

## Chapter 2: Raw Materials and the *Imbongolo* Mat-Making Frame

### Introduction

In an attempt to reconstruct the advancement of mat-making technology in Swaziland, this chapter discusses six aspects of the technology, aspects largely determined by information gathered from interviews conducted with 14 Swazi mat-makers. First, there is the acquisition of raw materials in relation to the customary laws that govern grass cutting in Swaziland and the taboos and beliefs associated with non-adherence to this practice, as well as an outline of the geographical locations of popular grass types and their uses. Second, the old method of handmade grass mats is described and the experiences of several mat-makers are compared; this is particularly important for establishing a cultural and historical sequence in Swaziland, and establishes reasons for the adoption of the *Imbongolo* frame by contemporary mat-makers (a brief reference is made to an early method of mat and string making amongst the *Zulu* neighbouring group). Third, there is the importance of string as a vital agent for binding the grasses; the old method of making string using natural fibres and the recent acquisition of nylon string is discussed. Fourth, the chapter looks at the acquisition of sweet paper and other plastic materials. Fifth, the different types of patronage for the grass mats are established. Sixth and finally, a detailed focus explains the technological advancement made in recent years in the process of grass mat-making in Swaziland. A contemporary innovation called the *Imbongolo* that perhaps has its origins in Mozambique has radically changed the way grass mats are being made, thus marking a significant shift in the production of both old and new types of mats. The *Imbongolo* is a mat-making frame that is not mechanised but is manoeuvred by hand and uses discarded torch batteries. It is a frame not commonly used by textile weavers, the crucial difference being that no warp and weft are at play; instead, a binding action is employed in securing grass strands, using strings held by the torch battery weights. A detailed description of the method of using this

new technology is offered later in this chapter in order to understand stylistic changes and continuity within the current context.

The collection of raw materials for making grass mats has long historical roots, and the emergence of making items using grasses may be related to the Swazi society's interdependence with the surrounding environment and the various raw materials available. The functional utilisation of these 'domestic grasses' was primarily in the form of building shelters and in a range of utilitarian requirements (see Chapter one). Use of natural fibres became an integrated part of Swazi technology and this established a pattern to which various communities adhered in the production of their material culture. A degree of specialisation was possible in a society that had the ability to understand the nature and the limitations of the materials available. The grasses were comparatively easy to utilise by comparison with other natural materials such as wood. Grass was an endlessly renewable source of material under historical land-usage conditions; however, under contemporary circumstances it is cut, gathered or bought in a number of different ways.

Swaziland's diverse climatic conditions have resulted in a rich selection of indigenous grasses. Physically and climatically, Swaziland can be divided into four main geographical areas over which the grass species occur. These are, from west to east, the Highveld, Middleveld, Lowveld and Lubombo regions (Plate 04). This division is based largely on differences in altitude (Murdoch 1968). These distinct regions influence grass locations, as grasses are specific to certain physical terrains such as open plains, swamps, ravine areas, and woodlands (Vilakati 1997). Swaziland has four major watercourses traversing the four ecological zones from west to east. These are the *Komati*, the *Mbuluzi*, the *Usutu* and the *Ngwavuma* Rivers. The *Komati* and the *Usutu* originate in South Africa, while the sources of the *Mbuluzi* and the *Ngwavuma* are in the Highveld of Swaziland (Plate 05). Nearly all the streams and rivers in the Highveld are permanent due to the relatively high

rainfall, while small tributaries in the Lowveld tend to flow only after heavy local rainstorms.

Braun (1988) termed the functional grasses “domestic grasses” and their main concentration is found in the lowveld, which comprises 37% of Swaziland’s total land area. The comparatively low urbanisation of the lowveld may account for this concentration, but the increasing ownership of property in small plots and its use for cultivation has also influenced grass availability. Braun further observed that only limited areas still support the so-called “domestic grasses.” Women now have to travel varying distances in order to obtain the raw materials. This has culminated in a new industry that cuts the grasses and sells to the women at the market place. Urbanisation and industrial development have made increasing demands on the environment; the expanding handicraft industry produces 75% of its products using “domestic grasses.”

Through Marwick (1966), we obtain a historical picture of the utilisation of grasses by the Swazi people:

Grass cutting is seasonal and takes place in mid-winter. Thereafter women will be seen plaiting grass into ropes on their way from one place to another. The main purpose of grass cutting is for new huts or for the repairs of old ones.<sup>1</sup>

Today the average Swazi mat-maker boasts an impressive body of botanical knowledge; the quality of the raw material is carefully selected for the object in mind. Strong resilient grass is needed for sleeping mats and May is the preferred time for cutting grass.<sup>2</sup> Eleven mat-makers confirmed that May is the ideal cutting time; two mat-makers from southern Swaziland cut their supply in June and July, and one mat-

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<sup>1</sup> Marwick, B.A., 1966:62

<sup>2</sup> Also confirmed by Kuper, H. 1947:50, in ‘Seasonal Chart in the Middleveld’

maker in the Piggs Peak area bought her supply of *Lutindzi*.<sup>3</sup> Most mat-makers are not involved in the actual cutting; only seven of the women interviewed cut their own grasses. Five bought their supply, two both cut and bought, and one purchased her grass in Maputo.

There exists a long established custom associated with grass cutting in Swaziland and amongst other groups in southern Africa. Several mat-makers interviewed in Swaziland revealed they observed a proclamation given by the King or their local chief to begin cutting: grass is cut at the time of the sorghum harvest that takes place around May at the beginning of winter. The King, who gives the go-ahead to begin, makes an announcement on Swazi radio. Seven mat-makers disclosed they waited for the pronouncement from the King, three followed a go-ahead from their chief, and two in southern Swaziland usually waited until June and July to cut. According to Ntombane Mdluli, there are women who defy this and travel in the dark, so as not to be detected, their prime motive being financial. There are people appointed by the chief to catch the women who cut before the go-ahead from the King. The penalty is one cow, or the equivalent in money. This can be up to 800 *Emalangen*.<sup>4</sup> Several mat-makers interviewed believe that great misfortune will befall them if they cut grass before May. They are warned that bad weather and thunderstorms will result. During discussions with mat-makers, seven women showed concern about bad weather as the consequences of this action; two believed you would be fined a cow, and one feared arrest. In addition, Ntombane Mdluli believes that *Likhwane* should be cut first, then *Inchoboza*; you cannot cut them together, as the King has stated that if the *Inchoboza* is cut first it will affect the weather.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bikiwe Mamba, (LaNdwandwe) Vusweni, Hereford, Piggs Peak, Hhohho, makes both sleeping and sitting mats and recently began to make floor mats using plaited *Lutindzi*. (pers. comm. 29<sup>th</sup> May 1999)

