

Women and the Art of Speaking with the Beads: The Traditional 'Zulu Love Letter'

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ABSTRACT Beads form an integral part of the Zulu traditional regalia as they are used among the Zulu people of both genders to portray their status and social relationships. From the Zulu perspective, a skill of speaking with the beads flows from young women who specialize in designing the popular 'Zulu love letter' to communicate their romantic messages to their male recipients. A beaded-message adds a loving seasoning to the meaning of a non-verbal language of beads for eloquent communication, especially during romantic relationships. In the published academic literature, there is a significant research gap concerning the value and the function of this indigenous form of communication. This paper attempts to fill the gap by conducting firsthand interviews with local women in KwaZulu-Natal to examine and interpret the indigenous bead puzzle 'written' by women to outshine men through color coding.

INTRODUCTION

The Zulu social lifestyle has in many ways been affected by modernity and other aspects of life in the 21st century. However, this paper attempts to illustrate to the reader how things were in relation to courting among the youth in the olden days. Biyela (cited in www.ajcnet.com 2015) explains that courting differs across generations as well as societies in many ways and she also emphasizes that there are devices and social programs that nations implement to regulate and evaluate the processes of courtship to preserve the nation's identity as well as its cultural strategy. Patterns of courtship also differ with respect to who initiates it, the rules associated with it, methods of communication, and the length of time it takes. Biyela (cited in www.ajcnet.com 2015) further explains that in traditional Zulu society, it is a male who is expected to initiate the dating process and to present the *ilobolo* (bride's dowry) to the girl's family as a sign of appreciation. A girl is given the right to sever ties with her boyfriend if he fails to fulfill his promises. In earlier traditional Zulu culture, the duration for courtship was a minimum of two years. The belief was that a potential couple needed enough time together to discover possible incompatibilities prior to their final commitment to each other in marriage. In the context of western culture, Little (1982: 24) attests that 'both men and women often want

partners who will first of all be loving mates, and second, caring parents'. In earlier Zulu traditional time, courtship was a dynamic romantic enterprise among young people of both genders because adulthood and public ranking were by then achieved mainly through marital status. Beaded communication was one of the incentives through which the youth were facilitated towards this goal.

This paper argues that in Zulu culture, the skill of communicating with the beads by young women through color coding to display the social status of an individual to whom the message is addressed is a form of indigenous 'writing'. This type of skill also opens the window to the creation of color metaphors, which abound in Zulu language. The art of speaking and 'writing' in beads discussed in this paper originated from what Ong (1982) calls the basic 'oral culture' whose communication was achieved through word of mouth or other non-verbal means. The oral word, according to the theory of Ong, is the bearer of creative power in the minds of its users, and may produce magic actions or events once it is uttered with authority. During a courtship period, for example, a girl who had not fallen in love would wear her string of white beads on her lower waist as a form of communication to say that "her heart belongs to no one yet" (Biyela 2013:39). The magic power of beads emphasized by Ong reminds the researcher of the beaded necklace that the late former president of South

Africa, Mandela used to wear as a young political activist. The researchers' informants said that people used to interpret his wearing of the royal necklace as a way of inviting his ancestors to support him in his political struggle.

The researcher became interested in exploring this indigenous art of talking to the beads by young Zulu women because there is a noticeable gap in the academic literature concerning the depiction of beads and their colorful designs as powerful romantic art. This gap in knowledge motivated the researcher to conduct firsthand oral interviews on the impact of a 'Zulu love letter' among young lovebirds to provide a source for a collaborative interpretation and critical analysis among scholars in the present context. The traditional 'Zulu love letter' is made from *amaxube* (multicoloured bands of beads), which are 'written' in a form of 'sentences'. *Amxube* are also made from medium-sized beads called *amaqanda* (eggs) (Nyembezi and Nxumalo 1966).

