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Managing Mapula: Defining Markets for an Embroidery Project in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Brenda Schmahmann

My aim in this paper is to explore the kinds of strategies used to market a contemporary needlework project in South Africa – one entitled “Mapula” (which means “mother of rain”). Members of Mapula embroider cushion covers and, more occasionally, tablemats. But the art form that has been especially successful and provided members of the project with the widest scope for innovation is embroidered cloths – works that were first made in 1996.

The Formation of Mapula

While currently operating in a post-*apartheid* South Africa, Mapula was in fact formed in 1991, three years prior to the first democratic election in 1994. The project is in the Winterveld (**Fig.1**) – an area that is currently in the North West Province and about 45 km north of Pretoria. In 1936, large farms comprising the Winterveld were divided into plots that were made available for purchase and agricultural development by black South Africans. But rather than undertaking farming, new owners found it more profitable to rent land to tenants on the lookout for homesteads a manageable distance from Pretoria and Johannesburg. Growth in the population increased still further when the area became home to victims of the forced removals that took place during the fifties and sixties – in other words, when thousands of black families were evicted from suburbs identified for white settlement. The Winterveld would also feel the impact of the *apartheid* government’s policy of dividing areas of the country occupied by black people into independent ‘homelands’. Although 90% of the population are not Tswana-speakers, the area was incorporated into the ostensibly Tswana ‘homeland’ of Bophuthatswana when it was granted independence in December 1977. When assigned to Bophuthatswana, the already dire living conditions of the population worsened. Boreholes that had been drilled by the South African government in an attempt to create a fresh water supply for the burgeoning population were neglected, disease and infant mortality became rife, and, when all registered schools were required to use Tswana as



Fig. 1 The Winterveld: December 1977 - May 1994

their medium of instruction, so-called 'private schools' were established that were often no more than shacks staffed by teachers with limited levels of literacy. Also non-Tswana people living in the area, even those who had been born in the Winterveld or who had inherited land, had difficulties obtaining citizenship of Bophuthatswana and, as a result, struggled to receive pensions or work permits. This was, then, an area rife with social problems.¹

The formation of Mapula was part of an initiative by the professional women's organisation, Soroptomists International, to upgrade the living conditions of people in the Winterveld. A prime mover in starting the project was Karin Skawran, then professor and head of History of Art and Fine Art at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria² and a Soroptomist whose portfolio was "Literacy and Education". Equally important were the Sisters of Mercy in the Winterveld. In early 1979, a Winterveld Action Committee was established under the auspices of the Pretoria Council of Churches, and one of its agendas was the introduction of literacy and development projects in the area. This provided a framework for the Sisters of Mercy to build an adult education centre in the Winterveld, one that opened in 1984 and was named the DWT Nthathe Adult Education Centre.³ Apart from making available a room at the school as a base for the project, the Sisters identified Emily Maluleke as a local person who could supervise the making of works.⁴ A number of University of South Africa staff assisted the project in its early stages. But the person whose commitment has been the most sustained has been Janétje van der Merwe – a fine art graduate employed by the Department of Marketing and Corporate Communication.⁵

Although minutes kept during meetings by the steering committee⁶ suggest that the initial aim was for Mapula to function independently, a withdrawal on the part of outsiders has

¹ A good overview of conditions in the Winterveld during the *apartheid* years is provided in the following pamphlet: Commission for Justice & Peace, Archdiocese of Pretoria, and The Winterveld Action Committee of the Pretoria Council of Churches, *A Profile on the Winterveld*, December 1983, 1-8.

² The University of South Africa (Unisa) is a large distance education university.

³ I obtained details about this initiative as well as conditions in the Winterveld from Sister Immaculata, who led these developments in the early 1980s. (Sister Immaculata, interview by author, Pretoria, 3 April 2002.)

⁴ The project has undergone some changes over the years. In early 1998, some women wanted to work from home rather than in the context of the classroom, and they elected a second co-ordinator, Rossinah Maepa. More than half of the approximately eighty women now in the project are members of this group.

⁵ I have obtained various insights from Janétje van der Merwe about the running of the project since I first interviewed her on 12 September 1999. In the following lengthy discussion, we focused on recent developments at Mapula and on marketing: Janétje van der Merwe, interview by author, Pretoria, 1 April 2002. Information about the strategies she uses is derived from this discussion, although analysis of the implications of these strategies is my own.

⁶ I am indebted to Karin Skawran (interview with author, Pretoria, 3 April 2002), for providing me with copies of minutes that are still extant. Present at the first meeting, which took place on 8 March 1991, were

never been realised. While most committee members have now deflected their attentions elsewhere, this is only because Van der Merwe proved herself the person most capable of building markets for the project, and, more than anybody else, committed her energies to Mapula and fostered relationships of trust and friendship with the women it supports. The project is undoubtedly rendered vulnerable through members' total reliance on Van der Merwe, but it needs to be recognised that the levels of growth and development that Mapula has seen since the mid 1990s are unlikely to have occurred without her input.⁷

If a post-*apartheid* situation has presented new opportunities, taking advantage of these various possibilities is no easy matter. Needlework in South Africa can be marketed in such a way that it enters prestigious public and corporate collections, but it can simultaneously be directed at tourists or sold via shops and open markets rather than 'art galleries' in the traditional sense. And while needlework can find a place in prestigious museum exhibitions, it can also be displayed at shows of the type that convey messages that exhibited works are essentially 'products' rather than 'art', and the outcome of industrious labour rather than inspired or creative endeavour. Van der Merwe's approach has been to attempt to take advantage of *all* rather than *some* of these opportunities, as I will indicate. But since this has entailed catering for markets that are not merely *different* from one another but which in fact also convey *contradictory* messages about the value and status of the works, it has required some subtle negotiation. Mapula embroideries currently occupy an uncertain terrain. Regarded, on the one hand, as individually made and conceptualised collectors' pieces, they are also, on the other, made accessible to buyers on the lookout for mementoes of South African or for reasonably priced items of décor. While the makers of pieces are in some respects defined as 'artists' who are capable of establishing individual reputations, they are in other instances constructed as unknown 'artisans' or 'craftswomen' who define their style and subject matter in terms of precedents established by the group.

