

Chapter 4: Anatomy of the Mats: *Sitsebe*, Wall Hangings, Sleeping and Sitting Mats

Introduction

There are many different possible “anatomies” of grass mats and below I have described the four main types of mats: the *Sitsebe*, the wall hanging, the sleeping mat and the sitting mat.

The early relation of the modern grass mats is the *Sitsebe*, though there is evidence that alludes to the sleeping mat as having a long history (see Chapter one). The most basic form of embellishment to be applied on Swazi grass items were, I believe, what appears on the *Sitsebe* (grinding mats). The primary function of a *Sitsebe* is to be placed under a grinding-stone to catch the over-spill of the ground flour. The bottom grinding stone is oval; the top stone is much smaller and hand-held. The seeds are placed on the bottom stone and the top stone is used to crush the seeds. Once enough flour is ground it is removed by hand into a container; the stone is lifted from the *Sitsebe* and the over-spill is funnelled into the container. The *Sitsebe* has a sturdy quality; an example collected in southern Swaziland is estimated to be 15 years old ¹ (Plate 29). The *Sitsebe* mat is multi-functional and is used not only for the placing of the grinding stone when grinding flour but also for serving certain food types, such as bread, or roasted vegetables, and used as a chopping board for leafy vegetables. ² During Swazi wedding ceremonies, the bride gives a *Sitsebe* as part of the household items to her husband’s family. ³ The function of the mat demands that it be tightly woven and this would explain why it differs in its construction from the wall hangings, sleeping and sitting mats.

¹ Collected from Linah Dlamini (laMkhonza, Zombodze) and Sarafina Dlamini (laNlangamandla, Nkhuguine) Mhlosheni, Shiselweni, (30th Oct.1999)

² Letsiwe Dlamini, (laMalaza), Mbabane, (pers comm., May 1996)

³ Matsebula, J.S.M. 1987

An average *Sitsebe* measures between 40 cm x 35 cm and 45 cm x 40 cm. This type of mat employs the technical method of weaving as opposed to the binding process used for the wall hangings, sleeping and sitting mats. The *Sitsebe* is totally made by hand and not on a frame. Several strands of *Lucashi* are used as the warp and lengths of *Inchoboza* or *Indvuli* grass for the weft.⁴ The process of making a *Sitsebe* utilises freshly cut grass, as the weaving action requires the grass to be pliable. The overall surface of the mat is usually decorated by using grass on grass patterning, creating a relief structure.

The following description offered by Shaw (1962), confirms the process:

The maker sits with the mat on her knee, warps back to vertical front and from left to right; using wet grass (kept wet by wrapping in a bundle). Beginning warps side by side held by first row of twining, the mat is shaped into a rectangle. Edges are formed along the warp with two rows twined with weft wrapping. Decoration consists of zig-zag draper pattern lengthened stitch.⁵

More recently, with the availability of chemical dyes, the integration of dyed grass is used to decorate the *Sitsebe* (Plate 30). Only one sample has been collected that incorporates the use of sweet paper to create stripes for decoration (Plate 31). The top and the bottom boundaries reveal trimmed edges that consist of visible strands of *Lucashi* (Plate 32); the other two edges are firmly bound with *Inchoboza* as the weaving action permits. (The bound edges allow the mat to bend in the middle like a funnel to contain the flour once the grinding stone has been lifted.) The technique of making a *Sitsebe* is not dependent on a frame and the size of the mat enables the maker to manipulate the grass totally by hand. The process is time-consuming and therefore not popular with younger mat-makers (nearly all *Sitsebe* collected were bought from older mat-makers, and in some cases they were being sold by either

⁴ *Lucashi* is found on the slopes of the mountainside, grows up to approx. 100 cm in length and is most commonly used for making sweeping brooms with handles that are elaborately decorated with geometric shapes.

