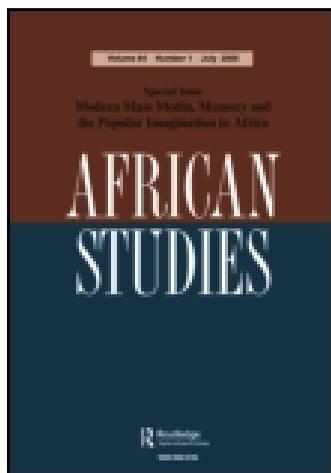


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# Women, *Beadwork* and Bodies: The Making and Marking of Migrant Liminality in South Africa, 1850–1950

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*Migrant labour practices in southern Africa pulled large numbers of men into the cities and onto the mines, leaving women at home to tend the fields, bring up the children, care for the elderly and, most importantly, to keep cultural identity alive. At the same time, migrant labour provided cash for those left behind, facilitated the passage of trade goods from cities and trading stores into rural settlements and thus saw to the transformation and sometimes the death of local traditions of making. The introduction of increasingly large quantities of glass beads into southern Africa from the early nineteenth century saw the emergence of new forms of dress and regalia, made by the women left at home in rural villages, and worn by men and women as forms of indigenous dress. Although beads were used as a currency by the Mpondo peoples and were highly desired by many other East Coast peoples, they were, in fact a luxury, very expensive, and could from the 1850s only be acquired with cash. This article looks at the emergence of particular techniques, designs and forms of beadwork in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as part of an emerging code of dress. Using photographs to establish the swift emergence of a hybridity in the dressing of the body among South African black peoples, the article, nevertheless, maintains that beadwork was something particularly associated with the rural home. It argues, in relation to selected items of men's beaded garments, that, in their use of imported beads, thread and needles provided by traders, and objects brought home by migrant workers, or obtained with the cash provided by them, women created beadwork forms that are now considered 'traditional', but which were equally 'modern' in their engagement with the wider contexts of migrant labour. In their hybridity and modernity, the beadwork items allowed indigenous cultures to establish modes of resistance in new 'traditions' that challenged dominant, particularly western, controls of dress and appearance.*

**Key words:** beadwork, migrant workers, Zulu, Xhosa, women

In a discussion of both Victorian and Zulu society (but by extension African cattle-cultures in general),<sup>1</sup> Anne McLintock (1995) argued that settlers in Natal developed a discourse of 'idleness' in which the 'Zulu' were stereotyped as idle, as doing no work. This colonial view is one that Sean Redding (1993) also traces in the legislation of hut taxes in the 1870s aimed at forcing men, in this case from the Transkei, into migrant labour.<sup>2</sup> The hut tax was imposed on the homestead head for every hut occupied, by women or unmarried adult children. McLintock (1995:252–255) and Redding (1993:56) argue that it was aimed at de-stabilising the ways in which pre-capitalist Zulu or Xhosa<sup>3</sup> social structures

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harnessed the power of women's labour to uphold patriarchy, in sometimes poly-gamous households. As Jefferson Guy (2013:144) and Redding (1993) have all noted, this form of taxation was, in the initial instance, on women's labour in the homestead where women largely remained, farming and producing food for the upkeep of men and children. Because this tax could only be paid in cash (Redding 1993), it meant that either the homestead had to produce sufficient agricultural produce to convert into cash, or men had to move into town or onto settler farms to earn cash wages.

In this article I address another, additional, form of labour undertaken by women, following and expanding on McLintock's exposure of the hidden-ness of women's labour.<sup>4</sup> South African black women were, from the start of the use of small glass seed beads in the late 1800s,<sup>5</sup> the producers of bead arts worn as items of dress by themselves and the men of their households, or by their suitors.<sup>6</sup> While particular styles of beadwork came, probably only by the 1890s, to be associated with specific ethnic groups, beadwork arts can (and must) also be seen as expressing personal taste or preference within, as well as of connections to, community, custom and history. Yet the nineteenth-century history of the development of beadwork as a marker of identity has not been fully researched, even though there is both material and photographic evidence which should enable some picture of this to be constructed. In this article, I argue that this history is importantly linked to the hidden work of women who remained at home.

Ironically, while the production and wearing of beadwork has been constituted, both by themselves and by outsiders,<sup>7</sup> as a 'tradition' among many southern African black communities, it has long been established that bead-working on the scale that developed from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, was possible only with the provision of the necessary materials by western traders: that is the glass beads and the means of sewing them together in ever more complex ways.

Although beads made of clay, stone and metal, as well as glass trade beads were used in sub-Saharan African communities for well over a thousand years, the forms in which coloured glass beads were used in southern Africa prior to the late eighteenth century were ultimately quite simple, and were generally scarce and reserved for important persons. Furthermore, beads were generally strung on animal gut, a medium that would have been difficult to use for small beads and fine sewing of the kind used in the beadwork that became ubiquitous from the 1840s onwards. Southern African beadwork using small glass seed beads sewn together to create complex forms was thus an invented indigenous tradition, dependent on interaction with extensive trade with Europeans.<sup>8</sup> The earliest examples of actual beadwork using these techniques to create pieces that are like bead-fabric, or like netted lace that I have found thus far date to between 1830 and 1850 (Nettleton 2012).

This move from the use of long strings of beads deployed in a variety of ways, around necks, in fringes, wound around grass tubular cores, or sewn to leather garments to the creation of bead fabric and other complex forms probably post-dates

the 1820s. A greater flowering of free-standing, complex forms of bead fabric items happens only in the second half of nineteenth century. From around 1830, the greater availability of beads, innovations in, or acquisition of, techniques of sewing beads together allowed women to develop these new forms, possibly as responses to the on-going disruptions of traditional social orders.<sup>9</sup> Sandra Klopper (1992) has shown, in the case of the Zulu Kingdom, that men's recruitment into migrant labour and the resultant pressure on women to uphold tradition, was reflected in the making of 'traditional' objects and the wearing of 'traditional' dress with ever-increasing amounts of beadwork. The history of beadwork among other groups, particularly in the Eastern Cape and among the Ndebele of the then Boer Republic, follows a similar pattern. In all cases they result in a development of particular beadwork styles in different polities.<sup>10</sup> This 'traditional' activity was, nevertheless, always in tension with a simultaneous and inherent traction towards modernity or hybridity, implicit in the very use of masses of imported glass seed beads.

