

TRANSLATING THE TRADITIONAL: DESIGNS FOR SHANGAAN EMBROIDERY

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New South Africa ... Reconstruction and Development Programme ... social and economic upliftment ... empowerment ... women's rights. These are all very topical words in contemporary South African society. Some of them are loaded with emotion and some even with militancy. All pertain to the current situation in this country - a situation which calls for words, but also for corresponding actions. The need for action is particularly acute in rural communities, where the plight of women especially needs attention. In this technological age, it is hard to imagine people who are illiterate, without competitive skills and with few opportunities to acquire them.

In the far Northern Transvaal farming area of Letsitele, the realities for rural women, mainly Shangaan and Northern Sotho, are very bleak. This is a highly populated area with a dismally low literacy rate. Among women, traditionally marginalized in terms of formal education, this rate is probably the lowest. Little or poor formal education, large families and the harsh tradition of male migratory labour, which leaves women and children to fend for themselves, means that women have many responsibilities, but very little power. There are only limited options for employment: women have a choice of either domestic work or unskilled agricultural work. In both areas of employment the problem of caring for small children while earning a living remains critical.

Shangaan women have always been agriculturists, but they are traditionally also manufacturers of a number of cultural items. Besides making baskets, sleeping mats, clay vessels for cooking and storage, and utility objects for working the fields, they also process calabashes

and do embroidery and beadwork. As a result of urbanization and modernization some of these skills have been neglected and others have been turned into pastime activities.

Kaross Workers

Against this background Irma van Rooyen, a farmer's wife and an accomplished painter, decided to initiate an embroidery project, called Kaross Workers. Irma chose embroidery, because of the custom of Shangaan women to embroider their *mincéka* (singular *nceka*), the two

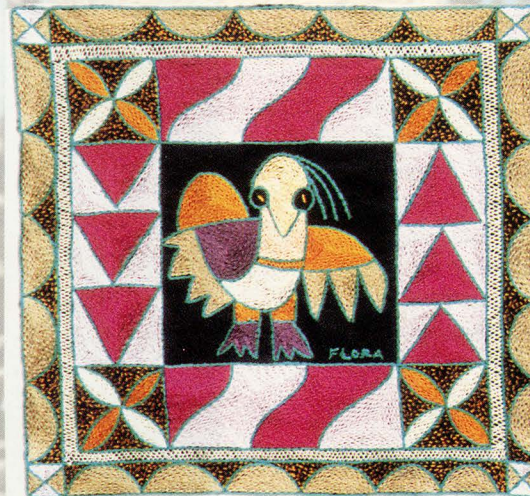
cloths they wear draped over their other garments. The cloths are knotted on the shoulders or the chest and are crossed over in the front and at the back. *Mincéka* are worn to mark special occasions, and in earlier times indicated a woman's status in the group (Terblanche 1994: 273-4). They also provide a place for the gifted woman to show her talents, thereby adding to her prestige.

There are three categories of *mincéka* (Terblanche 1994:271): the first one consists of squares of brightly-coloured fabric with clashing patterns, ready-made and available in shops. The strong colours and patterns are mixed at will by the wearer. The second category consists of *mincéka* made from black fabric, on which decorative motifs, often flowers and stylized trees, are

embroidered with brightly coloured thread and beads by the wearer. Safety pins are sometimes also used for decoration. The third category is the white *nceka*, a recent phenomenon, which is also embroidered with colourful motifs. Here, mealie meal bags are sometimes used and the women carefully embroider over the wording and logos on the bags.

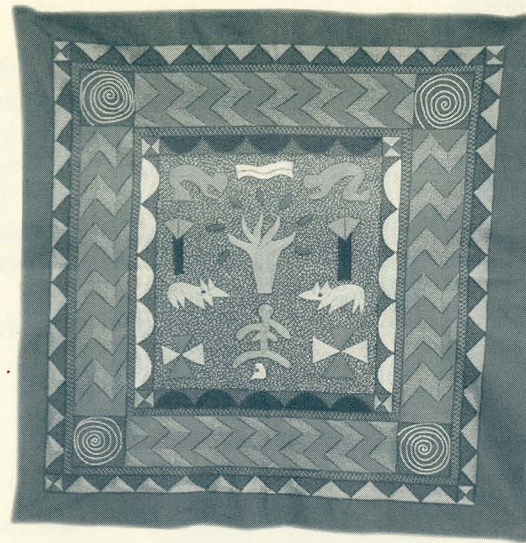


***An embroidery project
combines traditional
skill and a talent
nurtured by formal art
education into a range
of products which is
proving to be highly
successful in creating a
niche market for itself.***