⁵ Shaw. M., 1962, Hlatikulu, (unpublished notes accessed at SAM Cape Town, April 1999).

daughters or neighbours). From time to time, young girls are given the task of making a *Sitsebe* in order to practise and ‘play’ with grass.⁶

The adornment of the *Sitsebe* has evolved over the years and a variety of patterns are created on the limited surface area. Three types of lines are possible: oblique, vertical and horizontal (Plates 33, 34, and 35); overlapping lines are used to make rhombuses that are also constructed as solid motifs (Plates 36, 37, 38). A general observation indicates that there is often a profusion of horizontal stripes made from both grass and dyed grass. The absence of sweet paper and other plastic in the making of *Sitsebe* can be attributed to its specific use. The integration of sweet paper would undoubtedly affect the durability of the patterning due to the constant placing and lifting action of the grinding stone causing rapid wear and tear on its surface. However, the ‘high-visibility’ of the *Sitsebe*, in its everyday use and in its gift-value, requires that it be decorated; this is consistent with the treatment of the wall hangings and the sitting mats.

In some parts of Swaziland, the demand for *Sitsebe* is diminishing due to the services offered by travelling grinding machine entrepreneur replacing the role of the grinding stone.⁷ In the same areas, however, Swazi elders like Bikiwe Mamba still prefer to grind their own maize flour and this necessitates the use of a *Sitsebe*. However, *Lucashi* is not easily available in the Piggs Peake area, a vital component needed for the formation of the warp strands when making a *Sitsebe*; thus Bikiwe Mamba began to use *Inchoboza* to make small mats similar in size to a *Sitsebe* but using the technique used for making sleeping mats.⁸

⁶ Rosemary Andrata, Curator National Museum, Lobamba, Swaziland (pers comm., April 1999)

⁷ On the road to interview Bikiwe Mamba, a grinding machine operated by a private entrepreneur stopped at key locations and the community brought their maize to be ground, at the cost of 2 *Emalangen* per kilo of flour. (Pers observation, Herefords, Piggs Peak, Hhohho, 29th May 1999)

⁸ Bikiwe Mamba, (LaNdwandwe) Vusweni, Hereford, Piggs Peak, Hhohho, (pers comm. 29th May 1999) Early information supports the use of an alternative mat. In Siteki *Umu*zi was not available for making these mats; they used a small mat of the same technique as the sleeping mat. Beamer 1939:216

An average length of a wall hanging is approximately 88 cm in length and 50 cm in width.⁹ The majority of wall hangings collected show a loop fixed in the centre of the wide edge. The visual orientation of the rectangle is primarily its length (vertical) followed by the width (horizontal). A description of the wall hanging begins with the top edge, being the one that has the loop attached to it. Generally, the loop is created using the ends of the middle two or three remaining vertical strings after the wall hanging has been removed from the *Imbongolo* (Plate 39.) In some examples, the loop has been formed by lifting the middle of the last rod of the mat to form the loop (Plate 40). The final stages in the completion of a wall hanging involve tying together the rest of the vertical strings (the one at the rear of the mat with the one at the front). As nylon string is used, mat makers will use a lighter or a match to burn the excess string into a melted dot to achieve a neat finish.¹⁰

A distinctive feature of the wall hanging has been observed: the spaces between the vertical strings tend to be wide and, on average, there are ten vertical strings on a wall hanging that is 50 cm in width. The smaller the number of vertical strings, the faster the mat has been produced. Furthermore, in comparison to the function of sleeping and sitting mats that are required to be sturdy and constantly handled, the wall hanging remains stationary in its role. The spacing of the vertical threads and the type of edging used (that is, the last row of vertical strings at each edge of the wall hanging) give clues about the experience and dedication of the mat maker.¹¹ The majority of wall hangings collected, 114 out of 161, show ‘single-stitch angled’ edging. It is atypical to find that 27 wall hangings actually have ‘chain stitch’ edging; the application of chain stitching is a time-consuming process, one that is normally used by experienced mat-makers for sleeping and sitting mats (see Chapter two). For

⁹ Information generated from spreadsheet of 161 wall hangings collected between 1995 and 2004

¹⁰ The sleeping and sitting mats are completed using a process of backstitching. (See Chapter two)

¹¹ The numbers of vertical strings do not take into account the last rows, the edging, as this has been accorded separate attention (see Chapter two). (Wide spacing of vertical strings indicates less time spent making the mat.) This type of meticulous scrutiny concerning the edging is necessary, as the type of edging and the number of vertical threads applied provides a comparative value of the new composite wall hangings in their analysis.

a younger mat-maker speed is of the essence and one of the time-saving measures adopted is to apply only the 'single-stitch angled' edging. Another anomaly found is that 20 wall hangings show 'double-stitch angled' edging. This type of finish is indicative of the work of an experienced mat maker.