### **Women and Shifting Social Structures of Migrant Labour**

The greatest threat to the traditionalist patriarchal structures in southern Africa, in which the fruit of women's work accrued to men, came with the imposition of hut taxes and later poll taxes on rural dwellers and the resultant movement of men recruited for work on the mines, and later in industry and commerce in urban areas (Maylam 1986; Redding 1993; Guy 2013). Belinda Bozzoli (1983) argues that we must understand that the fact that it was the vast majority of African women (not men) who were left behind, at home in the rural areas was a direct product of pre-colonial structures. It was these structures which outlined their employment in tending the fields, bringing up the children, caring for the elderly and, as importantly, keeping cultural identity alive through observance of ancestrally-sanctioned customs.<sup>11</sup> In relation to the latter point Bozzoli suggests that women were also resisting domination through their conservation of 'pre-capitalist aspects of African patriarchies' (Bozzoli 1983:167) and were, for a while at least, able to retain some strength through their retention of a rural base. The beadwork could, I argue, be seen as part of the conservation of particular understandings of 'tradition'.

From the early nineteenth century onwards, missionary intervention saw some women (albeit relatively few) leave the traditional village or homestead for education in western skills, the most common of which was sewing (Callaway 1936; Tyler 1971 [1891]; Healey 2011; Nettleton 2000, 2012); some entered domestic work in colonial towns and a few became teachers and nurses or nuns and thus migrant workers themselves.<sup>12</sup> These women were generally, like Paulina Dlamini (1998), cut off from patriarchal traditions and had little to do with the creation of the beadwork traditions with which I am concerned.

The women of the male migrant labourers' families took over men's roles at home, in some cases, ploughing and working with cattle in ways that were not

sanctioned ancestrally. As all African peoples in southern Africa followed patrilineal patterns of living, younger married women were nominally under the control of the men of their husbands' lineages or agnatic clusters and had to follow the lead of their mothers in law.<sup>13</sup> Unmarried women were generally subject to the same structures of authority in their fathers' homesteads. Bozzoli argues that changes within patterns of patriarchy in African societies in the course of the nineteenth century (some of which she lays at the door of the penetration of merchant capital), had seen the emergence of a form of 'chiefly patriarchy' which was grossly distorted and resulted in the task of maintaining the homestead being laid at the door of women (Bozzoli 1983:151). Thus women were important in maintaining links to the past, to custom and to home, and in the production and sustenance of a future generation, although it may have been the younger women who undertook most of the menial tasks, especially in polygamous households. However, while polygamy was practised and was certainly something that the colonial authorities and missionaries would have liked to eradicate, there is a question as to how prevalent it actually was, outside of chiefly lineages, or headmen's homesteads in any of the southern African groups with which I deal here.<sup>14</sup> The question of how many young women would have been available in the average homestead is thus open.

Among the tasks undertaken by the women of the homestead, increasingly from the 1830s onwards, was the production of beadwork. Women in southern African societies were generally not responsible for sewing clothes made of skins, that having been men's work. Mission schools introduced sewing classes for young women, but there is little evidence that they taught beadwork skills to their converts. Why women should have taken up this particular form of craft is not clear, except that they appear to have been responsible in the past for stringing other materials into necklaces, or onto pieces of indigenous clothing (Nettleton 2000). It appears that women of any age could and did learn skills in beadworking, with young unmarried women making pieces for suitors, and married women making them for their sons and husbands, or among the Xhosa, unmarried mothers and divorced women making pieces for their lovers (Peires 1981; Shaw & Van Warmelo 1988; Klopper 2000). Klopper has interrogated the ways in which the production and wearing of beadwork in the Eastern Cape reflected power relations between men and women: as she points out, women '... have played a significant role in constructing and even controlling the world...' (1994:31) that seemed to be controlled by men's activities. But she did not follow the trail through which beads were acquired for use in the first instance and then passed to women for processing.

### **The Trade in Beads and the Making of 'Tribal' Dress**

The introduction of increasingly large quantities of glass beads into southern Africa from the early nineteenth century, via the Cape, Delagoa Bay and then Port Natal, was part of a larger process whereby translocated objects were used

to complement old, or invent new forms of dress. This process is recorded in accounts, written by traders, missionaries and colonial officials, of the indigenous dress practices of southern African peoples (Nettleton *et al.* 1989; Bedford 1993; Van Wyk 1993:67–77; Kaufmann 1994). These records, paired with photographs of people wearing the beadwork items and the objects themselves, offer an archive that traverses the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That this visual archive is neither neutral nor innocent is taken as understood in my argument, but it does offer evidence of technical, formal and functional aspects of beadwork at particular times and in specific locations.

Glass beads were, from the start of the trade, highly valued by many African peoples. Early glass beads traded down the East Coast of Africa were mostly long and tubular: they were largely simply strung together and worn around the neck.<sup>15</sup> From their first entry into local African communities in larger quantities, imported glass seed beads were a luxury, controlled in distribution within the Zulu Kingdom during the ascendancy of Shaka (Klopper 1992), but more generally available elsewhere. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, white traders and missionaries exchanged beads for ivory and other exotica,<sup>16</sup> the establishment of trade fairs in the frontier regions of the Eastern Cape encouraged barter and increased the volumes of materials exchanged (Peires 1981:98–103; Crais 1992); beads were used as currency among amaMpondo (isiXhosa-speakers) until the collapse of their value by 1831 (Peires 1981:102), although Noel Mostert (1993:306) records that by the time that Van der Kemp paid his first visit to Ngqika in 1799, brass buttons and other buttons were used in commercial exchanges on the Eastern Cape frontier. By the later nineteenth-century beads were most regularly bought with cash at the trading stores set up in ‘the bush’ (Callaway 1936; Dicke 1936; Peires 1981), and concession stores in mining centres from the 1860s onwards. Male migrant labourers earned this money, which often passed to household heads at home for payment of taxes, but some managed to retain it to provide their own bridewealth payments, or to help already established rural families. But wages were also essential for the purchase of trade goods in cities and at trading stores.<sup>17</sup> Thus wages taken back to rural settlements in various forms saw to the transformation, and sometimes the complete reinvention, of local traditions of making, wearing and using material objects.