When Irma started Kaross Workers in 1989, she employed 15 women from local farms on a part-time basis. Most participants' chief motivation for joining the project was to earn extra money. This meant that the activity had to be more than mere therapy and that the end products had to be unique, of an acceptable quality and vendible to essentially up-market buyers. Irma started by selling the 'raw' product, namely an embroidered cloth with neatly cut edges, to visitors and interested local residents. Clients worked the pieces into wall-hangings or cushions, or they simply framed them.

The growth of the project and the need to widen product marketability, led to the processing of the cloths into usable articles. Irma, with the help of a farm manager's wife, started to make up place mats, bedspreads, carrier bags and tablecloths. She then employed a part-time agent in Pretoria to handle distribution and marketing in the Gauteng area and further afield.



The original series of designs consist of a large centrally placed image supported by a border of smaller elements. All the images are made up of organic and geometric shapes. The planes created by these shapes provide opportunities for the abundant use of colour. The borders of the cloths reinforce the images in the centre and are considered equally important. The ethnic feeling conveyed by the central image is echoed by using mainly triangular and diamond shapes, joined together in zig-zag patterns. Half-circles and crescents in flower-like configurations are sometimes used and bars of colour, worked by criss-crossing the thread, often balance the solid areas.

Design

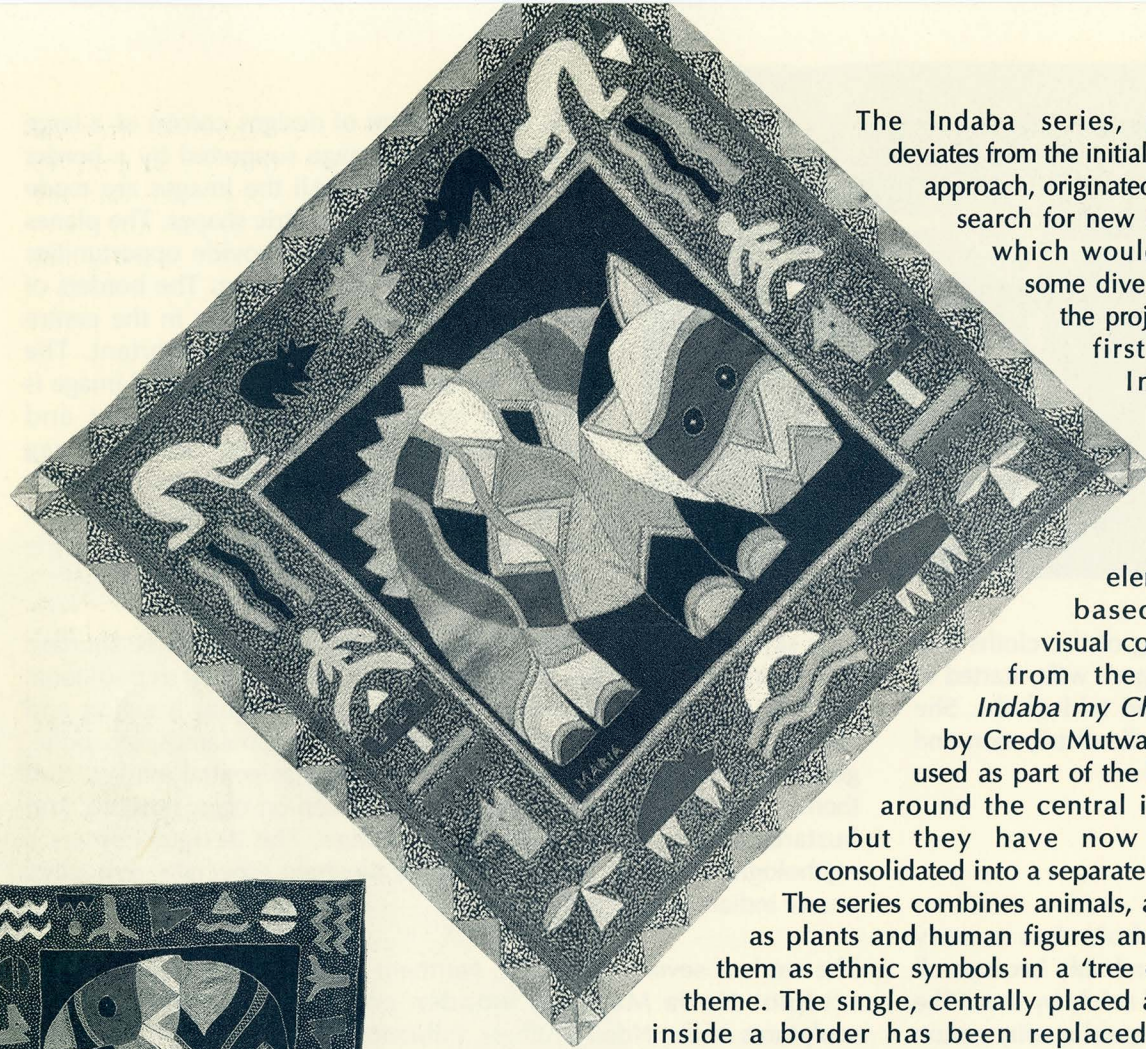
The project as a whole has a very distinctive character, probably because all the designs are created solely by Irma. She draws the motifs onto good quality cotton fabric with a white pencil and selects the range of colours for each piece. Initially only black fabric was used, but lately white, ochre, 'brick-red' and green are also being used. The white cloths are embroidered mainly with white and cream thread, creating subtle images. A light colour like blue, ecru or green is sometimes added for definition. The black cloths, which still make up the bulk of the production, as well as the other coloured clothes, are worked in a multitude of colours.

