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From grass to plastic: The Effects of Economic Development on the Design and Production of the Traditional Swazi Grass Mat Made by Women

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Chapter 1: History of the Swazi and their Exploitation of Grass Technology

Introduction

Traditional items made of grass are easily found in Swaziland today and not just exclusively in the rural areas; in many cases they have been modified by the adoption of materials of industrial manufacture. In particular, the grass mat in recent years has been susceptible to innovative variations. The surface quality of the traditional mat has transformed due to the introduction of contemporary materials whereby mat-makers have adapted their traditional methods of production and techniques to create new forms for a new market. Mat-makers, trying to maintain a contemporary relevance, have introduced a novel material of sweet wrappers in shimmering colours and other plastic coatings to decorate a traditional art form; they are producing mats that are more durable in some cases than the originals made exclusively from grass. This marks the transformation of an object with a long historical past, a past possibly dating back to the birth of the beehive dome and beyond.

Historically, the grass sleeping mat served and still serves for some Swazi elders the function of a mattress spread across the (cow dung) floor in a hut. An analogous mat, the sitting mat, would be offered to a visiting stranger as a sign of generous hospitality.[1] Sitting mats are still bought by many urban Swazis, and are seen to maintain a link with the homestead life and the elderly relatives; [2] a grass sleeping mat still forms part of the basic essentials a bride takes to her marital home together with a headrest for her husband. [3] At a burial, a mat made of *Likhwane* grass is placed on the coffin before the soil is thrown into the grave to prevent its touching the coffin.[4] So the grass mat can be seen not only as an object of historical relevance, but

[1] Miriam Msithini (LaMnisi, Ematsara, SA) Elukwatini, *KaNgwane*, (pers comm. 2nd May 2000) Kuper 1947:154
[2] Nondumiso Qwabe, Manzini, (pers comm., April 1999.
[3] Hall. J., 1998:53.
[4] Ntombane Mdluli (laMvila, Mnwenya, Barberton) Luve (pers comm. 17th Aug. 2000)

as an object of contemporary significance, especially as it undergoes its current transformation from grass to plastic.

This chapter focuses on the early history of the Swazi people and their relationship and interdependence with the surrounding environment; it is their utilisation of the various raw materials available to them that has led to the diverse importance of the grass mat. Their functional utilisation of grass was primarily in the form of building shelters and developed simultaneously into the creation of objects fulfilling a range of domestic requirements.

Certain elements of grass technology among the Swazi are attributable to their earlier time spent living in close proximity with other *Nguni* groups in the *Pongola* River area during the middle part of the eighteenth century. [5] The history of the first group of the 'true Swazis' known as *Bemdzabuko* (a term used to refer to those people who clamed to have originated together with the *Ngwane,* the royal line of Dlamini) began in this area. [6] This group entered the, neither vacant nor sparsely populated, *Pongola* River locale where they found the powerful *Ndwandwe* kingdom already settled. As this area cuts through the *Lubombo* Mountains, it was rich in natural resources for farming and cattle rearing; a natural choice for such settlement. A settled community in a rich, fertile terrain provided the ideal compatible environment the *Ngwane* were seeking. The *Ngwane* thus established themselves in these well-watered grasslands that provided pasturage for their cattle and alluvial soils for a new staple crop. Farming in southern Africa had shifted from sorghum and millet to maize introduced by the Portuguese, a crop that demanded less labour but gave a higher yield; thus the warmer and wetter climate in the *Pongola* area provided an ideal situation (Huffman 1996). Additionally, there was an abundance of timber for homestead construction,

[5] The journey of the Dlamini ancestors prior to their settlement is mentioned in Swazi royal praise songs: '*lowacedza Lubombo ngekuhlehletela etfwele umfunti.*' (Nkosi Dlamini you skirted the *Lubombo* in your flight, carrying a small bundle of medicines.) Kuper, H 1978:10

[6] Bonner uses the term Ngwane to designate the nucleus of what later become the Swazi, who took control of southern Swaziland in the 1760s and 1770s. Bonner. P. 1983:9

(Jones 1993) the key factor being that the homesteads were above the area in which malaria was endemic. There was a profusion of game for hunting, game that could be utilised for meat and for products that could be traded. To the south the land sloped down to the *Pongola* River, offering a good view of prospective invaders; to the north lay the caves of the *Mhlosheni* Hills providing excellent sanctuary; to the east was the dry lowveld, predominantly scrub savannah, uninhabited by people.