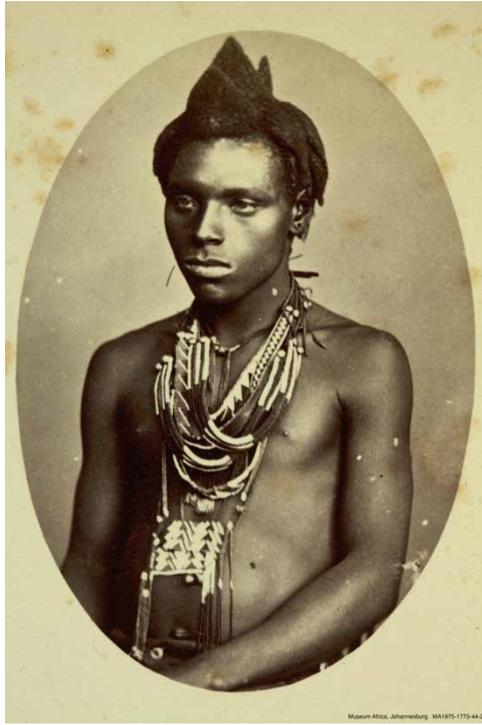
It is thus clear that the advent of a cash economy, of which migrant labour formed an important part, was an important condition for the extraordinary florescence of beadwork from 1870 onwards, along the eastern seaboard of southern Africa, and only slightly later in the interior. A complex network of exchange was established, leading from the men’s earning cash resources by labouring on the mines, through the exchange of cash for beads, thread and other beadwork prerequisites, their transfer to the women living in the rural districts, and their transformation into items of wear highly desirable, for both the women and their relatives, or potential beaux. The process of creation of social bonds, however, did not end in the making, nor even in the initial wearing and display of these

masterpieces of woman's work: items were passed down from one generation to another, were unravelled and restrung or have survived as heritage items or as artworks in museums, generally without the names of the makers or users, but always with an ethnic category attached.

### **Beadwork and 'Traditional' Clothing**

Over the course of 150 years, from 1800 to 1950, beadwork was developed by the women from king's courts to, increasingly, rural villages, to fulfil a number of functions, particularly in dressing the body. Early illustrations of beadwork from the Zulu Kingdom and Natal give some idea of how quickly women adopted this new medium for embellishing items of dress worn by men and women.<sup>18</sup> Beadwork was also, from at least the 1840s onwards (Nettleton 2012), made for sale to white outsiders: from the 1860s, photographers in Durban, Grahamstown and Cape Town used pieces as props to clothe indigenous subjects in colonial ethnographic portraiture: others collected beadwork for the great colonial exhibitions and ultimately for museums in the heart of colonial power.<sup>19</sup> The women who accompanied Cetshwayo on his imprisonment in the Castle and at Oude Meulen in Cape Town from 1879 to 1883 (Webb & Wright 1978) are recorded as making beaded items for sale to those who visited the king.<sup>20</sup> The makers and wearers of the beaded items, followed and abetted by photographers and collectors, thus together constructed beadwork as 'traditional' indigenous dress. These forms garnered specific significance over time, forming 'traditions' within the lives of migrants and their families. Some of the earliest of these migrant workers, Natal 'letter carriers for mails by the government' <sup>21</sup> (Figure 1) in the 1860s and 1870s, wore a large amount of beadwork, especially when they were photographed, but the extensive wearing of beaded items was, over the next hundred years, largely confined to the rural 'homelands', except on occasions of deliberate display such as mine dances or agricultural shows.

Beadwork items, such as those worn by many individuals in hundreds of late nineteenth-century photographs (Figure 2), was not intended by their makers or wearers to cover body parts in order to merely conceal them, but rather to celebrate and emphasise them.<sup>22</sup> Up to approximately 1900 in most indigenous southern African communities, only some body parts were hidden from view entirely, by covers made of animal hides, and/or of imported cloth, and these were trimmed with glass beads, metal buttons or studs, and chains. As these items of wear had, before the arrival of glass seed beads, been embellished with egg-shell, clay or other natural materials turned into beads, the use of large numbers of white and coloured glass beads in their stead must have made these garments stand out from the rest: the number of beads used increased with the importance/wealth of the individual who wore the beadwork, elevating their visibility amongst their fellows. The Xhosa king, Sandile's wives are recorded by Gustav Fritsch<sup>23</sup> as having worn vast numbers of beads in heavy white fringes strung across their chests and covering their breasts and John Colenso (1855) recorded



**Figure 1.** 'Zulu hairdressing', probably from Durban, c.1865–1870. Studio photograph. Courtesy Museum Africa, Johannesburg.



**Figure 2.** 'Zulu warrior', probably from the Caney Studio, Durban, 1883–1893. Silver gelatin print. Courtesy Iziko Museum of Cape Town.

similar use of swathes of white beads across Pakade's 'dancing girls' in 1854. Fritsch's image (in Dietrich & Bank 2008) showed Sandile's wives, however, still wearing shell, wood and claw/tooth necklaces among the glass beads, indexing the degree to which the earlier tradition of body decoration continued to fulfil apotropaic and protective functions, something which may have been transferred to glass beads later.

Wearing beadwork *as clothing* was limited to the rural areas from quite early on in the colonial period, because rules governing dress in colonial towns in South Africa required 'proper' attire. Anyone entering town had to wear clothing that covered the body from shoulder to knee, and traditional forms of dress, including the newly emerging forms of beadwork did not, for the most part, comply with such requirements. Colenso (1865) mounted a trenchant critique of these requirements, the start of which Shaw & Van Warmelo (1988:620) place with Somerset's interdiction against the wearing of indigenous costumes in colonial towns of the Eastern Cape, prior to 1826.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this interdict, uniforms prescribed for both those who worked as domestic servants within the towns, and for those who were resident on mission stations or studied or taught in mission schools, were always western in form.

Pieced, tailored clothing including smocks, dresses shirts and trousers for those at mission stations, were sewn from imported cotton cloth by women residents, or by young women at institutions such as the Inanda Seminary for girls established in 1869.<sup>25</sup> This indexed a shift in division of labour from that 'traditional' in most indigenous groups, where skin garments such as karosses, the leather skirts worn by isiZulu-speaking married women (*isidwaba*), longer skirts worn by isiXhosa-speaking adult women and aprons worn by seSotho-, tshiVenda- or seTswana-speakers, as well as grass belts, fringed pubic aprons and bangles had generally been prepared and sewn by men.<sup>26</sup>

### **Valorisation of Beadwork: Women, Clothing and 'Tradition'**

Beadwork registers in the colonial record as an index of the uncivilised, but silent witness to women's work with imported, modern materials, and as part of a constantly changing clothing regime. The ambivalence in beadwork's status as traditional, is thus caused because, not only was it a modern phenomenon, but because it was also largely developed and vastly expanded by the women left behind in the rural areas, the place of 'tradition', 'craft' and 'custom' which, even though it underwent radical changes with the advent and continuation of migrant labour, was nevertheless thought of by most migrants as a place of continuity and links to the ancestral realm.<sup>27</sup>