<sup>4</sup> The price of a cow in 2000 was E800.00, Ntombane Mdluli & Evelyn Fakudze, Luve, (pers comm., 17Aug. 2000, 22 Aug. 2000)

<sup>5</sup> Ntombane Mdluli (laMvila, Mnwenya, Barberton) Luve (pers comm. 17<sup>th</sup> Aug 2000)

A similar taboo exists amongst the *Zulu* against cutting grass from December to April, possibly because many *Zulus* feel that this activity will cause the crops to be destroyed by hail. It is speculated that this prohibition against cutting grass during mid to late summer originated from a disaster that once occurred, but the details of its origins have been lost.<sup>6</sup> Amongst the *Lobedu*, thatching grass may not be cut before the *Modjadji* has given her consent. This restriction reflects the chief's control over an essential resource but is also a practical measure ensuring that the grass is not cut until ripe.<sup>7</sup> Miriam Msithini in *KaNgwane*, does not have to wait for the go-ahead from the Swazi King, but through experience knows the heavy May winds make the grass strong and sturdy.<sup>8</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu, a mat-maker with 30 years of experience, strictly adheres to the royal pronouncement and cuts only once a year. She lives in *Lobamba*, the Royal Capital, and is a member of the *Lutsango*, the King's female regiment; her Chief calls upon her to harvest in the King's fields, and this is followed by the construction of the windbreaks in the royal homestead.<sup>9</sup>

The pre-production preparation for making a grass mat involves the cutting of the grass, its transportation home and drying in the sun for up to three days (Plate 06). Only the longest stems of the grasses are cut, leaving a stump of approximately ten centimetres. The cutting is a hazardous task and gumboots are needed in order to protect the feet from being stabbed by the stumps of grass. This method enables the grass to replenish in the following 12 months. In some cases, the seasonal availability of grasses will restrict their use to certain times of year. *Inchoboza* (*Cyperus marginatus* or *Cyperus articulatus*) and *Likhwane* (*Cyperus immensus* or *Cyperus latifolius*)<sup>10</sup> are the popular grass types used for making sleeping mats. *Inchoboza*,

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<sup>6</sup> Grossert. John, 1968:609)

<sup>7</sup> Davison. P., 1984:68-69 from Krige & Krige 1943:47

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Msithini, Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*. (pers. comm., 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2000) An observation of all her mats made from *Inchoboza* and *Indvuli* clarify this belief; each strand is thick and spongy, precisely the quality needed for making sleeping and sitting mats.

<sup>9</sup> As a member of the *Lutsango*, she is entitled to live in the Lobamba area; she exchanges her labour in lieu of rent. Onoyi Mngometulu, Mahlanya (pers. comm., 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999)

<sup>10</sup> Graham Deall, (Nelspruit), Maguga Dam Project, Piggs Peak, Swaziland. (Email communication, 1999)

(Plate 07) *Likhwane*, (Plate 08) *Umtsala*, and *Indvuli* are all used for making sitting mats. *Indvuli* is found in the great *Usutu* River<sup>11</sup>

*Umtsala* is used for making sitting mats and wall hangings as it lacks the sturdiness needed for sleeping mats. *Umtsala* grows in large clumps next to rocks on the edge of the river, easily found near the river *Mhlambanyatsi*. The extensive use of the *Umtsala* grass type has been revolutionised by mat-makers in the late 1990's and early 2000's as evidenced by the abundant presence of the new composite mats. *Inchoboza* is the preferred grass type for making sleeping mats; it is spongy in texture and rod-like in appearance. It grows up to 120 cm in length and is best cut in its prime in May.

*Likhwane* has a leafy appearance, being essentially a long thin leaf about 8mm wide that folds in half, but without the spongy quality of *Inchoboza*. *Likhwane* is found near the *Mhwawhwalala* and *Mbuluzi* rivers,<sup>12</sup> the Mbabane River,<sup>13</sup> along the river banks near *eDwaleni* power station,<sup>14</sup> near rivers in *Mhlosheni*,<sup>15</sup> beside the *Tse T sisi* and *Lususwana* rivers,<sup>16</sup> rivers in *Kapunga*,<sup>17</sup> the *Ishwadza* and *Black Mbuluzi* rivers<sup>18</sup> in *Malkerns*,<sup>19</sup> and where there are farms.<sup>20</sup> Due to the flatness of *Likhwane*, another strand may be inserted between the folds, thus increasing the width of the sleeping mat.

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<sup>11</sup> Mr Julius Dlamini, ex-Director of the National Archives, SD (pers comm., Oct 1999)

Also recorded by Margaret Shaw in Mbabane, 1962 – *Inchoboza* – commonly used for warps sleeping mats wefts of *Sitsebe*, river grass for roofing (unpublished notes, South African Museum, Cape Town)

<sup>12</sup> Gladys Malambe & Esther Sifundza. (pers comm., 26<sup>th</sup> April 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Jessie Nsibandze (LaDube, Mpolonjeni) Mpolonjeni, (pers comm. 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2002)

<sup>14</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu (LaZwane, Elukwatini) Mahlanya, (pers comm. 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999)

<sup>15</sup> Linah Dlamini (laMkhonza, Zombodze) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct 1999) & Sarafina Dlamini (laNlangamandla, Nkhuguine) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct.1999)

<sup>16</sup> Sibolile Kunene (laDlamini, Mdlangampisi) Lobamba, (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>17</sup> Phumzile Emakhozazana Nkambule (LaLukele, Kaphunga) Emoti, (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec 2000)

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Lomekhuzo Fakudze (LaMdluli, Maphalaleni) Luve, (pers comm. 22<sup>nd</sup> Aug 2000)

<sup>19</sup> Anna Nkambule (La Magagula, Shewula) Emoti (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec 2000)

<sup>20</sup> Ida Msebele (LaShoyisa, Xhosa) Lobamba, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> Oct 1999)

A mat made from *Likhwane* also has a significant application at funerals; both Ntombane Mdluli and Evelyn Fakudze described how such a mat is used to cover the coffin before the soil is laid.<sup>21</sup> *Likhwane* is not found in the *KaNgwane* region of SA where many Swazis live and follow this practice; they use a plain undecorated mat made from any grass type.<sup>22</sup>

On a fully constructed mat, the length of the grass has determined the width of the mat and this varies according to grass types; *Inchoboza* and *Likhwane* can grow up to 150 cm in height and *Umtsala* up to 100 cm. All three grass types are found growing in close proximity to most of the rivers in Swaziland. Both *Inchoboza* and *Likhwane* grow in the swampy areas close to the riverbank and not actually in the water. In addition to *Inchoboza*, *Likhwane* and *Umtsala*, the three most popularly used grass types; experienced mat-makers will also cut a variety of other grasses for making domestic objects. *Libhuma*, a leafy grass type that grows on swampy riverbanks, is not considered strong enough for mat-making but only suitable for basket making.<sup>23</sup> *Inkhosana*, a wispy and flexible grass type that is twisted and applied in a woven style to make *Emahluto* (beer strainers), grows in close proximity to *Inchoboza* and *Likhwane*.