Another major consideration for this location may have included the nearby River *Ngwavuma* which would have provided *Inchoboza* and *Likhwane* matting grasses and *Umhlanga* reeds for building windbreaks (*Emaguma*) around the homesteads. In addition, both the mountainside and the base of the *Lubombo* Mountains would have provided an abundance of raw materials needed for making household objects and the rich fertile location yielded the long grasses needed for thatching as their dwelling consisted of the *Nguni* beehive dome, a dome clad with grass mats placed over its crown and thatched over with grass sewn onto the frame using plaited grass ropes. [7] Indeed, there is substantial evidence to support the established utilisation of grass as a fundamental raw material by the *Nguni* groups. The names of the Zulu grass mats and grass types identified by Bryant (1949) closely resemble the *SiSwati* names for the grasses currently found in Swaziland. [8] For example, *iKwani* is similar to *Likhwane*, *iBhuma – Libhuma,* and *iNduli – Indvuli.* Bryant (1949) observed that amongst the nearby Zulu, the following items were made: sleeping mats (*iCantsi*), sitting-mats (*isiCepu*) and eating-mats (*isiTebe*). Moreover, the production of these grass items is attributed, by Bryant, to 'female industry, ` [9] gender attribution that is backed up by Krige (1936)

[7] Frescura, F., 1981:39. Frescura (1981) attributed the evolution of the *Nguni* beehive dome to the prevailing terrain in the following way: 'This combination of rain and grass encouraged the early house builder, on one hand to shy away from easily eroded mud walls, whilst on the other inventing a house form that was entirely dependent upon the application of various types of grass plentiful in the region.'

[8] Until 1969, the medium of instruction in Swazi schools was Zulu. A distinct Swazi language *SiSwati* was first recorded in 1846. Macmillan 1989:290

[9] Bryant. A.T., 1949:199-201. The Zulu name used for a sleeping mat *iCantsi* is similar to *Licansi* and the grinding mat *isitebe* is similar to *Sitsebe* in *SiSwati.*

> … mat making, and the plaiting of beer strainers and ropes are done by women, though basketry is by no means confined to women … men do a great deal of basketry. [10]

Additionally, Biermann confirms this role of women in the creation of grass artifacts:

> The women built the shelters – sometimes with assistance from the men folk on the framework of larger units - and they maintained the ageless tradition of weaving and plaiting the grass covering. [11]

So, overall, it can be deduced that the *Nguni* groups living in the *Pongola* River area had an established grass technology, a technology in which women played a particularly important part.

This symbiotic relationship with the environment enjoyed by the *Ngwane* was short lived as they became uneasy neighbours with the *Ndwandwe*, sparking off a dispute over grain fields on the south side of the *Pongola* River. [12] As a result, the *Ngwane*, led by *Sobhuza I,* were forced to move to an area to the north of the *Pongola* fields, *Shiselweni. Shiselweni* was already occupied by a number of chiefdoms, in particular a group of *Sotho* people who had settled there many years before; they spoke a language different from the *Ngwane*, practised slightly different customs, and were not organised for warfare. They seem to have placed more emphasis on agriculture and hunting and had fewer cattle. Despite these differences, however, their way of life was similar in many ways to that of the *Ngwane* invaders, facilitating an ultimate

[10] E.J. Krige 1936: 184-85 in Zulu Treasures 1996:131. Furthermore, the decline in male basket weavers is largely due to the migratory work system and the lure of jobs in the cities van Heerden J. 1996:132

[11] Biermann., B 1971:100 in Shelter in Africa (ed) Paul Oliver.