Literature Review

Bryant (1949), in his research on beads, observed that young Zulu girls made with their beads a multitude of ornaments, wherewith to bedeck their own and their sweethearts' bodies. The girls also designed the beaded messages to communicate their desires to their male recipients, since 'beadwork combines art and linguistic logic' (The Zulu Beadwork Language 2015:2). Artistic oral creativity consists, according to Canonici (1996: 4), in giving expression to even trite events by employing dramatic imagery and carefully constructed linguistic expressions, so as to make the oral utterance striking, memorable and easily recalled. This art of writing or communicating through a traditional 'Zulu love letter' depends upon the patterning of colors in which women are claimed to outshine men. According to Twala (1951), the beading art also varies in scale according to the occasion and the social status of the person for whom the message is designed because each color has its own proper meaning in a particular context. Twala (1951:116) further explains that 'in writing out a message, the keyword is the 'heart'; always in the first person, the designer, with a message addressed to the second person, the lover'. This means that a girl, the sender is able to whispers or sings to a particular color that corresponds to the feel-

ings of her heart in that point of writing her message. Bryant (1949:159) stresses that by writing a beaded-message in this way, "A girl would read the letter, telling the beads one by one saying, my heart today is white". In the Zulu language of beads, this 'white heart' may mean purity, faithful love, happiness, reconciliation and peace. The perceived bead colors in Zulu may summarize a situation, pass a judgment, or offer a course of action within a particular context. For example, a message sent in a white-beaded string can be a consolation in difficulties and a guide when choice is made and can also express a morality suited to the human behavior in a Zulu cultural context (Maphumulo 1993).

Xulu (2002) has explored the beads from the point of view of modern fashion, where colors are often interwoven into aesthetic patterns in line with principles of design and decoration to supply economic demands for cash at tourist destinations without using colors symbolically in the traditional Zulu manner. Mashiyane (2006) examined beadwork, its cultural and linguistic significance among the Ndebele, a sub-group of the Nguni. Biyela (2013) has also examined the bead color metaphors in a general Zulu lifestyle but not a 'Zulu love letter' in detail as a vehicle of powerful romantic desires.

RESEARCH METHOD

The researcher's curiosity was stimulated during her visits to the beadwork section at Phansi and Eshowe museums in KwaZulu-Natal, containing old beads with colors and patterns different from those commonly seen at tourist destinations where curators and the curio owners no longer decode the colors according to traditional Zulu cultural cues. The research problem was identified and it gave rise to the need to find additional reliable sources of information to complement the heritage reserved in these museums. Prior to the field-research, the researcher discussed ethical issues with the community leaders in the targeted area. She conducted oral interviews with the elderly rural informants so that they would interpret the encoding of beaded-messages of the 'Zulu love letter' according to the original Zulu cues for understanding conversations conducted through beads. Mtetwa (1988:38) stressed that the "beads are deliberately coded, are meant to be puzzles, sometimes

taking days and months to unravel.” For this reason, the encoding and analyzing of the language of beads involves meticulous and critical thinking on the part of women as the designers of this coded indigenous embroidery. In this paper, the researcher postulates that young lovers in earlier Zulu society encountered challenges on their love journey whose sentiments were expressed through beaded-messages such as the ‘Zulu love letter’.

Data Capture

The researcher used simple random sampling to target an area, namely, *Emahlayizeni*, in Nkandla. She conducted individual and group interviews with 25 elderly women whose experience could add value to the study, as some of these informants had been leaders of their respective women regiments during their courtship program. The book, *Inqolobane Yesizwe* by Nyembezi and Nxumalo (1966) remains the standard reference for oral interview questions emphasizing Zulu ‘color codes’. The qualitative model was selected to make it possible for some illiterate informants to express orally their perceptions of the beaded messages. To capture the data, video recorders and still cameras were used. Date of interview and biographical information of the interviewees were also recorded.

The following section gives the findings, analyzes data and also discusses the underlying meanings of the selected colors of the traditional ‘Zulu love letter’.

OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

The Interpretation of Beaded-bands in the Message

The Band of White Beads

This section examines and illustrates how “Beads talk through imagery” as referred to by Xulu (2002:24). During the writing session, each bead becomes a messenger of the girlfriend to her lover. For instance, she carefully picks up a single white bead and speaks directly to it, saying, “tell him, my love for him is as immeasurable as the sand on the sea shores”. Using white beads in the opening of a ‘Zulu love letter’ is vital. It tells the reader that the letter is bringing good news, because according to Xulu (2002:20)

the “white bead conveys a positive message of love, purity, goodness, happiness and virginity in this society”. The informants explained to the researcher that a girl may also open the letter with the white beads to gently remind her partner of their commitment to a virginal relationship, which is supposed to end with an uncontaminated marriage, as the Zulu ethical regulation prescribes. Biyela (2013:40) also stresses that when a “young couple enters their marital status with uncontaminated bodies, the community rejoices as the two ‘white colors’ symbolize a double blessing”. The white color in particular embodies the ideal values such as peace and security towards which the young ‘doves’ need to strive in Zulu traditional society. There seems to be a correlation between the Zulu and the Kaguru people of Tanzania with regard to the metaphors concerning bodily and sexual orientation. For the Kaguru too, the color white represents ‘safety, peace, and normality’ (Beidelman 1980: 39).