*Lucashi* is not a river grass, but is usually found in mountainous areas such as *Mdzimba*, *Lubombo* and *Elukwatini* (in *KaNgwane*). It is popularly used for making long brooms and is a vital component for forming the warp strands on the *Sitsebe*; it

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<sup>21</sup> Ntombane Mdluli & Evelyn Fakudze, Luvu, pers comm., 17<sup>th</sup> Aug 2000, 22/8/00

<sup>22</sup> Miriam Msithini (LaMnisi, Ematsara, SA) Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, (pers comm. 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2000). A personal observation of this practice was made at two funerals; the younger brother carried on his head a rolled mat made from *Likhwane* with a soft pillow tied to it as he followed the coffin out of the church (this in earlier days, would have been a headrest that belonged to the deceased). Funeral of Pop Dlamini, All Saints Church, (pers. observation July 1998) At the burial, the coffin is placed in the grave; two layers of short branches are laid across the width of the grave, and the grass mat is spread over the branches. Once this preparation is complete, the process of filling the grave with earth begins. Funeral of Aaron Dlamini, Eluhlendlweni (pers. observation 20<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2005). Marwick (1966) observed another use for a grass mat at funerals: ‘...widows follow behind and walk under a canopy made of a grass mat which is held over them by the women of the neighbourhood’ Marwick 1966:223

<sup>23</sup> *Typha Capensi*, *Typhaceae*, *ibhuma* (Zulu), *bulrush* (English) Van Wyk, B. B Van Oudtshoorn, N. Gericke 2002:264-5

grows up to 150 cm in height.<sup>24</sup> Recently *Lucashi* has been considered suitable for making sitting mats. Each strand is thin and up to four strands have to be grouped together to emulate the thickness of a single strand of *Inchoboza* before they can be secured and formed into a sitting mat.<sup>25</sup>

*Lutindzi* is a mountain grass that is available all year round; mountain springs create moist conditions for it to continue growing in rock pools (Plate 09)<sup>26</sup> It is found in abundance in the *Mdzimba* and *Lubombo* mountains; a short grass, up to 60 cm in height, it is not cut but pulled up by its stumpy roots. It is lightweight and can be carried down in large bundles. Its short length and fragile texture makes it suitable for plaiting to make *Tintsambo*, a rope used for securing thatch, and more recently for making floor mats. It is also used for making *Umtsanyelo*, a short sweeping brush; dyed *Lutindzi* is used for making colourful baskets.<sup>27</sup> Two other grass types are used for making plaited ropes: *Sifunti*, also a mountain grass, is leafy with yellow tones and without the attractive appearance of rope made from *Lutindzi*; *Likhaba*, not a mountain grass, is found growing in large quantity in *Luve* in the Lowveld. *Likhaba* is comparatively thicker than *Lutindzi* but rope made from *Likhaba* tends not to be as strong. Other items made from *Likhaba* include *Sitsebe* (grinding mat) and *Umgibi* (belts for storing grass mats)<sup>28</sup> (Plate 10).

An increasing number of mat-makers both cut and sell grasses; bundles of freshly cut grasses are bought and sold at Manzini Market. *Inchoboza*, *Likhwane*, *Umtsala*, *Lutindzi* and *Luchasi* are available in abundance mostly during the winter. At other

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<sup>24</sup> Information obtained from a broom maker. One bundle of *Lucashi* costs five *Emalangen* (Manzini market 1998)

<sup>25</sup> Miriam Msithini was commissioned by customers in Ermelo who wanted sitting mats made from *Luchasi* for wedding presents. (pers. comm., Dec. 2004)

<sup>26</sup> *Lutindzi* is not a matting grass, but used for making plaited ropes, brooms and floor mats.

<sup>27</sup> Jenny Thorne started Gone Rural in 1992; a small development company dedicated to helping rural women achieve more economic independence. The company employs over 700 rural women in areas such as *Gebeni* Mountain in the region of Manzini. The women collect the mountain grass *Lutindzi*, that grows in abundance and that the cows will not eat. They trade this freshly picked grass for coloured grass that has been dyed in Malkerns at Gone Rural. (Zoe-Dean Smith, Manager, Gone Rural. Brochure, 2001)

<sup>28</sup> Ntombane Mdluli (laMvila, Mnwenya, Barberton) Luve (pers comm. 17<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2000)

times, sales are sporadic. Elderly mat-makers who cannot walk to the river to cut their own grass will buy from women in their village. One bundle is enough for a full size sleeping mat and costs 40 *Emalangen*. A bundle of *Lucashi* costs five *Emalangen*.<sup>29</sup> Well organised mat-makers think ahead and store enough bundles of grass to last up to a year or longer, as in the case of Linah Dlamini who had a store of *Likhwane* from 1978 (Plate 11).<sup>30</sup> Several mat-makers have married and moved to an area where *Inchoboza* and *Likhwane* are not available; they maintain their link with their natal home and regularly transfer the essential grasses to their married homes with the help of relatives or neighbours with transport.<sup>31</sup> Mat-maker Gladys Malambe<sup>32</sup> buys her supply of *Inchoboza* from Malkerns. Esther Sifundza buys *Inchoboza* from Maputo, Mozambique; a bundle costing 30 *Emalangen* would be enough for one sleeping mat.<sup>33</sup> *Inchoboza* is found in the Mbabane River,<sup>34</sup> Malkerns,<sup>35</sup> the Lobamba area,<sup>36</sup> and found in abundance along the rivers in *Mhlosheni*,<sup>37</sup> the *Tse Tsisi* River, the *Lusushwana* River,<sup>38</sup> in *Kaphunga*,<sup>39</sup> and near the *Ishwadza* River, a tributary of the *Black Mbuluzi* River in *Luve*.<sup>40</sup>

Once the raw materials have been gathered the process of assembling the grass strands need to be considered. String has played a vital role in the construction of a mat, and historically various types of string have been used for securing strands of grass together. Initially, grass was tied together using other strands of grass; this method did not produce strong sturdy mats. Other possibilities were investigated and, to begin with, fibres obtained from the bark of the *Luhlakanay* tree were used. The

