

### Chapter 3: Acquisition of Mat-Making skills and the Transfer of Technology

#### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the acquisition of mat making skills, discussing and interpreting information gathered through interviews conducted with 14 Swazi mat-makers from a variety of regions in Swaziland, including *KaNgwane*.<sup>1</sup> Conversation with another 13 women and pertinent information collected from approximately 150 women was obtained at Manzini Market. The name of the mat-maker and area of abode was taken into consideration and the majority of the mats collected encompass only this basic information. The term 'technology' is applied here in relation to the whole package of skills that are passed down from one generation to the next within the family. More recently, considerable influence has been exercised by contact with women outside the family; the presence of this other channel of influence is recognised and highlighted.

The process of learning how to construct a grass mat today involves two different stages. First, there is the original skill of making mats totally by hand and, more recently, using the *Imbongolo* frame. For a number of younger mat-makers today, however, the second stage is the most relevant. Hamilton (1998) referred to the notion of cultural continuity in relation to the *Umntfwana*, a Swazi fertility figure, the making of which crosses family boundaries. For example, in a polygamous family, daughters could be subject to the tuition of women from widely different origins. The Swazi uphold largely the system of exogamous marriage practice; when women marry, they leave their natal home and cross over into the home of their husband, thus bringing with them a series of skills and practices for the manufacture of material culture.<sup>2</sup> In relation to mat-making, most women bring with them the basic skills of

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<sup>1</sup> *KaNgwane* (the place of the Ngwane people, see Chapter one), an area inhabited by Swazis, (North-West) outside the current borders of Swaziland)

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, C. 1998:25, The Swazi are an exception among the *Nguni* and have also adopted the *Sotho* practice of preferential cross-cousin marriage. Bonner, P.1983:24

working with grass and along their journey, either to the husband's domain or, perhaps, to an urban setting, they acquire the other valuable techniques of integrating and combining new materials with old.

The primary question posed, 'Who taught you?' deals with two crucial stages of skill acquisition: the first period, mat-making by hand, the pre-*Imbongolo* frame stage, is followed by mat-making on the *Imbongolo* frame, the *Imbongolo* stage. The pre-*Imbongolo* stage involves the ability to control grass and string on one's lap and to secure strands of grass together using string to construct a mat. Several older and experienced mat-makers confirmed this was their foremost skill. A majority of the younger generation of mat-makers felt more comfortable with the second stage, the *Imbongolo* stage.

These skills may be seen as a series of components that are acquired in succession. The initial knowledge and skills required in collecting the raw materials are the ability to cut the grass, the knowledge of the location of suitable grasses, the knowledge of the best time to cut, and the ability to transport the raw materials. Once the raw materials have been gathered, their treatment and storage needs to be considered. For example, the grass has to be laid out in the sun and dried. Not all of the grass is used immediately by the person who gathers it; some is sold or given to other mat-makers. Decisions have to be made about the type of string to be used to bind the grass together and a number of possibilities are available. Nylon string may be bought at the market or sisal string can be made by hand, a lengthy process; maize flour sacks may be acquired or bought and unravelled as an option. Originally, the grass mat would have been made by hand without a frame, in which case the process of production could begin at this point, the pre-*Imbongolo* stage.

The skill of mat-making, however, is not solely passed on from mother to daughter. Mothers are no longer the distinct influence on the younger generation of mat-makers. Currently, mat-making skills are acquired through different family members

and are passed through unrelated women living in close proximity to the mat-maker. The new generation of mat-makers is comprised of young women, approximately in their twenties, sometimes single mothers, formally unwaged, but part of the informal sector of the Swazi economy through their contribution as mat-makers.

Of the 14 women interviewed, for the pre-*Imbongolo* stage, seven women confirmed their paternal grandmothers were their primary source of influence. Only three were taught by their mothers, and two by other women; one was self-taught and both her grandmother and mother taught one. The practice of teaching mat-making skills initially takes place in the patriarchal unit, as indicated by Linah Dlamini and Sarafina Dlamini,<sup>3</sup> both with 58 years of experience; each was taught by her grandmother. Their grandmothers also played a key role in teaching mat-making skills to Ntombane Mdluli,<sup>4</sup> Bikiwe Mamba,<sup>5</sup> Anna Nkambule,<sup>6</sup> and Ida Msebele.<sup>7</sup> The next important person to exercise influence was the mother; this was true for Evelyn Lomekhuzo Fakudze,<sup>8</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu,<sup>9</sup> and Phumzile Emakhozazana Nkambule.<sup>10</sup> For Miriam Msithini<sup>11</sup> and Jessie Nsibandze,<sup>12</sup> other women in the neighbourhood played the crucial role of teaching them mat-making skills. However, for Esther Sifundza<sup>13</sup> and Gladys Malambe,<sup>14</sup> both grandmother and mother were responsible for teaching them. Sifundza also received mat-making education at school in Lozitha. Sibolile Dlamini, a mat-maker with over 45 years of experience, claimed she was self-taught.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Linah Dlamini (laMkhonza, Zombodze) and Sarafina Dlamini (laNdlangamandla, Nkhuguine) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)

<sup>4</sup> Ntombane Mdluli (laMvila, Mnwenya, Barberton) Luve (pers comm. 17<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2000)

<sup>5</sup> Bikiwe Mamba, (LaNdwandwe) Vusweni, Herefords, Piggs Peak, Hhohho, (pers comm. 29<sup>th</sup> May 1999)

<sup>6</sup> Anna Nkambule (La Magagula, Shewula) Emoti (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2000)

<sup>7</sup> Ida Msebele (LaShoyisa, Xhosa) Lobamba, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)

<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Lomekhuzo Fakudze (LaMdluli, Maphalaleni) Luve, (pers comm. 22<sup>nd</sup> Aug. 2000)

