

## **WORLD CRAFT COUNCIL**

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### **TOPIC OF DISCUSSION – THE LOCAL ECOLOGY OF CRAFTS**

South Africa has a reputation for a colourful, diverse and vibrant craft sector which draws on the cultures specific to different areas of the country. We also have a distinctive genre of interior design, clothing accessories and decorative and utilitarian handmade items, which appeal specifically to our local and traditional audiences. One of these are the Ndebele.

The South African Cultural Observatory (SACO) was an initiative of the Department of Sports Arts and Culture through the Mzansi Golden Economy Strategy. SACO is a statistical and socio-economic research project, launched in 2014, which charts the socio-economic impact of the arts, culture and heritage sectors and the cultural and creative industries in South Africa.

Craft production in South Africa, is an entry-level income opportunity for people with low literacy levels and provides income in rural areas especially to women. This perception has the challenge of causing craft production to be undervalued and for craft production, especially traditional craft production such as basketry and beading, to be looked down upon by young people who have higher levels of education. However, this changes in urban areas where craft production is linked more closely to design and higher incomes.

The SACO 2020 report notes that 80% of sales of South African visual arts and crafts are to domestic households. Not all of these are through middle class retail outlets:

- Imbali Visual Literacy's director said that almost all Imbali's graduates go on to start enterprises in urban townships and cater for markets within their communities (Watterson, 2020).
- Director of the Coffee Bay cooperative Nomabali Art and Craft says that all the apparel and beadwork they produce is sold for traditional occasions (Madlalisa, 2020).
- The Africa Craft Trust's experience of working with Ndebele weavers in KwaNdebele confirmed that a large amount of beadwork is made for the local traditional market.

Other statistics include that the Visual Arts and Craft domain contributes significantly to South Africa's transformation objectives: 82.4% of people in visual arts and craft occupations are black Africans,

There is a vibrant and successful local market that supports South African craft. The SACO report notes that for craft producers approximately 80% of sales are to households in South Africa and 20% to exports (Hadisi and Snowball, 2019, p.26/27).

## **I. THE PROJECT**

### **a. Kwa Ndebele Crafters**

The hand beaded craft and paintings from Mpumalanga Province in what is traditionally known as Kwa Ndebele is world renowned and most identifiable as South African. The craft groups that the project addressed were:

- Nomhlekhabo from KameelRivier B,
- Esther Mahlangu from Mthambothini and
- Sibunjwa from Kwaggafontein.

The craft groups meet the needs of their local communities by supplying products for Ndebele rites of passage – birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership and ancestorship for example: Pension/Granny Day (The day when the state pension is paid out to senior citizens - who also make purchases of traditional crafts, for the above special traditional occasions); before they meet the needs of the tourist market; particularly since the Lockdown due to the COVID 19 Pandemic.

### **b. Low earnings**

The misfortune is that many ndebele artisans regard themselves as underpaid and in terms of South Africa's new minimum wage laws, they are, tending to earn around R2500 a month or less. At the same time, traders and wholesalers complain that when fair wages are part of the pricing of handmade products it makes them uncompetitive. "For many people working in the visual arts and crafts (VAC) sector, earnings can be very low, with some describing them as "survivalist" businesses" (Hadisi and Snowball, 2018, p.21).

## **II. TRADITIONAL ITEMS**

### **a. Beaded items**

The traditional women crafters are very selective in their choice of beads. Preferring to use the Czech seed beads which although are four times more expensive (R100 per 80gms compared to the Chinese R25 per 80gms), are of a good quality and used for the highly prized traditional items that include primary coloured, beaded wedding blankets that are beaded on the edges for the retail price of R400.00– R500.00, while the fully beaded blankets range from retail price of between R3000.00 – R5000.00. The less time consuming but just as sought after ankle, neck & wrist adornments (worn by women, girls and children) known as Nkgolwani range from between the retail price of - R2000.00 - R3000.00. The mens dancing sticks and boys cross body initiation jewellery, elderly women and married women beaded front skirts – Poto range from R800 – R1500.00. Beaded Gourds that are used for the ancestral occasions range from the retail price of R250.00 – R450.00

The inferior Chinese seed bead quality (unless one makes a special request) tends to be used for the more contemporary products such as eg. ndebele dollies, place mats, coasters,

fridge magnets and Alice bands. Items that are not seen as being of much value, traditionally.

b. Painted items

The art of painting is unfortunately a dying skill that was traditionally passed on from generation to generation, mother to daughter or Aunt to Niece and although it is becoming more and more difficult to see it on home dwellings where it was used decoratively - World renowned Esther Mahlangu has managed to commercialise her skill by using it on luxury vehicles, murals, and apparel through collaborations with the likes of BMW, Shopping Malls and Ecommerce Boutiques like African Fashion International – all of which are consumed locally.

Sibongile Mahlangu who belongs to the same clan but is far younger has managed to transfer the skill onto a more contemporary product. Her youthful clients purchase their own converse sneakers, which she in turn paints for them for the retail price of R800.00. Again satisfying a local market need.

c. Group Demographics

<b>GROUP</b>	<b>LEADER/COLLABORATION</b>	<b>PRODUCT</b>	<b>GROUP SIZE</b>
Nomhlekhabo	Sophie Mahlangu	Hand Beaded Items for Ndebele Rite of passage occasions - Dancing sticks, Wedding blankets, earrings, Mens initiation jewellery necklaces , Initiation	20 – 30
Sibunjwa	Esther Mnguni	Hand Beaded Items for Ndebele Rite of passage occasions - Dancing sticks, Wedding blankets, earrings, Beaded gourds	8
Sibongile Mahlangu	Sibongile Mahlangu	Hand painted Converse Sneakers for traditional weddings, funerals and contemporary consumption	1
Esther Mahlangu	Esther Mahlangu/AFI	Printed T-shirts with signature Esther Mahlangu design and her name	8- 10

### III. SUPPORTING AND ENCOURAGING THIS ECOSYSTEM

#### a. Education

Apartheid education was designed to deprive the majority of learners of quality basic, secondary and tertiary education, which included art, culture and heritage. Following the democratic elections in 1994 arts education at all levels was adopted as policy. One of the main reasons for the inclusion was to elevate the status and importance of heritage and culture and by association, craft.

#### b. Social Networks and Government

The craft sector is seen as going beyond providing economic value to communities, but also contributes to building social networks, developing economic independence and entrepreneurship and building personal and social capabilities, especially for rural women. Even the low earnings common amongst small-scale crafters is seen as an important contribution to helping to meet household needs. The craft sector in South Africa contributes to meeting government priorities, such as building small, medium and micro-enterprises, the empowerment of women, and rural development.

<b>Desk Research Sources, Meeting Notes and Interviews Used in Analysis</b>
Africa Craft Trust, (2018) Report to National Lottery Commission South Africa