[12] Three centralised chiefdoms, the Mthethwa, Ndwandwe and Ngwane, had emerged in northern KwaZulu-Natal by the 1810s and the conflict between the first two in particular spurred the migration of smaller chiefdoms, in particular, the *Ngwane* who fled north over the *Pongola* River. The *Ndwandwe* had settled at least a generation before the arrival of the *Ngwane*. Bonner 1983:25 Up until then they had all enjoyed easy access to key natural resources. They were close to watersheds; average rainfall levels were high; the soil was generally fertile; and their proximity to both sweetveld and sourveld facilitated all year grazing. Maylam. P., 1986:32

integration of the two groups. [13] Thus *Ngwane* history really begins to dawn in the mid-nineteenth century when they took control of *Shiselweni* in southern Swaziland, [14] the *beMdzabuko* (true Swazis) gaining allegiance from this new people who became known as *emaKhandzambili* (those Found Ahead). Indeed, the *Sotho* people referred to the *Ngwane* as *aBantu bakaNgwane* (people of *Ngwane*) recognising *Sobhuza 1* as their leader. An eye witness from 1836 noted:

> Among several *Sotho* groups, *Sobhuza* tolerated the use of their own language. They called themselves - '*Baraputsi'* - the people of '*Raputsa'*, the *Sotho* version of *Sobhuza's* name. [15]

Thus 'The Found Ahead' group was incorporated as a second group into the growing state and *Sobhuza I* strengthened his position by eliminating, expelling, subjugating or coming to terms with the *Sothos* (Jones 1993). He absorbed the *Sotho*, and it is interesting to note how certain elements of *Sotho* culture were assimilated. Though today the Swazi*s* are classified as *Nguni*, as Bonner (1983) has observed "their culture is literally cluttered with *Sotho* borrowings," one of the cultural fusions that took place, and still exists in Swaziland today, being the *Incwala* (the first fruit harvest ceremony). [16]

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[13] A majority of the *Sotho* speakers lived north of the *Usutu* river, (pers comm. Richard Patricks May 2005)

[14] *Shiselweni*, the area over which *Sobhuza I* had developed control, also became known as the 'place of burning.' The origins of the name have been variously attributed to the frequent burning of homesteads by the Ndwandwe and also the Ngwane as they took over and later fled northwards to the upper reaches of the Phongolo and Mkhondvo Rivers. Jones. H.M. 1993:178-79

[15] "Some came humbly, others were defeated and plundered, but once their loyalty was assured, they were allowed to continue under their own recognised clan heads subordinate only to the *Dlamini* king." Captain W.C. Harris, 1836, met people in the valley of the Likwa (Vaal) River, in Jones, H. 1993:xix

[16] The *Incwala* is attributed to *Sobhuza I* as a direct result of having allowed the *Sotho* element to be integrated into *Nguni* traditions. The newly assimilated group performed special duties to enhance the powers of the ruling clan. (Kuper 1947) The special position assigned to the Swazi queen mother, as a joint ruler and her rainmaking powers; is not typical of the *Nguni* and represents a *Sotho* influence. The dual monarchy is more fully developed among the Swazi than in the neighbouring groups, where the emphasis is on the male and is attributed to their contact with the *Sotho* and does not exist anywhere else in Africa. (Kuper 1947:56.) Where the *Nguni* practiced a form of *exogamy*, (which places all people from the clans of grandparents within a prohibited range) the Swazi are an exception among the *Nguni* and adopted the *Sotho* practice of preferential cross-cousin marriage. The Swazi *Libandla*, a national council that represents all aspects of Swazi opinion may represent an adaptation of its *Sotho*

By the time of the assimilation of the *Sotho* people by *Sobhuza I* at *Shiselweni,* the prevailing grass technology among the *Sotho* may have consisted of the *Sotho* beehive dome on a cylinder, a structure dictated by the highveld terrain. (Plate 01) It was differentiated from the *Nguni* beehive dome in both shape and construction (Frescura 1981). Another variation of the dwelling would have been a square shaped building with terraced thatching (Plate 02) [17] Many archaeological *Sotho* stonewalled sites are dotted across the northwestern highveld where *Sotho* speakers lived (Bonner 1983, Hamilton 1992). [18] The advantage of the dome on the cylinder is that the stable structure of the walls could withstand fire, which would thus only destroy the thatched dome that could be replaced easily. [19] In addition to the established use of grass for their dwelling, the *Sotho* used other objects made from grass and it is interesting, yet again, to see how these objects are associated with female manufacturers:

> …the *Sotho* males were ascribed with carving in wood and ivory-made utensils. The *Sotho* females were attributed with pottery, earthen jars for storing grain and baskets or mats made of rushes used as articles of trade. Some of the *Sothos* made great rush baskets called *Sesiu,* for storing grain; a technique that distinguished them from most of the *Nguni*. [20]