Beadwork appears to have lodged in this increasingly female domain. Beads were strung and sewn by women, not only for themselves, but also, importantly, for men who were absent from the homestead for long periods.<sup>28</sup> Beaded dress items were mostly worn for ceremonies that had to be performed at home, because the ancestral community's presence and participation was essential to

their success.<sup>29</sup> In the 150-year period which saw the growth and development of beadworking traditions, few workers in towns wore beadwork in their places of employment or even in their places of relaxation, such as hostels. Some items were specifically linked to rites of passage such as initiation, courtship and marriage, many of which required periods of seclusion, separation and abstinence prior to the principal participants' reintegration into communities.<sup>30</sup> Most tellingly, these ceremonies were performed 'at home', in the presence and in the domain of the paternal ancestors.<sup>31</sup> Migrant labourers' movements out of the community, and thus out of range of direct ancestral intervention, and then back again, could be argued to have been a rite of passage, which replaced or augmented the transition from boyhood to manhood and marriageable status within the patriline. These new movements, like the old ones, required a rite or ceremony of reintegration in which beadwork played an important part. Young migrant labourers returning from the mines with their wages and material goods courted young women with gifts of beads; they received gifts of beaded items from their admirers in return. Older men were able to accumulate beaded items by giving out beads purchased with younger men's remittances to them as household heads.

In all of these cases women would have been at the bead-face of the construction of particular visual identities in sewing the beads together using particular colour combinations and patterns: both men and women used the beadwork ostentatiously for important public occasions.<sup>32</sup> Beadwork thus accrued value that escalated as it was hoarded/collected, particularly by married isiXhosa-speaking men (Broster 1976; Costello 1990), but photographs of people from other, diverse ethnic groups, from the 1880s onwards, show that similar practices obtained among many of them.

### Beaded Identities

The fact that the making and wearing of beadwork functioned as an index of 'ethnic' identity, largely in the period of white settlement and the growth of urban styles of life among black people, is significant in the construction of beadwork as a black 'tradition'. While beadwork was in some ways essential to the white experience of the spectacle of the savage native in South Africa and his or her 'tribal' status, it was actively used as an expression of ethnic belonging and difference (at the level of more localised groups such as Mpondo and Gcaleka rather than 'Xhosa') by black traditionalists.<sup>33</sup> Vincent Gitywa suggests that:

although beads and beadwork are originally foreign elements in Xhosa culture, it has become so accepted and adapted that beadwork is today universally accepted as a traditional craft not only of the Xhosa, but also of all the Bantu in South Africa. (1970:54–55)

Southern African beadwork encompasses many different visual styles developed at different times and in a variety of locations: beadwork itself is mobile and could travel from one district to another. Nevertheless beadwork, as Gitywa (1970) suggests, could, at particular periods, act as a marker of its wearer's ethno-geo-

graphical belonging. While traditionalists followed particular body practices that marked them physically and permanently as women, men or as members of a specific 'ethnic' group, once they were stripped of 'customary dress' and placed in ubiquitous western-style clothing – in the case of migrants this would be trousers and shirts, sometimes with shoes and socks, or indeed in plain blankets – they would lose their immediately striking, particular visual identity.

The process of migratory labour was one in which *visible* difference between labourers was largely eradicated, except in the context of the mine dances where ethnicity was by contrast spectacularly on display. This can be demonstrated in comparing the draped cloth-covering skin aprons, necklaces, wristbands and leg rattles of the dancers and musicians in a photograph of 'Chopi musicians' (Figure 3) with the distinctive costume worn by men in an image of stick-fighting (Figure 4) called 'Natives in mine compound' where fringed skirts emulating tails are combined with a motley assortment of headgear and shirts.<sup>34</sup> Beadwork does not feature prominently in these images, nor in the many others of mine compounds available in the archive<sup>35</sup> and the clothing was certainly not the kind worn in the process of mining, nor in leisure time in the compounds. Yet the invented forms in these photographs reference garments from the rural background, home, the place in which visual and visible conformity to particular 'ethnic' norms was, from the 1880s through to the 1960s, maintained and promoted. While this conformity was expressed through a multiplicity of material accoutrements, the forms of beaded excess were particularly prominent, alongside particular preferences in cloth, blankets and hairstyling, especially among isiZulu-, isiXhosa-, TshiTsonga- and SiNdebele-speakers.<sup>36</sup> That the styles of beadworking



**Figure 3.** 'Chopi musicians', date unrecorded. Postcard silver gelatin print, Joseph & David Barnett. Barnett Collection, courtesy of *The Star* archives, Historical papers, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



**Figure 4.** 'Natives in a mine compound', 1900–1901. Postcard silver gelatin print. photographer unrecorded. Courtesy Museum Africa, Johannesburg.

could be used to distinguish, for example, among isiXhosa-speakers, Thembu from Gcaleka or Mpondo, or among isiZulu-speakers, those from Hlabisa from those from Nongoma, Msinga or the Ngwane areas, speaks to the ways in which women constructed forms of beadwork to perform the particular task of identity marking, although clear demarcations may not have emerged until after 1900.

The beaded belts, necklaces, panels, fringes, aprons, leggings, armbands, waistcoats and other accoutrements of dress that feature in images of southern African peoples from the mid-nineteenth century onwards were all responses of excess, particularly in the sheer number of beads used and their increasingly complex colours and pattern. While the quantity of beadwork was dependent on the availability of cash resources, the quality was dependent on the beading techniques which were varied, labour-intensive and time-consuming. They required concentration and ability to envisage designs that were only revealed in a completed 'garment', because beaders worked without patterns. The beaders not only made use of imported beads, thread and needles, to transform traditional forms, but they possibly also borrowed designs from other sources introduced through trade such as woven shawls, fabrics, towels and blankets (Papini 1984). Beads were often used to transform manufactured items bought by migrant labourers, either by providing a new covering or by attachment. Further, discarded western industrial detritus was often beaded or incorporated into objects in completely new interpretations of the commonplace. Beaders thus created new kinds of objects, among them items of wear for both men and women, which reflected particular kinds of interaction by individuals with changing circumstances, and the building of forms of resistance and cultural survival.

