

New Wine in Old Bottles: Creating Totem-Like Pendants

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The South coast of KwaZulu Natal is a world of stark contrasts. On the rural interior there is poverty, lack of social amenities and lack of employment opportunities whilst on the coast itself there are up-market holiday resorts, apartment blocks, clinics, hospitals and luxury motor showrooms that are scattered along a coastline that features superb beaches, restaurants and sporting facilities, Five Star Hotels and many large shopping malls.

All of these facilities are served by a good highway that for most of its length is a dual carriageway. In contrast to this there is a large inland area served by poorly maintained dirt roads linking small towns that offer few facilities other than the provision of basic food supplies, clothing, and some social services.

The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well throughout the region but many a small business has had to shut up shop for a variety of reasons including lack of access to funds, lack of business skills and the depressed state of the rural economy.

Noteworthy it is, however, that the isiZulu cultural traditions are more strongly observed in the rural areas than they are in the Westernised coastal belt and the thought was that this could possibly provide some unexplored entrepreneurial opportunities for the provision of sustainable livelihoods.

IsiZulu cultural artefacts are, of course, sold in stalls offering basketwork, embroidery and a variety of handcrafts normally undertaken in groups. The region has also produced some remarkable beadwork.

Everything that has been mentioned to this point has been exploited commercially and a relatively small number of crafters make a sustainable living out of their craft work but a number of remarkable crafts have gone into decline for one reason or another. One such instance is the wearing of iziqhaza.

[Circulate examples amongst the delegates]

The earliest isiqhaza were rather plain wooden items but as workers from rural areas went to work on the mines in Johannesburg, and all over the Witwatersrand they were faced with a limited choice of alternative employment in the building industry. Some worked for vinyl floor tiling firms such as Marley and there they found that the waste offcuts of these vinyl tiles provided opportunities to create these remarkable items. These are not earrings but earplugs. Those who worked for firms using Perspex for signage provided Perspex offcuts that produced the kind of iziqhaza to be seen in the upper section of the following slide.

[Slide : Perspex and vinyl ear plugs.]

Although it is now rare to find people wearing these splendid ear plugs they were worn by men and women. In the following slide [Slide: Woman wearing iziqhaza] notice the extent to which the earlobe has been stretched.

Customs change and the stretching of the earlobes went out of fashion and it is now considered to be a rural and backward custom pursued now only in any significant numbers by some of the followers the Nazareth Baptist Church, popularly known as the Shembe Church. It is claimed that there is Biblical foundation for this practise although I have not been able to get from any of the followers that I have interviewed, exactly what the Biblical reference is.

The irony of the situation is that the creators of these fine artefacts are amongst the poorest of the poor but, because these items are becoming more and more rare and difficult to acquire, American collectors are currently paying hundreds and in some cases over a thousand dollars per pair for these artefacts.

Whilst I can admire and respect the skill and excellence of the craft involved in the isiZulu and other indigenous cultural artefacts that I collect, I also felt a kind of moral obligation to attempt whatever I could do to alleviate the deprivation and poverty of the creators of these fine artefacts. In attempting to find a possible solution to this problem I combined three factors.

1. isiZulu society was, and in large measure still is, organised into clans that are referred to as izithakazela,

2. These izithakazela are, many of them, still associated with an animal, bird, plant, or insect, in a way that comes close to totemic association although this is not strictly the case and the association is fading in modern society where the younger generation sometimes don't know their thakazelas.
3. At an earlier stage in my life I was apprenticed to a mould-maker. Whilst I trained in the use of rubber moulds supported by plaster of Paris bases into which I poured a mixture of catalysed resin, kulu, earth oxides, synthetic coloured powders and sometimes metallic powder, I was, none-the-less aware of new developments that are far simpler to work with. In this case, no electricity is required, no water is needed and small items can be manufactured in bulk using silicon rubber moulds. The whole family can become involved and the moulding would require very little space in which to operate. [Slide: Silicon rubber mould of small pendants]

So the next step was to experiment and to cost out the creation of a simple mould, that could be given to a craftsperson in a deep rural area and that could generate small pendants of animals, birds, plants or insects. If the wearing of your 'totem' could be adopted as a fashion item then there would be enough of a return to generate a small profit to assist destitute individuals and to make a modest contribution to the deep rural economy. Unlike the marketing of other craft work, which relies heavily on the tourist trade to sustain enterprises, this idea would rely upon the buy-in of local and rural people such as taxi drivers, chiefs and the izinduna. It would have an added advantage of resuscitating a dying isiZulu cultural tradition.

No plan is foolproof, but I really believed that this plan would work. I was mistaken. To understand what went wrong you must first be aware of the somewhat feudal hierarchy of traditional leadership in tribal areas in South Africa,

All tribal land in KwaZulu Natal falls under the Ingonyama Trust which is administered by the King. At present this is King Zwelitini. (InkosiZwelitini). He appoints regional izinkosi to represent him. Then under these minor kings come the izinduna who assist the inkosi. Finally, and most problematically, there are the Isibonda, who are councillors appointed by whatever political party won the latest regional election. To summarise:

POWER DYNAMICS OF RURAL AREAS IN Kwazulu NATAL

[Ukugwaza]

Ingonyama Trust

Amakosi

Izinduna

Izibonda

The problem is that there is an accepted practise of ukugwaza, which politely translated would be rendered as ‘token of appreciation’ or in more robust terms ‘a bribe’

The King of the Zulu nation only deals with the higher echelons of the National Government. Nobody would think of bribing the King but if I wanted to institute this proposed project I would have to start with the principal Induna who currently, I am told, needs to be ukugwaziled with one bottle of Jonny Walker Red Label whisky. In gratitude for this token of appreciation he will then introduce me to the local Inkosi. I would have to explain the project and outline the advantages for the local crafters. I would then need to produce two bottles of Red Label whisky (again, I am informed that this is currently the ‘going rate’). With approval having been gained from both the indunas and the Inkosi, I thought naively that I could then enter the rural areas to hold meetings and training sessions for resin casting the proposed small figures or any other that the rural crafters thought would be more appropriate for the local market. But, I had failed to take account of the last gatekeeper on the list, the isibonda. They presented the greatest hurdle to implementation of my plan because these councillors, as political appointees, were not interested in gologo‘bomvu (whisky) or gologo‘mhlophe (Vodka). I was authoritatively informed that they would require cash up front and a share in the profits of the enterprise. As there would only be rather slender profits, if these were to be shared with someone who had done nothing to generate the artefacts, then this would act a huge disincentive to those who the project was meant to benefit and this dealt a deathblow to the project.

Like many others before me, I had failed to start with the socio-political realities of the region and, had the project gone ahead as originally planned, I would have been attempting to graft

my liberal Eurocentric notions onto a deep rural collective with their own set of moral imperatives operating in a well-established social order very different from that operating in my own urban context.

I had made a costly miscalculation and I have those, who enlightened me in time, to thank for steering me away from making a far costlier mistake.