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<sup>29</sup> Price of a bundle at Manzini Market in April 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Linah Dlamini (laMkhonza, Zombodze) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)

<sup>31</sup> Jessie Nsibandze's natal home is Bethany; she lives in Mpolonjeni in the highveld where *Inchoboza* and *Likhwane* are not available. (pers comm., 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2002)

<sup>32</sup> Gladys Malambe, Shewula

<sup>33</sup> Esther Sifundza Shewula

<sup>34</sup> Jessie Nsibandze, Mpolonjeni

<sup>35</sup> Anna Nkambule, Emoti

<sup>36</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu, Mahlanya

<sup>37</sup> Linah Dlamini & Sarafina Dlamini, Mhlosheni

<sup>38</sup> Sibolile Dlamini, Lobamba & Ida Msebele, Lobamba

<sup>39</sup> Phumizile Nkambule, (Kaphunga) Emoti

<sup>40</sup> Evelyn Lomekhuzo Fakudze, Luve

process was lengthy and involved soaking long strips of bark in the river for about a week, until rotten. The pulp was then washed away and the remaining fibres were dried and rolled into lengths of string.<sup>41</sup> Bryant (1949) described a similar technique of making string among the *Zulu*. The bark from *isiSanto* coast bush of the *iNtozwane* shrubs (*lasiosiphon anthylloides* and *Peddeia Africana*) was stripped, sun dried and pounded with a stone to loosen the strands. The ends of two pieces of fibre were twisted and rolled with the flat palm on a bare thigh and made into string.<sup>42</sup>

Sisal (*Agave Americana L, haliboma* in *SiSwati*) is a natural fibre that appeared in Swaziland via Mozambique where it was introduced by the Portuguese.<sup>43</sup> The sisal plant is a bitter tasting weed that requires very little water; it was originally planted to fence off homesteads from grazing goats and other domestic animals. The preparation for making sisal string involves cutting the leaves and scraping off the pulp using a metal object. Next the fibres are washed and dried followed by the twisting of several strands of fibre into two-ply string.<sup>44</sup> The process of making sisal string is time-consuming and mostly popular amongst older mat-makers. Mats collected since 1996 reveal five samples in the General Group made using sisal string, all made by experienced mat-makers. Two floor mats made entirely from plaited *Lutindzi* and secured with handmade sisal string were made by Bikiwe Mamba from the Piggs Peak area. Three mats were collected from the Manzini area that includes two mats made entirely by hand and not on the *Imbongolo* frame. In southern Swaziland nylon string is not easily available and Sarafina Dlamini and Linah Dlamini both use sisal string.<sup>45</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu who lives in the Middleveld both makes and uses sisal string for her mats.<sup>46</sup> Dyed sisal string is now popularly used for making colourful baskets and there are women who sell only sisal

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<sup>41</sup> Ntombane Mdluli (laMvila,) Luve (pers comm. 17<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2000)

<sup>42</sup> Bryant. A.T., 1949:199-201

<sup>43</sup> Shaw. M., 1992:197 collected a mat made using sisal string in the Ngwavuma area in 1962.

<sup>44</sup> Sheila Freemantle, Tintzaba Crafts, Piggs Peake, (Pers comm. April 99)

<sup>45</sup> Linah Dlamini (laMkhonza, Zombodze) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct 1999)

Sarafina Dlamini (laNlangamandla, Nkhuguine) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct 1999)

<sup>46</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu (LaZwane, Elukwatini) Mahlanya, (pers comm. 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999)

string at Manzini Market.<sup>47</sup> A project in the northwestern part of Swaziland employs rural women to make elaborate baskets from dyed sisal string.<sup>48</sup>

White nylon string is the preferred type amongst the majority of mat-makers due to its easy availability and durable quality. One bundle of white nylon string costs 60 *Emalangeni* and is sold by numerous women traders who only deal with nylon string at Manzini Market.<sup>49</sup> Sibolile Kunene, Phumzile Nkambule, Jessie Nsibabdze, and Evelyn Fakudze all bought their nylon string from Manzini Market; Fakudze also makes her own sisal string.<sup>50</sup> Gladys Malambe prefers to buy her supply of nylon string from her grandmother in Shewula.<sup>51</sup> Esther Sifundza has an outlet in Matsapha for her nylon string.<sup>52</sup> For a number of mat-makers virtually all the raw materials are free; if, for instance, they are unable to make the sisal string, or cannot afford the nylon string, they carefully unravel the string from a maize flour sack<sup>53</sup> (Plate 12). A significant number of mat-makers prefer to use nylon string whether unravelled from a sack or bought at the market.<sup>54</sup> Recently in Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, Miriam Msithini has revolutionised the use of coloured string to create geometric patterns in a variety of ways (see Chapter six).

A majority of mat-makers interviewed confirmed that, before the arrival of the *Imbongolo*, they made mats by hand. The initial preparation of the grass was the

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<sup>47</sup> In Mozambique and the South African lowveld, numerous sisal plantations manufacture sisal string on a large-scale. In Swaziland, sisal string is made by women on a small scale.

<sup>48</sup> Tintzaba Crafts, a rural crafts project run by Sheila Freemantle in Piggs Peak, who has worked with women in rural areas of northern Hhohho region since 1985. Over 500 women are currently involved in the development project, producing a large range of *titja*, woven sisal baskets. (pers. comm., April 1999)

<sup>49</sup> (Pers observation, Manzini Market, April 2000)

<sup>50</sup> Sibolile Dlamini (laKunene, Mdlangampisi) Lobamba, (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001), Phumzile Emakhozazana Nkambule (LaLukele, Kaphunga) Emoti, (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2000), Jessie Nsibandze (LaDube) Mpolonjeni, (pers comm. 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2002), Evelyn Lomekhuzo Fakudze (LaMdluli, Maphalaleni) Luve, (pers comm. 22<sup>nd</sup> Aug. 2000)

<sup>51</sup> Gladys Malambe (la Sifundza, Shewula) Shewula, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>52</sup> Esther Sifundza (laNkhosi, Lozitha) Shewula, (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>53</sup> The sacks are also sold at Manzini Market and cost one *lilangeni* each.

<sup>54</sup> From a total of 209 mats in the General Collection, 179 mats show the use of white nylon string, 30 mats show a variety of coloured nylon and cotton string and sisal and rolled palm string. (Information generated from the spreadsheet in Appendix A1-A34)

same; the grass was collected and dried for up to three days. The assembling and binding of the grass strands was laboriously done by hand using two lengths of string, one at the rear and one at the front. The space needed to construct a mat was modest; it was possible to sit in a courtyard, alone or as a social activity. As is the case with many contemporary mat-makers, they would organise an area indoors.