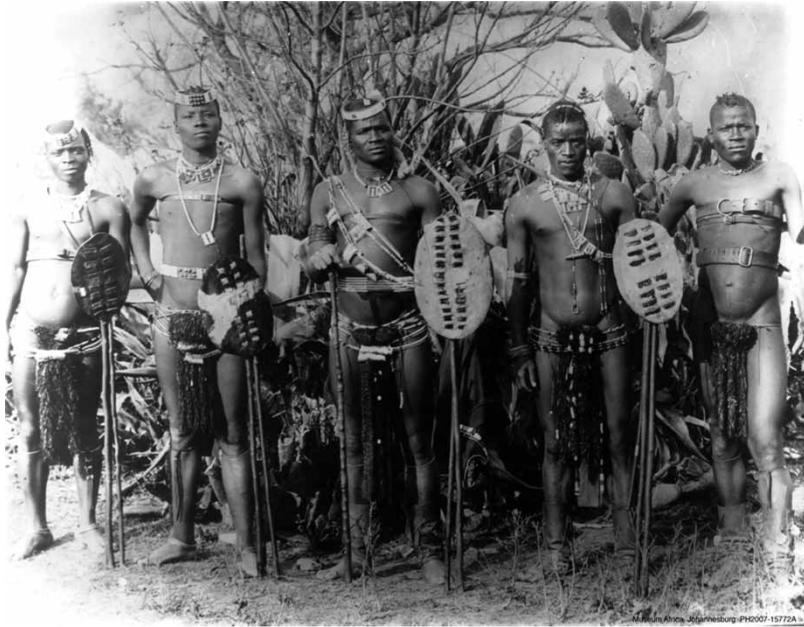


**Figure 5.** Waistcoat and waistband, Mpondo (Xhosa), Eastern Cape, date unrecorded. Beads, buttons, thread, leather metal hooks and eyes (61 × 39 cm), artist unrecorded. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, WAM.

A possibly Mpondo or Mpondomise style of beadwork is seen in the pink and blue waistcoats illustrated by Costello (1990) as part of a married man's wear, and eulogised by David Bunn (2004) as being particularly attuned to wear over brown skins. Such waistcoats (Figure 5) use (in these cases locally produced) leather strips on the edges which fastened, and some were also elaborated with multiple mother of pearl buttons. One of the names given to such vests was *umwayo* which, according to Costello '... suggests a large number ... (of beads)' (1990:77), pointing to a local understanding of the excess that such items represented.<sup>37</sup> In all, a waistcoat such as this represented a considerable investment of resources by the person who bought the materials and who produced the finished item, although it was generally the man to whom the symbolic capital accrued. But, and possibly more importantly, a garment such as this would have marked its wearer as a participant in a process of speaking back to the centre of power, as an African version of a modern item of wear.

### Leather and Beads – Mix and Match

An example of how beaded items made by women became incorporated into migrant workers' home dress is seen in a photograph (Figure 6) dating from the 1890s,<sup>38</sup> possibly taken on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg's Zwartskop location.



**Figure 6.** Zulu Warrior, photograph from Natal, possibly near Pietermaritzburg, c.1880–1890. Silver-gelatin print, photographer unrecorded. Courtesy Museum Africa Johannesburg.

A group of five young men, in the prime of life, stand posed against a background of trees, cacti and aloes, on a piece of ground with patches of grass that locate it outside the studio. They are ‘dressed’ in attire, which was appropriate for rural homes, not for cities or mines, and which is thus generally classed as ‘traditional’, but which is also evidence of idiosyncratic and individual interpretations of current trends of dress. Collections of animal tails cover their pubic areas, held by girdles of string or skin, with pendant bead strings. All wear beaded necklaces around their necks, mostly small panels with geometric designs against white backgrounds, patterns by then established as common in beadwork emanating from Natal, and thus considered ‘traditional’ and ‘Zulu’. These so-called ‘love-letter’ panels feature also on strings of beads worn bandolier-style over one shoulder and around the torso. In addition, three men on the left of the image have rather jauntily positioned beaded straps as headdresses, the man second from the right has a headband of strings of beads around his head with more hanging down on either side; only the man on the far right has no headgear and a minimum of beads. Two wear belts in different styles, one of multiple tubes of grass, the other of plaited grass, all covered in beads and the latter with brass studs, and both identified as women’s belts in some of the literature (Wood 1996). These beaded items were made by young women as gifts for their courtiers,<sup>39</sup> and men took great pride in sporting this finery as evidence of their popularity among women.

Most of the men in this photograph also wear leather belts, an intrusion into the image of a different order from the beads with their silent witness to women's hidden work. Absorbed into a tradition of wear for unmarried men, such items marked their wearers more immediately as people who interacted with the modern machinery of commerce rather than those whose connection to home and tradition was marked by beaded items alone.<sup>40</sup> Although beads were acquired by migrant workers in cities, they were also acquired in trading stores at home, and were, in their loose and un-sewn form, associated with the domestic space of women. Thus, although we cannot definitively say that these men were migrant labourers, they are of an age at which they could have been, and they had accumulated around their bodies, markers of migrant identity including the forms of beaded finery made by women.

*'Xhosa' Integrations of Leather and Beads*

Numerous items moved into the rural areas of the Eastern Cape in the baggage of returning migrant workers, to be transformed into new and extraordinary objects by women beadworkers.<sup>41</sup> Leather straps were particularly favoured by mid-twentieth-century Gcaleka artists in making belts, as is reflected in the multiple straps with beaded trim along their edges worn wrapped around torsos by both women and men in the late 1960s, seen in photographs by Alice Mertens (Mertens & Broster 1973:pls 16 & 97). These leather strips were, however, also used to make the framework of more complex garments. A (female) master beader constructed a vest/waistcoat (Figure 7) by connecting panels, of largely



**Figure 7.** Vethiboyi (vest), Thembu (Xhosa), Eastern Cape, date unrecorded. Beads, buttons, thread, leather straps (91 × 50 cm), artist unrecorded. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, WAM.

white beads with geometric motifs in primary colours, to tan-coloured leather straps thus providing both chest and back pieces, and longer side sections between the strips. The side panels are placed with gaps between them, allowing the viewer to see the skin of the wearer, and only partially masking the body beneath. The surface of the tan leather straps is punctuated by regular holes (probably machine made), filled in places by rows of plastic imitations of the mother-of-pearl buttons which were favoured by isiXhosa-speakers since they first encountered them on European clothing (Nettleton *et al.* 1989).<sup>42</sup> Such a garment is clearly a tour de force aimed at enhancing the male body, but speaks also of hours of labour needed for its construction, of a woman sitting in the homestead plying a needle and thread.