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counterpart, the *Pitso* (Bonner 1983). It also seems likely that the Swazis adopted the circumcision rite from the *Sothos*; the lodge was known as *Insutu* and the first boy circumcised, called *ukusoka* (Wilson. M & L. Thompson, 1982:97, Marwick 1966:156) This rite no longer exists; during the reign of *Mswati II* it was decided that all the young men were indispensable and needed for the army, as a result the rite of passage ceased to exist. (Kasenene, P. 1993:59)

[17] Pers observation, both buildings found in Hlatikulu, Shiselweni region (July 2005)

[18] Around 1820, *Sobhuza I* formed his first regiment, the *emaHubhulu* named after the white-necked raven an aggressive but wary bird of essentially mountainous country, a name that suggests that he had lived in the highveld. (Jones 1993:179) Many *Sotho* stonewalled sites are found in the north-western part of Swaziland which is mountainous.

[19] Frescura 1981:49-50. As Shiselweni became known as 'the place of burning' as a result of the numerous attacks by the Ndwandwe, there was a need for building houses that could not be destroyed totally.

[20] Campbell, 1820:276 in Wilson. M. & L. Thompson, 1982:148 (The *Siswati* word for a chicken basket is *Silulu)*

Constrained by the lack of additional evidence for this period concerning the Swazi and *Sotho* settlement's utilisation of grass technology, verification is sought in the observations made by Shaw in 1962 in Hlatikulu within the region of *Shiselweni.* This information is of considerable value as, from the time of *Sobhuza's* amalgamation of the *Sotho* groups who were resident in that area, only 120 years have passed. [21] It can thus be assumed that the grasses utilised by the people in the Hlatikulu area were to an extent also used during the time of *Sobhuza I.* [22] Shaw noted, in her observations, that all the work was done by women and that grasses were plentiful. She recorded the following grass types as being easily found: *Inchoboza, Likhwane, Indvuli, Lutindzi, Lucashi, Ncinini, Umtsentse, Umsingitane, Inyakeni, Ngongoni, Inthlambi* and *Luthlonga* (for thatching). In relation to grass mats she recorded that "the women of the kraal also made sleeping mats *Amacansi* of *Likhwane* (the grass is squeezed to narrow it and twined with *Umthile*), *Sitsebe* was made from *Lucashi* and *Inchoboza.*" According to Shaw, grass objects made for domestic purposes included *Umtsanyelo* (brooms), *Umqunqu* (waterbottles), *Lihluto Umhome* (beer bags), *Silulu* (chicken baskets) *Isishikishi* (grass skirts), *Inyakeni* (spoonbag), *Umgibe* (sleeping mat holders) and *Isitsha* (grass rings). For ritual purposes, grass-made objects were also utilized, such as the *Tincwati,* a cap made from *Umuzi,* and *Ligodza,* a grass rope, both worn by widows for a mourning period.[23] Shaw also observed that huts were thatched with *Luthlonga* and roughly made grass mats called *Likenya.*

A specifically 'Swazi' grass technology can be said to have been implemented when King *Sobhuza I* (1810-1839) settled with his people in the region of the *Mdzimba*

[21] A visit to this area in 1999 (and again in 2005) confirmed the lack of development in this part of Swaziland, a communication and transport system was being established, thatched building were found in profusion, a general feel of rural lifestyle prevailed.
[22] Margaret Shaw carried out an extensive study of Basketwork of Southern Africa in 1962. Shaw's unpublished notes are housed at the South African Museum in Cape Town, accessed April 1999.
[23] Also supported by Marwick 1940:224-225

hills in Central Swaziland, and built his homestead, *eLangeni* (in the sun). [24] A combination of this rich, fertile land for farming and grazing, and a secure mountain fortress adjacent to the caves provided a prime position in which to settle. By this time a distinct Swazi group, composed from *Nguni, Sotho* and *Tsonga*[25] elements had been created (Macmillan: 1989). After 1840, the term 'Swazi' is attributed to *King Mswati II* (1840-1865) who gave his name to the commonly used title of the country, *eSwatini,* and the people of *Mswati, emaSwazi.* [26]