Sitting on the ground with legs stretched out in front, strands of grass would be laid out on the mat-maker's thighs (Plate 13).<sup>55</sup> Beginning at the bottom horizontal edge of the mat and using a long length of string, loops would be formed at regular intervals. This would lay the foundation for the vertical string that would form lines lengthwise along the mat. To form the surface area of the mat the string from the rear would be brought forward and the string from the front would be taken back, crossing and turning at the point of contact with the grass. This binding action would secure each grass strand in place. The action was repeated until half the mat was bound, approximately a metre lengthwise (a comfortable half-way reachable distance). The mat would then be turned around and the whole process repeated for the other half, both horizontally and vertically.<sup>56</sup>

The constant handling of the grass strands whilst securing them with the string caused a considerable amount of movement, resulting in irregular lines of vertical strings, not straight and taut as on the current mats made on the *Imbongolo*. The sturdy quality of the mat is dependent on the tightness of the binding. An example of a Swazi grass mat made in 1941 seen at MuseumAfrica is the earliest record to date of a handmade grass mat. The irregularity of the vertical strings offers clues that it was handmade; the lines appear neither straight nor taut. It is described as a child's sleeping mat made from *Inchoboza* and bark string.<sup>57</sup> Another example from 1970 offers similar

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<sup>55</sup> Linocut by Austin Hleza. (Reproduced from Gone Rural brochure)

<sup>56</sup> Miriam Msithini (LaMnisi, Ematsara, SA) Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, (pers comm. 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2000)

<sup>57</sup> MueumAfrica, Johannesburg. Specimen No. 42/468, Child's sleeping mat. Size: 43X47, *Inchoboza*, collected at Lobamba in Dec 1941.

clues to its handmade quality.<sup>58</sup> An earlier pictorial record by Junod (1938) shows a young *Swazi* man carrying a rolled up sleeping mat with a headrest on top ( Plate 14). Clearly distinguishable as a mat made from *Likhwane*, well-worn and likely to be handmade by an experienced mat-maker, the clues lie in the narrow spacing of vertical strings<sup>59</sup> (see Chapter four).

Early writing on the *Zulu* neighbouring group contains description of their mat-making skills. For a purely comparative reason it is significant to note that they employed a mat-making technique that concealed the vertical strings. The grass was pierced and joined strand by strand, creating hidden verticals lines at regular intervals. Bryant (1949) described how round stems of the *iNcema* or strips of *iKwani* were 'sewn' that is, a hole was pierced through the grass with an awl. Furthermore, *Zulu* men were involved in the mat-making process.<sup>60</sup> Current evidence of the pierced technique being applied by mat-makers in certain parts of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, and the northwest part of Mozambique is available.<sup>61</sup>

All mat-makers interviewed attest to the fact that using the *Imbongolo* frame is by far the most efficient and speedy method of mat-making. The time required to complete an average size sleeping mat varies considerably. Full-time, it can take up to three

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<sup>58</sup> Specimen No. 70/1931, sleeping mat, size, 150X76, *Inchoboza*, collected at Mbabane market in Oct 1970. (Both personal observations, MuseumAfrica, Johannesburg, August 1997.)

<sup>59</sup> Junod, H.P. 1938, *Bantu Heritage*. Junod's caption reads 'a *Swazi* on his travels.' It is likely to be a young participant in the *Incwala*, the first fruit harvest ceremony when young men would carry bundles for their elders such as the one in the photograph. Incidentally this photograph appeared in the *Time of Swaziland* with the caption '...the water party (*bemanti*) members leaving the royal residence...' 4<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2005 (Plate 14a)

<sup>60</sup> Bryant, 1949:199-201

<sup>61</sup> An example is a sitting mat made by Ngwane Zwelithini from KZN, sold by Lindiwe Gwebu, Gundwini (Manzini Market 4<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1999), 155 cm X 74 cm, made from *iNcem* and patterned using strips of dyed grass. It has three narrow, open weave panels of alternate dyed strands, 21 'invisible' vertical lines spaced four cm apart, with edging tightly bound with black sisal string and irregular corners, (a clear disadvantage of the pierced technique, affecting the overall appearance). A similar example was collected in Chokwe, Mozambique. The full size sleeping mat, made from *Likhwane*, has eight invisible vertical two-ply sisal strings 12 cm apart, is not sturdy but slips from side to side when placed on the floor. The vertical strings cannot hold the mat firmly in place. The grass strands appear flattened, partly due to the use of *Likhwane* and the pressure of being pierced. Visible edging is tightly bound with sisal string. (collected by Chris Davies, 1999, Chokwe, Mozambique)

days; part-time, up to two weeks. A medium-size sitting mat takes two days full-time and up to one week part-time. A small mat measuring 80 cm by 50 cm may take a day full-time or two or three days part-time. The mat-makers in *Emoti* who make small placemats take a day to produce ten <sup>62</sup> (Plate 15). These experienced mat-makers ensure that their work displays quality and technical excellence. For the younger mat-makers with their financial motives, this speedy process means guaranteed supplementary earnings; they are able to produce small wall hangings relatively fast for sale in Manzini Market. Whether a mat-maker is experienced or not is detectable from the appearance of the mat; ‘single stitch angled’ edging and the wide spacing of vertical strings offer these clues. As discussed in Chapter four the distance between the vertical strings is related to its function; sleeping and sitting mats would have a greater number of vertical strings. A new composite wall hanging would not have closely spaced vertical strings, as its function does not require it to be continuously handled.

Through the interview process, it was possible to establish different types of patronage, as mat-makers revealed they had a range of customers for their grass mats. However, only three mat-makers interviewed formally were involved in the production of mats using the contemporary sweet paper; the rest produced mats made from grass only. A majority of mat-makers sell regularly at Manzini Market. Their customers are mostly Swazis, occasionally tourists and Swazi traders. Many elderly Swazis prefer to use a sleeping mat instead of a bed and grass mats are much sought-after including at times of weddings for the traditional component of present-giving. Sitting mats are owned by many urban Swazis, used for special occasions, and are seen to maintain a link with the homestead life and elderly relatives. <sup>63</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu has a variety of customers that include Swazis, tourists, and Zulu and Johannesburg traders. <sup>64</sup> Both Anna Nkambule and Phumzile Nkambule are commissioned by Justin Thorne, director of ‘House on Fire,’ to make small

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<sup>62</sup> Information generated through interviews with 14 mat-makers between 1999-2004

<sup>63</sup> Nondumiso Qwabe, Manzini, (pers. comm., April 1999)

<sup>64</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu (LaZwane, Elukwatini) Mahlanya, (pers comm. 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999)

placemats.<sup>65</sup> (The patronage for the new composite mats is discussed in Chapter five.)

