

## Chapter 7: The Mngometulu Group

### Introduction

The Mngometulu group of mats were collected between May 1998 and August 1999. They were bought from only two sources: Sikhumbuso Mngometulu, a trader at the Ezulwini Craft Stalls, and directly from mat-maker Onoyi Mngometulu.<sup>1</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu began to integrate sweet paper into her mat-making during the early part of 1998. There was thus a time lapse of nearly three years between collecting the first mat from the Ezulwini Craft stalls incorporating sweet paper and the first sample collected that was made by Onoyi Mngometulu from the same craft stalls.<sup>2</sup> In this discussion, the Mngometulu Group has been separated from the General Group in order to trace the development of a single mat-maker who was making wall hangings and incorporating the use of sweet paper in her mat-making. Her mats provide an important point of comparison with the mats in the General Group. Other factors taken into consideration in separating this group of mats from the General Group were, firstly, the fact that the size of the mats varied considerably from the size of the wall hangings collected at the Manzini Market and, secondly, that her mats were all made in Mahlanya, situated in the Lobamba area in the Middleveld.<sup>3</sup> During the period of active collecting from Manzini market between 1995 and 2004, four other mats in the General Group were bought from the Mahlanya area. In contrast to the mats made by Onoyi Mngometulu, all four, consisting of two sitting mats, and two sleeping mats,<sup>4</sup> are of grass only.<sup>5</sup> The Mngometulu Group of mats has been entered into a spreadsheet from OM01 to OM20. Abbreviations for entries may be found in

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<sup>1</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu is Sikhumbuso Mngometulu's second mothe.

<sup>2</sup> See Fig 001 in the General Group

<sup>3</sup> Mahlanya, Lobamba area also borders on the Ezulwini Craft Stalls.

<sup>4</sup> Figs 06, 97, 146, and 147 in the General Group, Fig 06, sitting mat bought at Manzini Market, Fig 97, bought from Ida Msebele Lobamba, 26<sup>th</sup> Oct 1999, and Figs 146 & 147 from Sibolile Kunene, Lobamba, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001 both interviewees.

<sup>5</sup> Figs 06, 97, 146, and 147 in the General Group, Fig 06, sitting mat bought at Manzini Market, Fig 97, bought from Ida Msebele Lobamba, 26<sup>th</sup> Oct 1999, and Figs 146 & 147 from Sibolile Kunene, Lobamba, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001 both interviewees.

(Appendix C, C44-C45) followed by the spreadsheet (Appendix C, C46-C48); and the photographic figures are on page 141. The following information was gathered from an interview conducted in April 1999 with Onoyi Mngometulu.

Mngometulu has been making mats for 30 years and began to use the *Imbongolo* frame about 15 years ago; prior to this she had been making mats by hand, (Plates 55, 56). She cuts her own grass and adheres to the royal 'go-ahead' to cut at the beginning of May, also the beginning of harvest.<sup>6</sup> She is a member of the *Lutsango*, the King's female regiment, and is called upon annually to harvest the King's fields.<sup>7</sup> She plans and stocks up with plenty of *Inchoboza*, *Indvuli*, and *Likhwane*, which she cuts from a riverside nearby. She is aware of women in her neighbourhood who cut grass in order to sell at the Manzini Market. For some it is a profitable option and Mngometulu occasionally buys her grass from these women, particularly in times of high demand for her mats. She makes plain sleeping mats from *Likhwane* and *Indvuli*; *Inchoboza* is used for the sweet paper mats. In making the mats, she also uses a combination of nylon string and her own, hand-made, sisal string.

Onoyi Mngometulu had for a while been experimenting with additional materials and had initially used plaited strips of plastic bags to make spongy sitting mats. When she acquired her first reel of sweet paper in 1995, she began to plait strips of it as well, but realised that plaiting was time-consuming and used up too much of the precious shiny paper. She began to experiment with different ways of covering the grass strands conservatively and discovered that spiralling strips of sweet paper around the strands was the best solution, (Plate 57). She bought reels of sweet paper from women who worked at the Cadbury's sweet factory in Matsapha; she did not

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<sup>6</sup> Particularly in the Mahlanya area because Lobamba is the Royal Capital of Swaziland.