In this new terrain, grass technology was successfully employed for building shelter, creating domestic products such as sleeping mats and making ritually determined objects used for weddings and for death ceremonies. [27] The River *Lususwana* that ran nearby provided a vital source for plenty of matting grasses such as *Inchoboza* and *Likhwane* and *Luthlonga*, vital for thatching. The following popular grass types were probably used: *Lutindzi, Sifunti* and *Likhaba* for making *Tintzambo*, (plaited rope) and *Umtsanyelo* (brooms); *Inchoshana* for *Lihluto* (beerstrainer); *Lucashi* for long sweeping brushes and for forming the warp element of a *Sitsebe* (grinding mat), the weft element being made from *Inchoboza*, and *Libhuma* for baskets. The profusion of the *Nguni* beehive domes in the Royal capital *Ludzidzini* today is a testament to how *Sobhuza I's* homestead *eLangeni* may have looked in 1840.

[24] This area remains to this day in which most royal villages are situated, *Lobamba*, under King Sobhuza 11 and *Ludzidzini* under King Mswati 111.

[25] The third group of Swazis were formed during the time of *Mswati II* (1846-1865). Known as *Labafik'emuva* (those who came late), these included the *Tsonga* to the north. However, sufficient written evidence is lacking for this period of Swazi history and this last group is rarely mentioned. In relation to this last group, Shaw (1962) observed that 'a typical Swazi hut has a frame of tied saplings but in the Barberton district where there is *Tsonga* influence, the huts have low wicker wall with reed warps'.

[26] Kuper. H., 1947:18. Bryant 1929:332, wrote, 'All members of that nation – of whatsoever clan – were now indiscriminately christened, first *aba-kwa-Sobhuza (Sobhuza's people)* after their common conqueror, and subsequently in the completed nation *amaSwazi (the people of Mswazi)* after their common sovereign.'

[27] Another important consideration was sustaining their cattle economy; in the lowveld, the low bush and the grass were nutritious all year round, but were plagued by *nagana*, an insect-borne disease.

There exists 14 anthropological studies on the Swazi, by Kuper (1937, 1941, 1943, 1945, 1946, 947a, 1947b, 1950, 1952, 1963, 1965, 1978 and Marwick 1940, 1966, who both record Swazi practices as being particularly 'Swazi' during the period 1937 to 1978. They deal largely with the royal genealogy, the life patterns of the royalty and selected groups, but several references to grass technology in relation to household products such as the beehive dome and its construction, and the division of labour within a homestead set-up, are offered. Bryant (1929, 1949) documented information primarily on the Zulu with a few references to the Swazi. Since Bryant, Kuper, and Marwick, there has been a distinct absence of writing on the material culture of the 20th century Swazi;. The following discussion takes into account information based on the writings of Bryant, Kuper and Marwick; it incorporates other key sources that include contemporary Swazi mat-makers.

A significant amount of grass technology that has survived today includes the *Nguni* beehive dome. Its historical importance is recognised and has been preserved strongly by the Swazi royal family as seen in the archival photo of the royal capital in Plate 03. [28] The current royal capital, *Ludzidzini,* also consists of beehive domes organised in a homestead set-up with a central cattle byre where national ceremonies such as the *Incwala* takes place.[29] Though in the rest of Swaziland today a mixture of dwelling styles are to be found, including solid brick houses in towns and cities. There are still thatched buildings in the rural areas. These consist of either cylinder or square domes, but the *Nguni* beehive dome structure of the royal capital is rarely found elsewhere.

[28] Photo courtesy of the Swaziland Royal Archives of *Lobamba* Royal Kraal, circa 1930.

[29] Marwick (1966) recorded a description of how a beehive hut is built. The woman's part in hut making was to cut the grass and then to bind it up into endless rolls. There were two kinds of such rolls: (a) *emashingi,* grass bound with strong fibre at the base, (b) *emakhenye* bound with grass less carefully. A species of river grass, made in the same fashion as a sleeping mat, though more roughly, called *sihlantsi.* On the framework of the hut (*luphahla*) was placed a piece of *sihlantsi,* followed by the whole frame covered with *tihlantsi.* Next, the *mshigi* is placed all round the bottom of the frame with the bases of the grass downwards and it is wound round the structure. It reaches only a short distance up the side of the wall. The *makhenye* are wound round and round in a spiral towards the top and are tied into place on the wattles with *tintsambo* grass rope. The pinnacle is fixed last. Ropes from the pinnacle (*IncoNgwane*) are then let down the sides and tied near the ground and bound together in a kind of network. (Marwick 1966:62-63) The *Nguni* beehive dome is also found at Mantenga Cultural Village, a tourist village built in 1997.