### Hybridity and Modernity through Beadwork

In the context of migrant labour then, beadwork as a sign of otherness is reconfigured as a sign of indigenous modernity. The overwriting, or double inscription here, first of beads over indigenous clothing forms, then of the incorporation of western materials within traditional beadwork, can be traced as a form of hybridity that, Homi Bhabha suggested, arises from Derridean notion of double-inscription. Hybridity, Bhabha claims:

unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (1985:154)

The inscription in the case of this beadwork takes place on the bodies of migrant workers and on those of their families left behind, with mimicry extending through the use of materials provided by the colonial power, initially as a means of exchange (beads), or as part of western clothing (leather belts) into the making of a 'tradition' that does not return to origins, but turns self-identification against colonial classification. The hybrid form produced by mimicry results in what Bhabha contends are 'signs of spectacular resistance' (1985:162). The beadwork worn by people left behind in the rural areas, by the migrant workers themselves at mine dances, both the subjects of colonial photography in the late nineteenth century and more so in the twentieth century, to the eventual resurgence of beaded wear as identity markers in urban township celebrations, is all about particular forms of visual classification and spectacular display.

The jacket in [Figure 8](#) reflects designs common in Ngwane areas around Underberg in the 1950s and 1960s, which are completely distinct from those of Nongoma and Hlabisa in the same period. Both are produced by isiZulu-speaking women, but from different historical backgrounds and geographic locations. In these contexts beadwork can be argued not only to have been about the production of difference, but to have rigidified lines of division, marked on bodies and replicated in spatial divisions of people in homeland territories, mine hostels, townships, education and everything else.<sup>43</sup> The beadwork in the strips and panels applied to the



**Figure 8.** Ibantshi (jacket), Zulu, Natal, probably Ngwane area, Bergville, date unrecorded. Beads, buttons, store-bought jacket (110 × 83.5 cm), artist unrecorded. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, WAM.

jackets and waistcoats thus, in reflecting different regional pattern preferences among people from different districts in the larger area of KwaZulu-Natal, marked identity in very particular ways. The cultivation of distinct beadwork designs and techniques is equally evident among a variety of clan and lineage groups in the Eastern Cape over the period in which migrant labour was so rigidly controlled from the centre. Beadwork is represented thus as an ethnic index in much of the coffee-table photography of the twentieth century as well.<sup>44</sup>

### **Beadwork and Bodies of Resistance**

But beadwork and other African transformations of imported materials were also forms of resistance to the ‘primitive’ paradigm, to the missionary need to make converts conform and they enabled the creation of modern forms of indigeneity. Following James Scott’s notion of ‘everyday forms of resistance’, an analysis of how beadwork came to be preferred as ceremonial wear in the rural areas reveals that its construction is one of those subtle modes of addressing dominant western norms of propriety.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the kinds of use of western-style clothing documented among the Tswana at missions in the nineteenth century and argued as ‘aberrant’ or non-normative by John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (1995) and thus as resistance markers, beadwork among younger women and men, was most often disposed about an otherwise naked body, as seen in [Figures 1, 2 and 6](#) (above), a body which was inadmissible in the spaces of the urban, of the mission, of the supposedly civilised. In this sense beadwork disposed about the naked body could be argued to be what Scott might call a ‘partial transcript’, but here a visual rather than a verbal one, vested in the way the body is presented publicly, but which is open to different interpretations in different strata of colonial power. This beaded body was repeated as ‘traditional’ and ‘ideal’ by local rural communities, but as ‘tribal’ or ‘exotic’ by white colonists and later by tourists. Significantly it was also rejected by the African intellectual elite that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, the isiZulu-speaking *Ama-*

*kholwa*, and the isiXhosa-speaking converts to Christianity the *Amagqobhoka*, who chose to dress in suits and ties, in western dresses, skirts and blouses.<sup>46</sup>

However, such binaries are also misleading, because many Africans were, through the labour which women put into the making of beadwork items, able to reconcile aspects of both traditions, to develop a hybrid body that utterly confounded prescriptive acceptance or rejection of invasive elements.<sup>47</sup> In some instances this resulted in invented forms of indigenous 'clothing' such as the entirely beaded vests and waist pieces made by isiXhosa-speakers discussed above. In other cases the mix was more directly visible as where isiZulu-speaking women, the makers of beaded jackets and waistcoats, used (or copied) store-bought western dress items as the base for the application of beaded strips and panels. Such waistcoats and jackets were largely worn in the contexts of the rural home, in combination with other western dress items such as the jodhpurs worn by an Induna in a photograph taken by Katesa Schlosser (2004).<sup>48</sup>

That women were the guardians of belonging, signalled in the form of developing, changing and evolving traditions of beadwork, is significant. The migrant worker left the city and returned home to the place where women's labour produced and maintained 'tradition', in the speaking of language (mother-tongue), raising of children and production of food. But the women's 'unseen' labour, their use of time for the production of beadwork was what enabled traditions to be marked visibly on the body and celebrated aesthetically. Such distinctive use of beads in their variety of colours marked identities in ways that had not apparently been necessary before the development of the migrant labour system, showing local and particular formal characteristics. The beaded body had, by the 1890s, become a body of resistance, and it was to remain such for the next 70 years, proclaiming tradition and asserting modernity in the same breath, and making visible the labour of women by its presence.

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## Note on Contributor

**Anitra Nettleton** is Chair and Director of the Centre for Creative Arts of Africa at the Wits Art Museum (WAM). Her research has encompassed topics in historical and contemporary African arts. Her present research runs in two strands; the relationships between histories and modernity as manifested in beadwork and 'traditional' sculpture: a project on modernisms manifested in works by artists of the 1963/4 'Amadlozi' exhibition and by rural artists of Limpopo and Mpumalanga in the 1970s and 1980s.

## Notes

1. See David Hammond-Tooke (1985) and Gavin Whitelaw (2001) for wider analyses of African cattle culture and settlement patterns in southern Africa.