At present, the grass mat holds a position different from its historical counterpart and it was inevitable that plastic material should have found its way into Swazi mat-making in the 1990's and the early 2000's. Today, in addition to the collection of grass and the choice of string, for several mat-makers the acquisition of sweet paper and other plastic materials has become a vital consideration. This new material may be bought or obtained in a number of ways, either through an established network of women who work at the Cadbury's Sweet Factory located at the Matsapha Industrial Site, or women in the Matsapha area who sell only sweet paper, either in ribbon form on a roll or in metre wide sheets. This is confirmed by a number of mat-makers.<sup>66</sup> More recently, the sweet paper, either in rolls or strips, has been found on sale at Manzini Market.<sup>67</sup> Sweet paper is not easily available in the areas not connected to the vicinity of the Manzini and Matsapha radiuses, however. Both mat-makers Anna Nkambule and Phumzile Nkambule who live in *Emoti* are an exception; they have links with women in Matsapha who supply them with sweet paper.<sup>68</sup>

Set against this historical and current background the introduction of the radical mat-making frame called the *Imbongolo* is significant. This very modest-looking invention has played a key role in speeding up the process of mat-making in Swaziland. The word *Imbongolo* in *SiSwati* means 'donkey.' It is unclear who gave

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<sup>65</sup> House on Fire, a huge art theatre, craft shop complex in Malkerns that sells contemporary Swazi art, run by Justin Thorne.

<sup>66</sup> Margaret Thwala, Bhunya, (pers com., Manzini Market 29<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1998), Onoyi Mngometulu (LaZwane, Elukwatini) Mahlanya, (pers comm. 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999), Phumzile LaMdluli, Bhunya (pers comm., Manzini Market 10<sup>th</sup> July 1999), Sithembile LaDlamini, Undwini, (pers comm., Manzini Market, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2000), Anna Nkambule (La Magagula, Shewula) Emoti (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec 2000), Phumzile Emakhozazana Nkambule (LaLukele, Kaphunga) Emoti, (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec 2000), Sithembile Mayiesela, Elwandle, (pers comm., Manzini Market, 9<sup>th</sup> Aug 2001), Mamsi Maziya, Moyeni, (pers comm., Manzini Market 16<sup>th</sup> May 2002), Jessie Nsibandze (LaDube, Mpolonjeni) Mpolonjeni, (pers comm. 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2002)

<sup>67</sup> Personal observation, Manzini Market between 2000 and 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Anna Nkambule and Phumzile Nkambule are commissioned by House on Fire to make placemats using colourful sweet paper.

this mat-making frame this name; it is perhaps due to the metaphorical connection of ‘stationary like a donkey,’ or because it has four legs and emulates ‘working like a donkey.’ Whatever the reason, it is evident that the *Imbongolo* has revolutionised the process of mat-making and has made a significant contribution towards the production of innovative grass mats in Swaziland.

Visually, the frame resembles another object with bovine features, a very large Swazi wooden headrest, *Sicamelo* (Plate 16). There are four legs, two at each end forming an A-shaped stand. The apex of the legs supports a horizontal beam, a plank of wood placed depth-side up. The depth of the beam measures between three and four centimetres, and width between 12 and 14 cm. The horizontal length of the *Imbongolo* varies from 100 to 200 cm, the smallest to the largest. Its approximate height is between 40 cm and 50 cm, which enable the mat-maker to stretch her legs comfortably underneath the frame (Plate 17). Along the horizontal beam (the spine), there are straight cuts at right angles to the beam. These cuts or incisions are placed parallel to each other at regular intervals (Plate 18). The actual space between the cuts varies: Linah Dlamini explained how she uses a matchstick to mark the equal distance between each cut;<sup>69</sup> Miriam Msithini prefers to have narrower spaces between them (Plate 19). An approximate distance of two centimetres between each cut enables her to vary the spacing of the vertical strings from four to six centimetres, or even two to four centimetres, as required by a particular design<sup>70</sup> (see Chapter six). A general observation of mats collected since 1996 has confirmed that, on average, there is a distance of four centimetres between each vertical string (the length of a matchstick). The cuts on the beam are approximately one centimetre deep and about three millimetres wide, enough space to hold two pieces of string side by side (Plate 20). This forms the essential structure of the *Imbongolo* frame.

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<sup>69</sup> Linah Dlamini, Mhlosheni. Shiselweni, (pers. comm., 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)

<sup>70</sup> Miriam Msithini, Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, (pers comm., 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2000)

Three essential factors need to be considered in relation to the construction of a grass mat. Firstly, there are two sets of elements at play: grass and string. These two interconnect with each other at right angles and at regular intervals. Secondly, interconnecting the two sets is made easier if one of them, the vertical strings, is held in tension. Thirdly, the interconnection can be made easier still by a device to separate the two vertical strings needed to secure the strands of grass together. At the simplest level, the grass mat consists of horizontal strands of grass held together with vertical rows of string that create a striped effect lengthways along the mat surface. In order to form the stripes that are the vertical lines, two pieces of string are needed, one piece at the rear, and one at the front. These two pieces of string are held firmly in the grooves that form the cuts on the spine of the *Imbongolo*. A weight is attached to one end of each string in order to create and control the tension. The use of 1.5v torch batteries as weights suffices here (Plate 21). A general observation during fieldwork confirmed the preference for 1.5v torch batteries by the mat-makers, probably because they provide both sufficient weight and easy handling.

To begin the intricate task of ‘stringing’ the *Imbongolo*, a piece of string approximately two metres long is cut. Second, it is folded into two equal lengths. Third, beginning with one end of the string, a loop is formed and tied around the torch battery. Fourth, a succession of loops follows. To make these, the battery is held in the left hand, gripped by the thumb; using the right hand, the remaining string is wrapped around the battery and the fingers, forming a loop. The loop is placed onto the battery, from right to left, and the remaining string is pulled until the loop is tight around the battery. The formation of a series of interconnecting loops is not a winding action. This procedure is repeated until one battery is loaded with nearly half of the original length of string, stopping about 15 cm from the middle. This whole process is repeated for the second half of the string onto a second torch battery. The two batteries are held together by the string but separated by a distance of approximately 30cm. The middle part of the exposed string between the two batteries is slotted in one of the cuts on the spine of the *Imbongolo*. This whole process is

repeated until each cut holds a battery suspended by approximately 15 cm of string on either side. The cuts at each end form the edging of a mat and an experienced mat-maker will use two pieces of string to create a ‘chain stitch’ or ‘double stitch angled’ effect in order to strengthen the edge of the mat to prevent fraying. (However, a significant number of mat-makers have adopted the ‘single stitch angled’ effect for the new composite wall hangings; this requires only two batteries.) Consequently, to create the former effect, four batteries are needed at each end, two at the rear, and two at the front. The *Imbongolo* is ‘strung’ and ready for the process of mat-making to begin.