<sup>7</sup> She is not paid for this service but works in lieu of her rent for her chief who has paid allegiance to the King. All meals are provided and beer is brewed specially for this occasion; the chief stores the surplus harvest grain.

have any specific preference for a particular type of sweet paper but utilised whatever was available.

The function of the Mngometulu mats is ambiguous. They are bigger than wall hangings that have an average measurement of 88 cm by 50 cm. The longest Mngometulu mat is 174 cm (Fig OM07) and the widest mat - 94 cm. (Fig OM18) The smallest mat is 94 cm by 47cm. (Fig OM09) Given that the embellished surface disqualifies these mats as sleeping mats, they may have limited use as sitting mats, as the sweet paper would begin to lift with repeated use. They can perhaps most easily be classified as extra large wall hangings.

Mngometulu explained that this way of making mats was not a grass-saving device, as the same amount of grass was still used per mat; the difference was that it made the mats more marketable. During 1998 and 1999, only small wall hangings were available at the Manzini Market, whereas Mngometulu was using her existing technical skills of making large grass mats to embellish her latest mats with the sweet paper. The size was insignificant at this early stage. As an experienced mat-maker, she did not have to consider the time factor of making a larger mat; for the younger, inexperienced mat-makers, on the other hand, the fast production of mats was important.

The patterning Mngometulu created was mainly horizontal bands using a variety of sweet papers. Figs. OM01, OM03 and OM08 show bands created in many different colours, not arranged in any particular sequence. There are many examples of mats where the horizontal bands are carefully organised to show a repetition as in Figs. OM02, OM05, OM06, OM07, OM09, OM10, OM11, OM12, OM13, OM14, OM15, OM17, OM18 and OM19. She began to experiment with constructing motifs in Figs. OM04 and OM16, where she was trying to make Swazi shields.<sup>8</sup> Fig. OM20 is a large reversible mat; it has exposed *Inchoboza* on one side and sweet paper on the

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<sup>8</sup> Pers comm. Onoyi Mngometulu, Mahlanya, April 1999.

other, and may be used as a wall hanging. The sweet paper side of this mat shows wide bands made in Chocolate Éclair (gold) interspersed with narrow bands of Chocolate Éclair (purple). The reverse side has wide bands of uncovered *Inchoboza* with narrow purple bands that match the other side (Fig OM20a). This is the first mat collected that shows such a careful organisation of grass strands and sweet paper in order to create a reversible mat. However, the function of the mat remains unclear; her son, Sikhumbuso Mngometulu, explains she was experimenting. Mngometulu's natal home is Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, the current home of Miriam Msithini; no visible evidence can be established of influence on her mats from that area, however.

A majority of Mngometulu's mats are sold at the craft stall run by her son, Sikhumbuso Mngometulu; her customers range from tourists who stay at the Sun group of hotels across the road, to some Swazis, Zulu traders from Natal, several traders from Johannesburg purchasing for the art shop ArtAfrica, and Swazi middle-women traders who sell at the Mbabane market.

In classifying this group of mats, the technical level of excellence was attributable to an experienced mat-maker. The type of edging applied by Mngometulu is both 'chain stitch' and 'double stitch angled': 11 mats show 'double stitch angled' and nine show 'chain stitch.' Both types of stitching are a time-consuming practice. She has mainly used *Inchoboza* as the foundation for her mats with *Indvuli* applied to two examples; the fact that *Inchoboza* is easily available in the Mahlanya area is a vital consideration. Mngometulu is unique in this respect as the majority of the wall hangings in the General Group show the use of *Umtsala*. The last mat in this group that is double-sided is distinctive and remains the only sample of its kind thus far collected.