2. The hut tax had been imposed earlier in the colony of Natal by Theophilus Sheptone in October 1849 (Guy 2013).
3. I use these ethnic labels here as a convenient shorthand, mindful of their inaccuracies and problems of identification, some of which will emerge later in this article.
4. McLintock (1995:254) claims it thus: '... the homestead was based on the systematic exploitation of women's labor and the transformation of that labor into male social and political power'.
5. The dates for the beginning of the use of seed beads in such quantities differ in different parts of the sub-continent. Ludwig Alberti (1968 [1807]) illustrated examples of 'Xhosa' clothing that made use of such beads, and they were being imported into northern Zululand from Delagoa Bay at the same time.
6. The intricacies of who could make beadwork for whom were embedded in social relationships and customs of respect (Zulu *hlonipa*). So, in most cases a young man could not wear beadwork made by his sisters, but could wear pieces made by his mother or elder female relatives in his own lineage. Among Xhosa-speakers, married men often accumulated large collections of beadwork made by their girlfriends, wives and mistresses.
7. Some of this is addressed in the work of Joan Broster (1976), Frank Jolles (1993), Ivor Powell (1995), Eleanor Preston-Whyte and Jean Morris (1994), Gary van Wyk (2003) and Sandra Klopper (1992, 2000).
8. There is a large literature on southern African beadwork, not all of which acknowledges these basic factors. On the side of those that gloss over the history are Dawn Costello (1990), Broster (1976), Hilgard Schoeman and Alice Mertens (1975), Mertens and Broster (1973) and Franz Mayr (1907). More historically nuanced accounts include Van Wyk (2003), Klopper (2000), Marilee Wood (1996), Carol Kaufmann (1994), Andrew Proctor and Sandra Klopper (1993), but even these do not attempt to establish base lines for techniques, patterns and identities.
9. There is not sufficient space in this article to deal with these developments. I have been researching them through the visual records and through early acquisitions of beadwork into European museums – see Anitra Nettleton (2012) for some of this research.
10. Other major beadwork traditions among the Tsonga, for example, are also under-researched, but certainly date back to the nineteenth century. Some were published in colour plate drawings by Muller and Snelleman (1892). See Nettleton (2007).
11. Issues of how to understand the position of women in precolonial society in Natal are complex and much discussed. A good overview of some of the arguments is given by Klopper (1992:146–167), and by Klopper and Rankin-Smith (2004) in relation to isiZulu-speakers. Redding (1993) does a valuable analysis of the effects of the imposition of hut and poll taxes on women of Xhosa groups in the Transkei and Guy (2013) addresses the same question in relation to the Zulu of Natal. As Philip Bonner puts it: 'One issue which men of all classes and races in South Africa agreed upon was the desirability of keeping African women confined to the rural areas' (2004:94).
12. Bonner (2004:95) shows that the number of women migrant workers on the Witwatersrand was tiny by comparison with the number of men – men were more numerous even in domestic service, except in nursery duties.
13. In discussing these contexts in generalisations, there is inevitably some fudging of the issue of whether all southern African groups followed strict agnatic lineage patterns in their living arrangements. See for example Hammond-Tooke (1985) and Guy (1987). Jane Guyer's (1981) discussion of lineage and household as categories is useful for understanding their impact on African women's status. Redding (1993) also records the ways in which some women in Xhosa communities could become relatively wealthy and independent.
14. Assuming a more or less even split between men and women in African polities, and given that wealth was unevenly spread and that young men had to wait in line to obtain bridewealth, the idea that any other than a relatively small minority of men in these polities was able to have more than one wife, let alone more than two, is hardly tenable. This issue is important because we have some strange notions about divisions of labour: in a household in which

there was only one wife, she would have had to do most of the agricultural work herself on the land which had been apportioned to her and her husband. Until her daughters were old enough there would not have been anyone to whom she could delegate such responsibilities.

15. The trade in beads in southern Africa dates back before the advent of European traders on the coast, having occurred between African peoples as recorded by Shaw and van Warmelo (1988), Peires (1981:97) and Guy (1975). They were traded in small quantities however, and often made up part of chiefs' regalia, as was the case of the Venda rulers' 'beads of water' (Stayt 1931:26–27) See also Sharma Saitowitz (1994).
16. See the account by RG Cumming, published in 1850, of his hunting and trading exploits in South Africa from 1843 onwards. He lists the goods he took on his first trip including 'three hundred pounds of white, coral, red and bright blue beads of various sizes' as well as 'thread, needles and buttons', i.e. everything one might need for beadwork.
17. Eugene Casalis (1965 [1861]), for example, specifically mentions returning Sotho migrants' use of their wages to acquire clothing.
18. Most famously the images in George Angas (1849) but also seen in Joseph Shooter (1857 frontis, plates III, IV). Mayr (1907) still distinguished between what he called 'skin Zulu' and 'blanket Zulu' as a means of separating two putative periods in which Zulu-speakers either used indigenous elements of clothing besides beads, or imported cloth. In fact this distinction is not tenable. Further securely dated evidence is offered in a photographic album belonging to Arthur Spring of 1865 (Oxford: Pitt-Rivers Museum, 1998.67).
19. In an extended study of nineteenth century photographs of black people, particularly in the colony of Natal and in the Eastern Cape, I have been able to identify the same, or very similar, beadwork items worn by different people in different photographs from the same studios. Where the items are exactly the same, the probability is that these were not owned by the sitting subject of the photograph. This research is still to be published, but see Nettleton (2014).
20. Some of these may well have ended up in collections deposited in museums, especially in the United Kingdom, where no differentiation between them and those made for indigenous use would have been reported. The money Cetswayo received for these items, he spent buying shawls and other things in Cape Town (Samuelson 1929:118).
21. This is the caption to one of these images in the album belonging to Arthur Spring of 1865 (note 18 above). The image in Figure 1 is undoubtedly of the same vintage as the one in the Spring album, and is one of many reproduced in a variety of forms over the next 12 years at least – it reappears in drawings made as illustrations of the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 in the *Illustrated London News*. See Klopper (2010) for a discussion of these hairstyles.
22. While totalising histories of beadwork such as that implied in this claim are acknowledged as being problematic, because there are too many variants in practice not only between 'ethnicities', but within them, specific instances can be demonstrated with reference to individual objects or specific object types over a long time span.
23. This can be seen in an illustration (Fritsch 1872:fig 8) made from a photograph taken by Gustav Fritsch in 1865/6: the picture is reproduced by Dietrich and Bank (2008), but copies are also housed in a number of different archives.
24. Somerset was governor of the Cape from 1814 to 1826 and the engineer of the 1820 settlement of English emigrants. These dress restrictions have been discussed by a number of authors vis-à-vis the Natal towns (see, for example, Klopper 1992), but less fully with regard to the isiXhosa speakers in the Eastern Cape, possibly because most Xhosa-speakers wore more skin clothing than their northerly Nguni relatives, and the skins were early replaced by cloth.
25. Inanda Seminary was established by 'Mrs Edwards' (Tyler 1891). There are many other examples: one was at St Cuthbert's mission at Tsolo in Mpondomise territory (Callaway 1936).
26. Again division of labour varied from one ethnic group to another. See also Klopper (2012). Shaw and van Warmelo (1988:536) date the change to the use of cloth skirts among isiXhosa-speaking women to 1820.