The following examples illustrate the 'single-stitch angled' edging (Plates 41, 42, 43, and 44). To obtain this effect, there are two strings at play, both held by a torch battery, one at the front, and one at the rear. Alternately, the front thread is passed to the rear and the string from the rear is brought forward. This process is used to create all vertical lines (for a full description, see Chapter two). Furthermore an analysis of the 'technical excellence' of mats in the General Group revealed that 43 mats were placed in the top category; number five, with an equal number of mats for number four. 57 mats were placed in number three and 17 in number two; only one mat was placed in number one the lowest category.¹²

It has been established through information generated from the General Group of mats, that *Umtsala* is the preferred grass type for making wall hangings. Out of 161 wall hangings collected 106 have been constructed using *Umtsala*, a grass type that is easily available, one that would never be considered for making sleeping mats.

The average length of *Umtsala* is 110 cm (the average width of a wall hanging is 50 cm). A single strand of *Umtsala* is quite thin, and several strands are grouped together and covered with plastic sweet paper; these strands are used to create the thickness of the rod resembling a strand of *Inchoboza*¹³ (Plates 45, 46, 47). Normally, the length of the grass will determine, in the case of a sleeping or sitting mat, its width, and some mat makers have resorted to cutting the length of *Umtsala* in half for making smaller wall hangings. This is an effective way of doubling and thereby conserving their stock of *Umtsala*. A more practical reason for using *Umtsala* for making wall

¹² Information generated from Spreadsheets in Appendix A, (A5-A34).

¹³ Conversations with mat makers confirmed, that this thickness was easy to handle on the *Imbongolo*.

hangings is that shorter lengths of *Umtsala* up to 50 cm may be found all year round along most river banks in Swaziland.

Likhwane is a popular grass type for making sleeping mats; it grows in close proximity to *Inchoboza* and *Umtsala*. A general observation from a limited compilation of sleeping mats that form part of the General Group has revealed that, out of nine sleeping mats collected for this study, five are made from *Likhwane*. A fundamental observation concerns the non-embellishment of mats made from *Likhwane*. Due to its characteristic flatness, it is not conducive to having sweet paper wrapped around it but is ideal for making sleeping and sitting mats, yielding a sturdy mat both in appearance and function.

The samples in the General Group made from *Likhwane* indicate an average width of 110 cm. However, mats have been seen on sale at the Manzini Market with a width that exceeds this measurement. Communication with Ntombane Mdluli also confirms the advantage of being able to join the strands to increase the width of a sleeping mat.¹⁴ An essential consideration for the extra width is based on the practical purpose of sharing a sleeping mat with a child. Paul Malindzisa explained that a male child may share a sleeping mat with his father, and a female with her mother up to the age of seven.¹⁵ A sleeping mat requires extra strength to withstand the regular handling; it is rolled out each night to sleep on and rolled up again each morning. For the mat to be able to hold one body or possibly two, without it falling apart at the edges, all mat-makers who work with *Likhwane* apply a special type of finishing to the edges. Five samples out of nine clarify that a ‘chain-stitch’ edging is the most popular type to be applied.

In addition to the type of edging, another fundamental characteristic of a sleeping mat is the way the grass strands are held together. Essentially, the vertical strings hold the

¹⁴ Ntombane Mdluli (laMvila, Mnwenya, Barberton) Luve (pers comm. 17th Aug. 2000)

¹⁵ Paul Malindzisa, Mapalaleni, Mbuluzi, (guide at Mantenga Cultural Village, Mantenga Nature Reserve, (pers comm. April 1999)

whole surface together, and the spacing of these is vital to the function of the mat in ensuring its sturdiness. A typical sleeping mat made from *Likhwane* with an average width of 114 cm will have up to 30 vertical strings holding the grass strands together. Bryant (1949) in relation to the vertical strings on a grass mat, observed:

The spacing of the vertical-strings, further, differed in different mats. Sometimes the strings were placed at regular half-inch intervals right across the mat (then called an *iCitintambo*); at others, several strings are placed close together, forming; 'stripes' or 'bands' right down (not across) the mat. If the 'stripes' were narrow, but many in number, the mat was called *uBangazana*. If the 'stripes' were greater in width but fewer in number, then the mat was called *isiDidli*. Sitting mats were smaller and 'woven' using *iNduli* rushes.¹⁶