<sup>9</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu (LaZwane, Elukwatini) Mahlanya, (pers comm. 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999)

<sup>10</sup> Phumzile Emakhozazana Nkambule (LaLukele, Kaphunga) Emoti, (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2000)

<sup>11</sup> Miriam Msithini (LaMnisi, Ematsara, SA) Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, (pers comm. 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2000)

<sup>12</sup> Jessie Nsibandze (LaDube, Mpolonjeni) Mpolonjeni, (pers comm. 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2002)

<sup>13</sup> Esther Sifundza (laNkhosi, Lozitha) Shewula, (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>14</sup> Gladys Malambe (la Sifundza, Shewula) Shewula, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>15</sup> Sibolile Dlamini (laKunene, Mdlangampisi) Lobamba, (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

The second phase, the *Imbongolo* stage, has revolutionised mat-making for many women in Swaziland. This technological advancement has proved to be a valuable timesaving device in the production of the new wall hangings. The skill needed to work on an *Imbongolo* is easily acquired and many mat-makers can be seen swiftly operating the battery weights on the frame (see Chapter 2). Several mat-makers acquired the skill of operating the *Imbongolo* frame from women who were outside the family unit; this establishes a difference in the source of influence compared with the first stage. For ten mat-makers their mother was responsible for teaching them how to use the *Imbongolo* frame. The mother was also the primary influence for mat makers Phumzile Nkambule,<sup>16</sup> Agnes Nhleko,<sup>17</sup> Margaret Thwala,<sup>18</sup> Namcile Zwane,<sup>19</sup> Thuli Dlamini,<sup>20</sup> Thembekile Dlamini,<sup>21</sup> Joyce Tsela,<sup>22</sup> Thuli LaLukele,<sup>23</sup> Betty Zwane,<sup>24</sup> and Mamsi Maziya.<sup>25</sup>

This finding owes much to and is influenced by the increase in the migration of mat-makers from rural areas to an urban setting that determines that mat-makers no longer live in close proximity to each other, or within the extended family unit as was the case in the rural setting. Sarafina Dlamini<sup>26</sup> was taught by a friend's daughter; Ntombane Mdluli<sup>27</sup> was taught by a woman from Maphalaleni, who worked for her as a domestic. For many mat-makers the monthly meeting at the Chief's Kraal is an important arena for exchanging ideas and information, and Mdluli claimed she met women who discussed the use of the *Imbongolo* frame. Bikiwe Mamba,<sup>28</sup> Miriam

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<sup>16</sup> Phumzile Nkambule, (pers comm. Emoti, 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2000)

<sup>17</sup> Agnes Nhleko, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 29<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1998)

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Thwala, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 12<sup>th</sup> Feb 1998)

<sup>19</sup> Namcile Zwane, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1998)

<sup>20</sup> Thuli Dlamini, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1999)

<sup>21</sup> Thembekile Dlamini, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1999)

<sup>22</sup> Joyce Tsela, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 11<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1999)

<sup>23</sup> Thuli LaLukele, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 11<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1999)

<sup>24</sup> Betty Zwane, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2000)

<sup>25</sup> Mamsi Maziya, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 30<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2000)

<sup>26</sup> Sarafina Dlamini, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)

<sup>27</sup> Ntombane Mdluli, (pers comm. 17<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2000)

<sup>28</sup> Bikiwe Mamba, (pers comm. 29<sup>th</sup> May 1999)

Msithini,<sup>29</sup> Ida Msebele,<sup>30</sup> Esther Sifundza,<sup>31</sup> Onoyi Mngometulu,<sup>32</sup> and Jessie Nsibandze<sup>33</sup> were all shown this valuable skill by other women in their neighbourhood. Precious Dlamini and Thuli Dlamini<sup>34</sup> are neighbours and were taught by an aunt. Their grandmothers taught Gladys Malambe<sup>35</sup> and Jabu LaMotsa to operate the *Imbongolo* frame.<sup>36</sup> Sibolile Dlamini<sup>37</sup> was taught by her sister who lives in Gogolwako, and Anna Nkambule<sup>38</sup> was taught by her sister from Maputo. Evelyn Fakudze<sup>39</sup> was taught by her mother-in-law and Linah Dlamini by her daughter.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the second phase the *Imbongolo* stage reveals quite a different pattern of transfer of technology from the pre-*Imbongolo* stage. Hammond-Tooke (1998) placed the acquisition of skills as an idea that comes from a “tradition,” a template in the mind that has been handed down from the past as to how an article of manufacture should look. In relation to the current production of the grass mats and the new composite wall hangings, the makers are no longer dependent on a template that is to be handed down but are pro-active in their search for alternative ideas, being innovative and continually looking for new materials to utilise.

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<sup>29</sup> Miriam Msithini, (pers comm. 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2000)

<sup>30</sup> Ida Msebele, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)

<sup>31</sup> Esther Sifundza, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>32</sup> Onoyi Mngometfulu, (pers comm. 6<sup>th</sup> April 1999)

<sup>33</sup> Jessie Nsibandze, (pers comm. 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2002)

<sup>34</sup> Precious Dlamini and Thuli Dlamini, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 21<sup>st</sup> Dec. 2000)

<sup>35</sup> Gladys Malambe, (pers comm. 26<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>36</sup> Jabu LaMotsa, (pers comm. Manzini Market, 16<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1999)

<sup>37</sup> Sibolile Dlamini (pers comm. 20<sup>th</sup> April 2001)

<sup>38</sup> Anna Nkambule, (pers comm. 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2000)

<sup>39</sup> Evelyn Fakudze (pers comm. 22<sup>nd</sup> Aug. 2000)

<sup>40</sup> Linah Dlamini, (pers comm. 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1999)