Irma says she draws her inspiration for the imagery from three sources: her natural surroundings, the work of local artists, as well as traditional decoration and motifs found on the walls of tribal housing and clothing. Animals of the Letaba area, like the hippopotamus, crocodile, gecko, rhinoceros and elephant are often used as central images. Bird themes include the turkey, peacock, cock, hen-on-eggs, hornbill, kori bustard, heron, guinea fowl and partridge. The designs convey a mythological feeling, the birds and the elephant especially reminding one of Indian counterparts.

The work of several Shangaan, Northern Sotho and Venda artists, like sculptor Noria Mabasa's wooden crocodiles and the wooden sculptures of the Ndou brothers, influence the form and shapes of the designs. Irma maintains that she relates well to the ethnic view of animals, birds and human figures and that she finds confirmation for her personal interpretation of nature in the work of these fellow artists.

Although traditional decoration seems to be found mainly on curios nowadays, it may still be seen on clothing and mural painting in remote and highly traditional areas. In addition to travelling to these areas, Irma also collects traditional artifacts. She studies the decoration for themes and designs which could be successfully translated into embroidered images.





The Indaba series, which deviates from the initial design approach, originated in the search for new images which would lend some diversity to the project. At first the Indaba

elements, based on visual concepts from the book *Indaba my Children* by Credo Mutwa, were used as part of the border around the central image, but they have now been consolidated into a separate series. The series combines animals, as well as plants and human figures and uses them as ethnic symbols in a 'tree of life' theme. The single, centrally placed animal inside a border has been replaced by a combination of small images. Concepts like respect, peace and desire are symbolized. The Indaba elements have been successfully combined with the original ones to create a narrative design, instead of purely decorative pieces.