Kuper (1947) also made observations concerning Swazi hand made objects, and noted that the following items were being made:

> Pots, spoons, meat dishes, milk pails, beer strainers, and baskets, the furniture consisted entirely of sleeping and sitting mats and clothing of skin, hide and feather. Clay, wood, grass, and skins are skillfully worked and serve the purposes to which they are put, but the material soon breaks or perishes or tears, and every new article is laboriously made by hand. Only the grinding stones outlive the human span, but the slow and arduous process of grinding grain, the essential for every meal, illustrates further the technology of the Swazi. [30]

As has been seen earlier, the production of objects using grass technology was historically associated with women, and this association continues today. Indeed, it has been strengthened because of the fact that contemporary urban and rural Swazi societies have seen vast changes. Since independence in 1968, Swazi society has been in transition from a rural, agricultural and traditional basis to one of a more urban, middle-class, and cosmopolitan basis. Rural homestead life, once the norm, began to change during the first half of the twentieth century, primarily as a result of colonisation and the 'cultural' baggage that was introduced in the form of a money economy, agricultural advancements and education. Additionally, Swazi men became migrant labourers answering to the needs of neighbouring South Africa in great numbers from around 1914, thus leaving control of the homestead, agriculture and decision-making to women for the first time (Crush 1987).[31] Though Kuper (1947) observed that many men "in the Namahasha district, where Ronga influence is strong . . . thatch, brew, sew the skin skirts for women, and plait the fine beer strainers,"

[30] Kuper, H. 1947:138

[31] Crush (1987) establishes that "From within particular societies, different types of migrants emerged, with varying needs and motives for participating in wage-labour, and dispatched by different 'sending agencies'. [31]Despite this, according to de Vletter (1983), the homestead at the time of his observations was still the residence of about four out of five Swazi and continued to be a rural base both physically and psychologically for many urban dwellers. He comments that "Today the homestead remains, for rural and urban dwellers alike, the ceremonial focal point for the milestones, of life's passages (births, puberty, marriage and death) and the ultimate place of sanctuary from early childhood to extreme old age."

participating in the tasks of the homestead, she had to concede that "in the rest of the country similar tasks are normally allotted to women." As a result of this 'migration,' not only did more homestead duties fall to Swazi women; they also began to enter the workforce, establish themselves in small businesses and become involved in the subsistence economy, the craft industry (Russell 1983). This development further impacted on the production of 'traditional' items, and more sharply delineated which objects of material culture were made by women or by men. Kuper (1986) described Swazi men as being able to build, plough, milk cattle, sew skins and cut shields, carve using wood and fashion a hoe from metal. As it stands today, Swazi men are associated primarily with the production of 'hard' objects made out of wood and metal;[32] women are associated with the production of 'soft' objects made out of natural materials such as grass, reeds and sisal, and, as shall be seen, new materials such as plastic.

In terms of specifically grass-made objects, women in Swaziland today are credited with the production of several items. One is sweeping brushes that are made by binding strands of grasses together for one row in a similar fashion to mat-making by hand. [33] The grass that is held together is carefully fashioned into two types of brooms: *Umtsanyelo* made from *Lutindzi* for inside use and *Umtsanyelo* made from *Luchasi* for outside use. [34] Swazi women have also made beer strainers from twisted

[32] As a point of interest, the *Sicamelo,* the wooden headrest, is perhaps the only object made by men that has any direct relation to the grass sleeping mat of this study. The headrests are sold at Manzini Market and are primarily used as items, together with grass sleeping mats, that are buried with deceased Swazi males, in particular for the burial of Princes.[32] The original reasons outlined below by Jaques (1949) need not necessarily apply today: "As the headrest became embedded with body fat and personal materials it became more personalised, became so much a part of the owner that on his death the headrest was in many instances, buried together with him and other personal items."

[33] As opposed to using the *Imbongolo* frame.