Inchoboza is also the preferred grass for making sleeping mats; it is spongy in texture, rod-like in appearance and grows up to 120 cm in length. May is the preferred time for cutting *Inchoboza*, when it is considered to be ripe and in its prime (see Chapter two). *Inchoboza*, according to the rural people, is associated with the poor due to its wide availability and easy accessibility. However, only three sleeping mats made from *Inchoboza* have been collected and recorded in the General Group of mats. The average length of a sleeping mat made from *Inchoboza* is 188 cm and its width 114 cm.¹⁷ This is consistent and corresponds with the size of sleeping mats made from *Likhwane*. In fact, the width of a sleeping mat made from *Inchoboza* actually exceeds the width of the one example made from *Likhwane*. This is an anomaly as, in practice, the width of a *Likhwane* sleeping mat can be extended due to the leafy quality of this type of grass. A further variation has been observed concerning the type of edging used. As discussed earlier in relation to the sleeping mats made from *Likhwane*, the sturdiness of the mat is vital to its function. Only one mat out of three displays a 'chain-stitch' edging; the other two have 'single-stitch angled' edging. The 'chain-stitch' is the ideal type of edging for a sleeping mat and

¹⁶ Bryant, 1949:199-201 Ntombane Mdluli, confirmed the term used for the vertical strings in SiSwati as *libanga* (s) and *emabanga* (pl)

¹⁷ Information generated from spreadsheet of the General Group of mats, (see Appendix A1-A34) a limited sample of three mats was collected.

the ‘single stitch angled’ is inappropriate for a mat that is going to be used on such a regular basis. The number of vertical threads and their spacing is, however, consistent with the sleeping mats made from *Likhwane*. A mat with an average width of 114 cm contains 30 vertical threads, thus establishing a contributing factor that makes the sleeping mats made from *Inchoboza* strong and sturdy.

A sitting mat warrants the same type of strong durability as a sleeping mat. Its function involves regular handling that exceeds that of a sleeping mat; a sleeping mat is rolled out at night and rolled up in the morning. A sitting mat is used regularly by members of the household and is offered to visitors received both inside the home and in the courtyard. A sitting mat today is a valued item of importance; a bride gives it as a wedding present to her in-laws and highly-decorated sitting mats are commissioned from renowned mat-makers especially to be used for receiving wedding guests.¹⁸ A significant number of sitting mats have been collected and a large number forms the Msithini Group of mats; 53 sitting mats have been placed in that group and have been discussed in a separate section (see Chapter six). In the General Group, 35 sitting mats have been collected and recorded. *Inchoboza* is the most popular grass type to be used, closely followed by *Umtsala* and *Likhwane*. Five samples are made purely from plastic. The average length of a sitting mat is 168 cm and its width 82 cm. The analysis of the number of vertical strings and the type of edging used shows that an average of 20 vertical strings has been used to construct a sitting mat. This number is consistent with providing closely spaced vertical strings related to its function. The most popular type of edging, however, does not correlate with the function of the sitting mat; the ‘single-stitch angled’ has been applied to 16 mats followed by 18 examples equally showing the ‘double-stitch angled’ (Plates 48, 49) and ‘chain-stitch’ edging (Plates 50, 51). A possible explanation may be sought in relation to the experience of the mat-maker, but this type of information is not

¹⁸ Miriam Msithini (LaMnisi, Ematsara, SA) Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, (pers comm. 2nd May 2000) She has been regularly commissioned by Swazis in Ermelo to make sitting mats from *Lucashi* (pers comm. Dec. 2004)

easily accessed from the spreadsheet compiled. However, this significant link is established in relation to the Msithini Group of sitting mats.

The 'high-visibility' of the sitting mat, in its everyday use and in its gift and guest value, requires that it be decorated; this is consistent with the treatment of the *Sitsebe* and the wall hangings. Generally, sitting mats are smaller versions of sleeping mats, especially when they are made using just *Inchoboza* or *Likhwane*. Through an observation of the sitting mats in the General Group, it has been established that there are popular applications of pattern types: either horizontal bands or the inclusion of the rhombus motif. There is a modest amount of integration of sweet paper; this is consistent with its function as constant handling of the sitting mat would cause the additive material to lift and fray. Examples collected from older mat-makers show the use of patterning using strands of dyed grass and grass on grass patterning such as strips of plaited *Inchoboza*.