Execution

All the fabric and thread used are supplied by Irma. She selects the colours for each piece, but their placement and combination is left to each embroiderer's own sensibilities. The embroiderer first outlines all

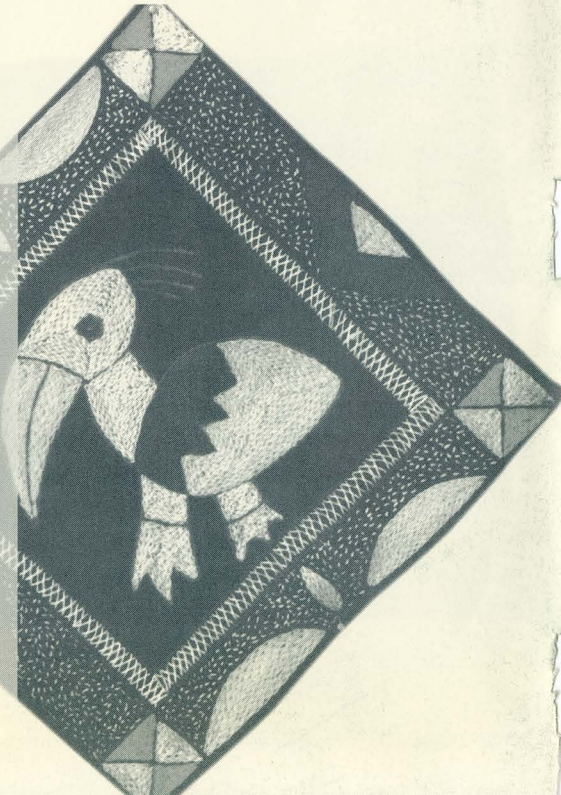
the shapes in stem stitch and then fills them in using chain-stitch. The chain-stitches are worked closely together creating a solid area of colour which looks like satin-stitch. Each outlined shape is executed in a single colour. Backgrounds are filled by 'specks' of colour, created by working small stitches at different angles to each other. The result is a vibrant and shimmering image.

Each piece bears the embroiderer's name, serving not only as a means of identification, but also as a form of 'ownership' and an advertisement for the skill of the particular individual.

The women are required to complete their pieces within a specified period of time. Completed pieces are then brought to Irma for comment, and once accepted the workers receive immediate payment. As the style of embroidery is uniform it is not difficult to make quality comparisons and to set a standard. Newcomers to the project are first given a small sample to work, in order to determine their technical and aesthetic ability. Once accepted to the project they are expected to produce work of a satisfactory standard.

Workers are paid per piece. Price is determined not only by size, but also by the appearance of the cloth. The basic price is set per size, but a bonus can be earned if the piece is well executed and the colouring attractive. Workers earn 50 per cent of the wholesale price of the final item. The balance is used for the cost of materials, administration, transportation and marketing.

The women are intensely proud of their creations and compete fiercely with each other. They take an active part in upholding and improving the standard of





their own work and usually participate enthusiastically in discussions about the placement of colours and the standard of workmanship.

Khomanani Club

The workers regard themselves as members of an elite group who have elected Lucy Shokane as their spokesperson. Lucy was one of the first 15 workers to join the project when it started. She was initially employed as a domestic worker by Irma, but her language and literacy skills enabled her to be promoted to pack-house work in season. She started embroidering on a part-time basis to assist her family financially, and because of her technical skills, was soon able to devote her time solely to the project and base herself at her home in Shihoko, near Giyani. This has placed her in the position of being able to remain with her children while earning a living.

Lucy encourages other women, also working from their homes, to join her during the day and has established a group which she has named the Khomanani Club. The word *khomanani* means 'to work together'. Most members of this group were invited to the project by Lucy. Some were trained by her and she now spends a great deal of time helping them, and encouraging them to work faster, but still according to the set standard.



Looking ahead

Kaross Workers came into being because of these women's skill and Irma's keen eye, sense of aesthetic interpretation and her love of African art. In this joint venture where traditional skill, learnt from childhood, and a talent nurtured by formal art education come together, the finished product is decorative, aesthetically pleasing, linked to cultural imagery and has proven to be highly marketable. The project has empowered a group of women to improve their standard of living and has provided them with the opportunity to raise their self-esteem.

What started out as a small concern that could be run as a part-time activity on the farm, today has 125 participants and has developed into a thriving business. The structuring of Kaross Workers grew as the number of participants increased and it has learnt valuable lessons along the way. The increasing demand for its products is

currently creating a threshold for Irma van Rooyen. She realizes that the project has almost outgrown her expectations and that she will soon have to make decisions regarding changes to the structure and management of this enterprise.

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