Each 1.5v battery weighs 100 grams. Therefore, the weight of a fully ‘strung’ *Imbongolo* increases by an excess of six kilograms in addition to the heavy wooden structure. An average size-sleeping mat measuring 192 cm X 110 cm may have up to 30 ‘vertical’ lines plus double strings for the edging; thus 66 batteries are required.<sup>71</sup>

A fully ‘strung’ *Imbongolo* stands with torch batteries suspended on either side of each cut ready for the process of mat-making to begin (Plate 22). The dry strands of grass need to be supple; this is achieved by dipping the strands in water just before use. The first row consists of two strands of grass, secured at regular intervals consistent with the cuts on the spine. This is done by placing the strands of grass along the spine of the *Imbongolo*, ensuring that the ends of the grass reach past the two sets of torch batteries at each end. The strands are held directly in front of the one centimetre cut just above the string. The hanging battery facing the mat-maker is picked up and the string is wrapped around the grass from right to left and brought up again (Plate 23). Holding the battery with the right hand and firmly holding the grass with the left, the string is directed through the cut and the battery is placed on the other side. The battery from the rear is brought forward through the same cut. This action is repeated until the first row is completed. The edging, however, needs

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<sup>71</sup> Information generated from the spreadsheet for the General Group of mats (Appendix A1-A34)

separate attention. Using both pieces of string to bind the grass they are passed to the rear between the two strings that are brought forward; when this process is repeated for the second row, a 'chain stitch' effect is created. To create a 'double angled stitch' effect, the action of a normal vertical string is repeated using two strings placed very closely together. Subsequently, upon completion of each row, the edging is always allocated this special attention. In the case of the new composite wall hangings, the edging does not necessitate strengthening due to its inactive function, though samples collected do reveal the use of either a 'chain stitch' or 'double stitch angled' (see Chapter four).

For the second row, two strands of grass are placed above the length of the first row and held in place using the left hand. The right hand picks up the battery dangling from the second cut and passes the string to the rear. The rear string is brought forward through the same cut. Once the strands of grass are firmly held in place, the whole process begins to speed up. The right hand passes the string backwards and the left hand brings the string forward. A very careful manipulation of the two strings causes the strands of grass to be held firmly in place. The front string follows a straight path through the cut, passes right of the other piece and hangs at the back. The rear string comes forward, passes left of the other piece and hangs at the front. These two sets of elements, grass and string, are made to interlace with each other at regular intervals, at almost right angles. It is during this exchange of strings that a cross over effect is created, actually securing the grass in place (Plate 24). A general view of the vertical line shows dashes of exposed string across the width of the strands of grass held in place. A closer view would actually reveal that the string crosses the width of the grass at approximately 45° angles. The batteries dangle from each of the cuts (two at each end). Furthermore, an even length of string is maintained by releasing the loops from each battery at regular intervals (Plate 25).

The thickness of the grass strands contributes towards spongy quality of the mat. The visible width of an average strand of *Inchoboza* is approximately five millimetres and

nearly 800 strands of *Inchoboza* (double strands per row as the strands are laid together with a slight overlap) are used for a full-size sleeping mat measuring approximately two metres in length.

The grass mat-making process is dissimilar to weaving and it is instructive at this stage to establish the differences. Shaw (1992) explained that “woven work may be flat; the two sets of elements are called warp and weft; the warps being the straight, passive elements, and the wefts active elements that are woven across the warps. Weft is one of the elements that cross the warp in woven work.”<sup>72</sup> Conversely, during the process of mat-making, the term ‘warp’ is not applicable, as the vertical elements are the active ones controlled by the torch batteries. The horizontal elements, the strands of grass, therefore lie passively and two vertical strings actively secure and bind these strands of grass. One could argue that the grass forms the ‘warp;’ however, the string element does not perform the essential ‘over-one-under-one’ action that is crucial to the weaving process. The difference in the two techniques is based on the striped effect created running lengthwise along the mat, whereas in woven work the warp and the weft are tightly placed together. Therefore the process adopted by the grass mat-makers may be described as ‘binding’ and not weaving. Furthermore, the consistent resting of the two vertical strings in the incised grooves at regular intervals and the equal weight of the torch batteries contribute towards maintaining an even taut tension in the ‘binding’ process.<sup>73</sup>

Upon completion of the grass mat, the whole mat is lifted off the *Imbongolo* and laid flat; the remainder of the string is removed from the batteries (Plate 26). The last row of grass is secured through a process of ‘backstitching’ by pushing through the short lengths (approximately eight centimetres) of vertical string backwards along the completed vertical lines. Finally, using a sharp knife, the grass strands are trimmed within approximately five millimetres of the row of edging.

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<sup>72</sup> Shaw, E.M., 1992:213.

<sup>73</sup> A single vertical line is *libanga*, more than one line - *emabanga*. (pers comm., Ntombane Mdluli and Selinah Mdluli, Luve 22<sup>nd</sup> Aug. 2000)

The technical application of using the *Imbongolo* has caught on rapidly amongst *Swazi* mat-makers. It has been difficult to ascertain neither its origin nor its age. An attempt has been made through interviews with mat-makers to establish the origin of the *Imbongolo* and, through recognition of its pictorial citing amongst other groups in South Africa, to determine some clarification regarding its age.

The majority of mat-makers interviewed attributed the introduction of the *Imbongolo* to other women either in the neighbourhood or villages nearby. However, they were uncertain about its origin. Ntombane Mdluli, a mat-maker from Luve with over 53 years of mat-making experience, had only used the *Imbongolo* for two years; although she had possessed an *Imbongolo* frame since 1997, she had not known how to use it. She first heard about its existence whilst gathered at the Chief's kraal for a meeting, where she overheard other women discussing the *Imbongolo*. Eventually a mat-maker from a village about six kilometres away demonstrated its use. Ntombane Mdluli speculated that the *Imbongolo* might be about ten years old, and confirmed that it had certainly speeded up the process of mat-making.<sup>74</sup>

Miriam Msithini, with over 36 years of mat-making experience, started to use the *Imbongolo* about 13 years ago, but was unsure of its origin; she had seen women in her village use it and bought the frame at the local market.<sup>75</sup> It was sold without the cuts on the spine; Miriam Msithini made the cuts herself, and her mats display narrow spacing between the vertical strings, approximately two centimetres apart. The spacing of these cuts enables her to create many geometrical patterns using repeat motifs (see Chapter six).