The Band of Red Beads

The color metaphors vary from culture to culture. According to Qiang (2011:100) (cited in www.aijcrnet.com 2015), in the Chinese tradition, for example, it is the color ‘red that brings positive things such as luck and joy’ In Zulu culture, red represents life, energy and solid love. In this letter, it is made to follow the white band of beads because the girl asserts to her partner that her whole life belongs to him alone. The red color here represents the heart of the girl, whose pump opens into that of her boyfriend, resulting in a ‘healthy high blood pressure of love’. Such an act of love is referred to by Mashiyane (2012:7) as a gift that has magic and that nothing else could equal it.

The Band of Green Beads

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, which could be the reason why the informants said that towards the end of the love letter, the sender of a beaded message often expresses the feelings of loneliness to invite her boyfriend’s companionship by saying, “my green bead, tell him, I am as thin as a blade of the green grass. Loneliness is also blowing me away like the wind blowing the thin green grass in the early morning hours. But what does this message say to its

recipient from the bead language point of view? Green signifies desire, delicacy and youthfulness in this context. Against this background, it seems that without her partner, the sender of a message feels incomplete because she has no one nearby with whom to share her romantic feelings. She is hungry for intimacy. The wind symbol in this context signifies adversaries who keep on reminding her to change her mind in order to give her heart to them. She might also be warning her partner that temptations and confusion are flooding her mind. In other words, she needs his support. After receiving such a warm letter, a responsible young man is bound to respond, either in person or by asking his female relatives to make him a relevant token of love that he can send to his girlfriend, as Xulu (2002:5) explains, 'Among the Zulu, if a young man wants to give a beaded message to his fiancée, he has to get a sister or other female relative to make it for him, as the rule is so strong that women do beadwork.'

The 'Zulu love letter' in this context is developmental in its design because it has started with a white color representing graciousness, followed by red for strength and green for desire. These colors show that the girl is also undergoing a process of longing for the full contentment in a final commitment where she will be lovingly cherished and protected against rivals by her prospective husband. Mtetwa (1988: 35) adds, "green as grass within the bead context can mean peace of mind, contentment, or a soft spot for someone". On the contrary, if the young man shows signs of being irresponsible after a number of warnings through beaded messages, the courtship principle allows his girlfriend to reject him using a 'rejection letter' with a collage of colors as the sample will show in the following discussion.

A Collage of Beads

If the communication bonds break down to interference in the relationship of the two young lovers, a girl has the right to send her partner a beaded collage with colours of anger, despair and rejection to remind him of his initial courtship promises. The first line of such a combination might start with the colors of birds, called *amankankane* (Hadadah Ibis), which are shad-owy violet blue. Biyela (2009, 2013) maintain that besides their color, these birds are also

known for their lamenting sound, which they make when setting off, which the Zulu literally interpret as saying, "*Mina ngahamba...*" (Me, I left...). Through the colors and the sound of these birds, the girl is saying, "I am moaning like a Hadadah Ibis and I am leaving you forever". The second line in the assemblage may be black, which represents the status of a married woman because when a Zulu girl gets married in a traditional way, her fiancé provides her with a black kilt to be worn around her waist where the white string used to be before falling in love. This is why, in a low voice, the girl would say, "my black bead, tell him, I thought he would provide me with a black kilt in marriage" (Biyela 2013). Finally, in this context, the girl talks to the last bead, *intohoviyane* (a large, evil smelling vegetable-locust with greenish-yellow and black-blue stripes) saying in anger, "tell him directly, he smells in my presence like *intohoviyane* because he is dishonest and irresponsible". In this context, it appears that beaded messages as a form of art can be used by girls as a disciplinary tool to remind young men of the responsibilities they should convey in their romantic relationships as Schoeman (1983:147) states that 'no true art is without discipline'.

CONCLUSION

The paper concentrated on the analysis and interpretation of selected colors of the multicolored embroidery known as the 'Zulu love letter', which was traditionally used to send love messages during courtship. The courtship program was established to give young people a direction in matters concerning their choice of romantic partners throughout their adolescence stage until their marriage. Bead messages signify different meanings in different societies, context and eras. In the Zulu society, these messages by young women lend themselves to the courtship communication as traditional non-verbal social networks to maintain healthy social relationships among young people.

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