[34] *Umtsanyelo* (with geometric handles made from *Luchasi*) is a very long hand held sweeping brush for use in the yard and does not require the sweeper to bend down. Its smaller counterpart *Umtsanyelo* (made from *Lutindzi*) is for sweeping the hut floor, this type of a brush is short and is designed to be used for the beehive hut floor and requires one to bend down. The short length of *Lutindzi* determines the length of the broom, the handle is bound plaited *Lutindzi* to form a grip, the top resembles a mop of hair, giving it an anthropomorphic appearance, similar to the beaded *Umntfwana.* A loop fixed at the top is an indication that it should be hung up either outside or inside the hut. Recently *Umtsanyelo* made from dyed *Lutindzi* are available. The introduction of dyed *Lutindzi* is due to the large number

lengths of *Inchoshana*. Plaited rope *Intsambo*(s) *Tintsambo* (pl), made from *Lutindzi* or *Sifunti,* continues to be an indispensable item associated with certain traditional practices such as the building of the *Emaguma* (the windbreaks made of reeds around the royal homestead.) [35] Finally, there exists a wealth of empirical evidence suggesting that *Licansi* (s) *Emacansi* (pl) (grass sleeping mats), *Si-hlantsi* (s) *Titlantsi* (pl) (grass sitting mats) and *Sitsebe* (s) *Titsebe* (pl) (grinding mats), the objects of this study, are also predominantly made by Swazi women. [36]

Swazi mat-makers are organised into networks that cut, sell and supply grasses to other women at the same time maintaining the use of grass as an active ingredient in the production of other current Swazi material cultural items. The current production of grass mats is of a considerable economic importance, being one of a relatively small range of goods that bring income directly to a large and predominantly female labour force throughout Swaziland. This income seems to form an important part of the family economy but is vulnerable to economic trends and foreign influences. (Russell 1978). Recent information is lacking concerning the economic status of women in Swaziland, however, except for a survey carried out by Margo Russell in 1978 on the production and marketing of women's handicraft in Swaziland that found women comprised a vital segment of the country's workforce in rural, traditional and modern sectors. The survey estimated there were 55, 000 women involved in natural fibre weaving in Swaziland, constituting nearly 10% of the total population. This

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of women employed by Gone Rural who dye the *Lutindzi* and return it to the rural women to fashion mainly baskets and table mats.

[35] This process requires an endless supply of such ropes. Before the reed dance, preparations have been made to collect lots of *Lutindz*i and women can be seen plaiting the rope whilst they do their daily work. The *Tintsambo* is used to tie the vertical reeds; passing the rope through alternate gaps in the standing reeds creating thick horizontal rows of binding called *Mtsandvo.* Two women work on either side or pass the rope backwards and forward, thus securing each reed in place. The windbreak is built around the huts, to create privacy and to enclose the outdoor cooking area. Three stripes are created to denote the cooking area and four stripes is an indication of the sleeping huts. This visual guidance is for the benefit of visiting strangers to direct them towards the kitchen area and not the sleeping quarters. Paul Malindzisa, Mapalaleni, Mbuluzi, (guide at Mantenga Cultural Village, Mantenga Nature Reserve, (pers comm. 04/1999)

[36] Though amongst the Zulu, men were also involved in making mats and weaving baskets made from *ilala* . (An early description of mat-making by Zulu men is found in Bryant (1949) see Chapter two.

relatively large sector generated a small income, often termed as ‘soap money,’ earnings especially important in that women were assured cash-in-the-hand over which they had control. In 1978, 36.4% of all homesteads had at least one woman involved in grass weaving practices. A further survey in 1983, also carried out by Margo Russell, showed an increase in this percentage to 56%, indicating the impact of craft marketability.

This study is rooted in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s and focuses specifically on finding explanations for why the Swazi grass mat has changed in appearance and function, explanations which seem to be connected to Swazi economic development in general and to craft marketability. During this period, the Swazi population became more migratory between the rural and the urban areas due to a better transport communication network; this allowed rural women greater exposure to a variety of new materials and resources. As a result, Swazi women began to incorporate and use ‘new’ materials, to integrate and modify the production of grass mats, creating dramatic differences between the old and the new, demonstrating innovative responses to changing circumstances. From conversations with the mat-makers, it is clear that they feel that whilst there is a need to maintain traditional values in craft there is also a need for a certain amount of innovation in the production of these mats in order to make them more marketable. As more people adopt a Western life-style, some traditional skills are becoming rare, especially amongst younger women. Older women, however, have become inventive in integrating the new materials available to embellish and decorate the traditional Swazi grass mat in such a way that the whole face of the mat has transformed.