Anna Nkambule has used the *Imbongolo* for 30 years, Esther Sifundza for four years, Ida Msebele for 30 years and Sibolile Kunene for 16 years; they all believed it came

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<sup>74</sup> Ntombane Mdluli, Luve, (pers comm., 17<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2000)

<sup>75</sup> Miriam Msithini, Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, (pers. comm., 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2000)

from Mozambique and had either met Tsonga women at Manzini Market or were directly taught by them.<sup>76</sup> Sarafina Dlamini and Linah Dlamini have both used the *Imbongolo* frame for the past 12 years and assume it was invented in Mhlanga, an area beyond Nhlangano in southern Swaziland.<sup>77</sup>

Bikiwe Mamba has used the *Imbongolo* for ten years and attributes its origin to *KaNgwane*, Phumzile Nkambule has used it for 15 years and believes it came from Kwa-Zulu Natal; Evelyn Fakudze has used it for ten years and also thinks it came from South Africa.<sup>78</sup> Jessie Ndsibandze has been using it for 20 years and believes it was invented at the Matsapha Handicraft Project workshop.<sup>79</sup> Gladys Malambe has used the *Imbongolo* for only a year and Onoyi Mngometulu for 15 years;<sup>80</sup> they were both unsure of its origin. Both Ida Msebele and Anna Nkambule claimed to have used it for 30 years, which would place its first use during the 1970's.

An example of a similar mat-making frame is found amongst the Lobedu. Davison (1984) explained: "making sleeping-mats on a vertical wooden frame is a recent practice, which seems to have been introduced by Tsonga-speakers. Grooves are made at regular spaces along the horizontal beam of the frame to mark the position of the strings that are tied to the first length of sedge. Bundles of sedge are twined together with the strings until a mat is made. The strings are weighted with stones to keep the mat in position and the tension even. This is a much quicker way of making

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<sup>76</sup> Anna Nkambule (La Magagula, Shewula) Emoti (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2000), Esther Sifundza (laNkhosi, Lozitha) Shewula, (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001), Ida Msebele (LaShoyisa, Xhosa) Lobamba, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> Oct.1999), Sibolile Dlamini (laKunene, Mdlangampisi) Lobamba, (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>77</sup> Linah Dlamini (laMkhonza, Zombodze) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999), Sarafina Dlamini (laNlangamandla, Nkhuguine) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)

<sup>78</sup> Bikiwe Mamba, (LaNdwandwe) Vusweni, Herefords, Piggs Peak, Hhohho, (pers comm. 29<sup>th</sup> May 1999), Phumzile Emakhozazana Nkambule (LaLukele, Kaphunga) Emoti, (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2000), Evelyn Lomekhuzo Fakudze (LaMdluli, Maphalaleni) Luve, (pers comm. 22<sup>nd</sup> Oct. 2000)

<sup>79</sup> Jessie Nsibandze (LaDube, Mpolonjeni) Mpolonjeni, (pers comm. 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2002)

<sup>80</sup> Gladys Malambe (la Sifundza, Shewula) Shewula, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> April 2001), Onoyi Mngometulu (LaZwane, Elukwatini) Mahlanya, (pers comm. 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999)

mats than the traditional method.”<sup>81</sup> This gives a date of pre-1984, at least for the *Imbongolo*; but, as mentioned above, it is probably much older.

The technology of using a wooden frame among the Zulu is shown in Cilliers (1998); the weights are difficult to define except as oblong shapes wrapped in paper.<sup>82</sup> In a publication on the Ndebele, a wooden frame is shown with blocks used as weights; they appear to be either bars of soap or have been made from wood (Plate 27).<sup>83</sup>

It is interesting to note the use of the torch batteries as weights by the Swazi mat-makers, a vital component of using the *Imbongolo* frame. Once again it is difficult to determine the origin of its introduction. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that many of the rural areas are not electrified, but dependent on candles and torches for light and wood for fuel. With an increasing and efficient transport system opening up to the rural areas, essential and luxury items were introduced; one such item was torch batteries. The non-biodegradable characteristic of the batteries contributed to their accumulation in the homesteads; they were adopted by very inventive mat-makers as weights. Several mat-makers revealed they had used stones prior to torch batteries. However, the rough surface of the stones caused the string to break. Next, smoother stones were used and it was important to find stones of equal weights in order to keep the tension of the vertical strings even. The transition from long pieces of stone to the 1.5v batteries was gradual; Ida Soyisa changed to batteries about 12 years ago.<sup>84</sup>

Although the popular use of the 1.5v torch batteries appears extremely inventive, a disadvantage was noticeable whilst interviewing Evelyn Fakudze<sup>85</sup> (Plate 28). A number of batteries were covered with greaseproof paper, the packaging from

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<sup>81</sup> Davison, P., 1984:84

<sup>82</sup> Cilliers, C. (edit.) 1998:13. (A limited number of Zulu examples have been collected; they reveal taut vertical strings as a result of using the *Imbongolo* frame).

<sup>83</sup> Cilliers, C. (edit.), 1998:19

<sup>84</sup> Ida Msebele (LaShoyisa, Xhosa) Lobamba, (pers. comm., 26th Oct. 1999)

<sup>85</sup> Evelyn Fakudze, Luve, (pers comm., 22<sup>nd</sup> Aug. 2000)

candles; others were wrapped in pieces of rags. This was necessary in order to reduce contact between the string and the leaking substance from the batteries that caused the string to break. Battery acid is highly corrosive and can cause skin irritation; additionally, the lead cladding on batteries is poisonous. Even though the rough surface of the stones had a less harmful effect, the use of the 1.5v torch batteries has become indispensable for every mat-maker using the *Imbongolo* frame.

It is interesting to note that, among the Baule weavers, the weaving loom is highly decorated and weaving is a public activity. Vogel (1997) observed:

The two heddles of a frame hang from a beautiful carved wooden pulley, one of the most public and often-decorated object types. Weavers, always men, do not work in the courtyard but out in the public place, often in an area where many weavers gather and every passerby greets them. Their frames and weaving are watched and commented upon constantly. Pulleys serve no protective or other purpose and represent no divinity. They are made simply to be attractive and to make people talk about them and their owner. Weavers said that a decorated pulley head moved charmingly from side to side, as if it was shaking its head at the weaver.<sup>86</sup>

For the Swazi mat-makers it is still relatively early to modify the *Imbongolo* frame in the form of decoration. Perhaps the next stage will include a design that allows one to work whilst comfortably seated on a stool or a chair; consequently any further development of the *Imbongolo* frame will probably be for practical reasons rather than aesthetic.

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<sup>86</sup> Vogel, S.M., 1997:272