27. Beinart (1982) and Peires (1981) both address the structural changes in homestead power relations in the Eastern Cape Xhosa-speaking polities caused by migrant labour, but Beinart especially, does not really consider the women's point of view.
28. The organisation of young men (and women) into regiments in the Zulu kingdom meant that young men in particular could be away from their family homesteads for long periods (Laband 2001). This system was replicated in many other polities. Among Xhosa-, Sotho-, Ndebele- and Tsonga-speakers young men would be absent from some time during their initiation into manhood, and sometimes on hunting or cattle-raiding trips, or in times of war.
29. That this is still the case is seen in the return of many urban dwellers to rural family homesteads for ceremonies involving the exchange of bridewealth, marriages, introduction of children to communities and the like.
30. Paulina Dlamini (1998:22) recounted to Revd Filter, from her experience, that beadwork with 'requisite symbols' had to be taken by young women who were placed by the families in King Cetshwayo's *isigodlo*, after which they were no longer part of their paternal families.
31. Klopper's (2012) discussion of why men returned home from the mines on a regular basis does not consider these, more spiritual, elements of the question.
32. Klopper (1994:31) suggests that there is a binary operating among Eastern Cape peoples between the women who stayed at home invisibly making the beadwork that men wore publicly, but the photographic evidence suggests that women wore beadwork sometimes almost as lavish as that worn by men. This is also clearly the case for the Zulu-speakers of Natal and the Ndebele- and Tsonga-speakers of Limpopo province. The particularly white beadwork worn as a special marker by isiXhosa-speaking practitioners of healing and divination could be made by male and female ritual specialists themselves.
33. See Martens and Broster (1973) on the Xhosa: they distinguish between the various isiXhosa-speakers more carefully than other writers. Schoemann and Mertens (1975) offer some examples of regional differences in Zulu beadwork, as does Preston-Whyte and Morris (1994). Powell (1995) gives an overview of Ndebele beadwork, and Nettleton (2007) of Tsonga beadwork.
34. Alfred Duggan-Cronin whose photographs follow this kind of distinction, started out photographing people on the mines dressed in ethnic costume: this led him to explore rural areas and photograph people in their apparently 'pristine state'. The published photographs appeared in a series called *The Bantu Tribes of Southern Africa* over the period 1928 to 1939. See for example Duggan-Cronin (1935).
35. Archives such as that at MuseumAfrica and at Iziko Historical Research Centre do not offer any such photographs. Some of the publicity images for mine dances from the 1930s onwards include some beadwork, but the photographic archive does suggest that beads were largely associated with rural bodies rather than urban ones.
36. See, for example the photographs by Katesa Schlosser (2004, 2006) and Alice Mertens (Mertens and Broster 1973; Schoemann and Mertens 1975).
37. Costello (1990:77) further suggests that these items were considered amongst the most desirable forms of beadwork that a woman might make for a man.
38. This image appears in Stevenson and Graham-Stewart (2000) labelled as 'Zulu Warriors' a postcard published in 1907, but its earlier iteration, in this case housed in the MuseumAfrica archives, does not bear the inscription, and it corresponds closely to other photographs taken in the same location in the 1890s.
39. There has been a great deal of ink spilt about the meaning of such love letters. Despite recent attempts to codify the language of colour and pattern in so-called 'Zulu' beadwork, there is no clear syntax and no clearly established vocabulary that allows for any standard reading of any of the beadwork. All 'meanings' were entirely contextual: see Marie-Louise Labelle (2005) for a measured rebuttal of such claims.
40. There are voluminous numbers of such group photographs, made for the postcard industry, in collections and museums in South Africa and abroad. See Virginia-Lee Webb (1992) among others.

41. Examples include gaskets from boilers that were beaded, decorated with woollen pompoms and worn as collars, beaded sunglasses, tennis racquet frames, bottles and many others: see Nettleton, Charlton and Rankin-Smith (2003).
42. They too, have come to be regarded 'traditional', used in excess on many items, functioning as ornaments not fasteners, their whiteness and shine referencing ancestral presence and general coolness, but also acting as indices of modernity.
43. Other forms involved the making of skirts and aprons for younger women, or for wrapping around longer skirts of married women from store-bought cloth and covering them with highly textured beadwork that was particularly favoured in the Greytown/Maphamulo districts in the 1950s (Findlay 2004), but were not based on indigenous precedents.
44. See for example Mertens and Broster (1973); Schoeman and Mertens (1975); Elliot (1970, 1986a, 1986b). In the latter Aubrey Elliott claims that the 'origins of beadwork are uncertain' (1986b:n.p.) and notes that the Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele excel at its making which may explain why they were the only groups that figure in his book on *Tribal Dress* (1986a). The only example of this kind of book produced by a black photographer was Peter Magubane's (1998) problematically titled, and multi-authored volume *Vanishing Cultures of South Africa*, again arranged according to tribes, with all Xhosa-speakers lumped together in a single, unsatisfactory chapter. Interestingly, Magubane's photographs of Sotho initiates emerging from seclusion (1998:110–111) reflect very clearly the continuing impact of migrant labour and its rewards in the dress of the initiates up to the end of the century.
45. Scott (1985:29) enumerates these as including 'false compliance', 'feigned ignorance', and 'sabotage'. The beadworkers' ability to construct garments that kind-of complied with western propriety is still seen today where young women in 'tribal' dress wear beaded brasieres that shield from view a part of the anatomy formerly easily and openly displayed by young black women in the rural homestead, with materials and forms that call to mind 'tradition', but reinvent it. In a sense this form of clothing is a 'false compliance' with western norms, but it also sabotages traditions in various ways.
46. That the residue of these attitudes is deep and ensnaring is clear from the conformity to the western-style suit worn by politicians, business men, lawyers and just about anyone else in the modern global world, even when the climate is not conducive to the physical comfort of the thus be-suited body.
47. A particularly important example of the invention of ceremonial costume that is completely hybrid is to be found in the uniforms used by members of the churches that derive from that founded by Isaiah Shembe. See Carol Muller (1999), Robert Papini (2002, 2004) for fuller discussions of Shembe beadwork.
48. Other photographs taken by Schlosser (2004, 2006) in Natal show how completely integrated beaded and western items had become by the middle of the twentieth century in this region,

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