Post-1994 Marketing Strategies

Apart from now featuring in the permanent holdings of at least three art museums,⁸ Mapula embroideries have begun to be included in the collections of local corporations. In 2000, for instance, the large petroleum company, Sasol, purchased a Mapula work, and

the following people: Shirley Kossick; Mimi van der Merwe; Sister Mercedes; Janétje van der Merwe; Frieda Hattingh; Lize van Robbroeck; Antoinette du Plessis; Karin Skawran.

⁷ Ideally, Mapula ought to have established a structure that enabled a local person to work continuously with Van der Merwe and thus to glean greater expertise in marketing. On a practical level, however, it needs to be borne in mind that Van der Merwe has full-time employment at Unisa and that she is simply not in a position to make daily or even weekly visits to the Winterveld. Unisa has no formal involvement with the Mapula project, and Van der Merwe's marketing of the works is done in her spare time. She receives no remuneration for her work with the project.

⁸ In 1998, cloths by Selinah Makwana were purchased by the Art Galleries of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and the University of South Africa, Pretoria. The Durban Art Gallery also recently acquired a cloth by a Mapula embroiderer – something I ascertained in an informal conversation with Carol Brown, Director of that institution, in August 2002.

in 2001 a number of embroideries were selected for the collection of Africa Bank. Furthermore, works by Mapula have been used in the context of official or government-sponsored events. In 1998, for instance, they were used as backdrops at the ambassadorial reception for the South African soccer team in France. And the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology has selected works by Mapula for inclusion in official displays of South African art overseas, such as the "Celebrate South Africa" festivities held at the Oxo Tower in London in 2001. A new democratic constitution has undoubtedly worked to create awareness on the part of public institutions and corporations that their collections ought to contain holdings from diverse sectors of the population. But the choice of Mapula works for official or government-sponsored events has probably been informed by their incorporation of subject matter that conveys messages appropriate to a new dispensation.

While early cushion covers by the group tended to focus on animals or flowers, the 1993-1994 period saw the introduction of subject matter focusing



Fig. 2 Rossinah Maepa, Untitled (*The 1999 Election*) (1999) embroidered cloth, 114 x 114 cm, private collection. Photograph by Paul Mills.

more specifically on contemporary events – and often on imagery which drew reference to South Africa's newly developed symbols of, and conceptions about, its nationhood. Shortly before the first democratic election in 1994, South African leaders, most especially Nelson Mandela, began to feature as subject matter of cushion covers, as did the new South African flag. The introduction of large cloths in 1996 meant that, by the time of the second election in 1999, it was possible to represent more detailed or complex imagery. An embroidered cloth by Rossinah Maepa, for example, was derived from a poster educating citizens how to vote (Fig. 2). While animals continue to be embroidered by a number of women, so too do icons of popular culture and sports events (Fig. 3). The late 1990s also saw works drawing reference to grassroots educational campaigns⁹ and

⁹ These include various AIDS awareness campaigns. The "Drive Alive" campaign, directed primarily at discouraging speeding, has also featured in Mapula embroideries.

local advertising. And women have begun to refer to international events involving or affecting South Africans. A few cloths made in 2000, for example, are indebted to media coverage of the floods in Mozambique – more specifically, to reports about the assistance offered by South Africans to victims of the disaster, such as the rescue of a woman who had given birth while taking refuge in a tree (Fig. 4).

Mapula embroideries have been influenced by a

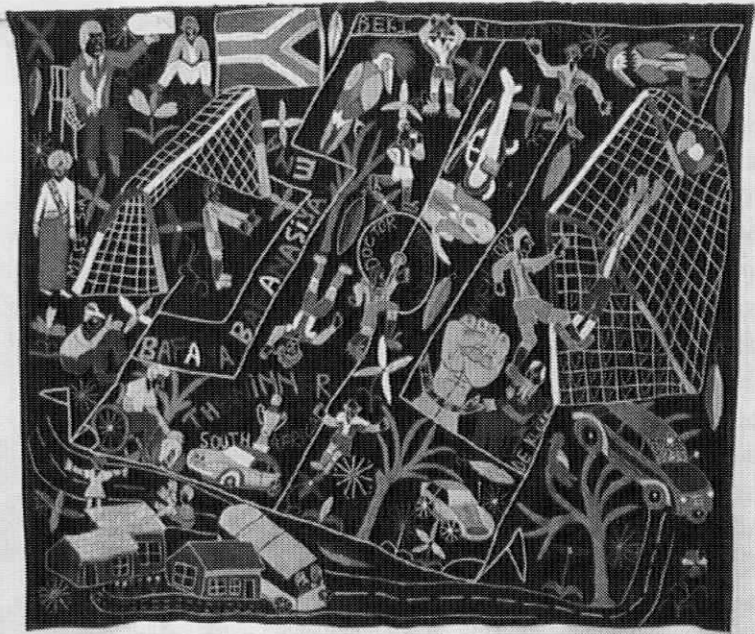


Fig.3 Selinah Makwana, Untitled (*Bafana Bafana*) (1999) embroidered cloth, 115 x 135 cm, private collection. Photograph by Paul Mills



Fig. 4 Unknown artist, Untitled (*Mozambique Misery*) (2000), embroidered cloth, 82 x 110 cm, private collection. Photograph by Paul Mills.

climate in which there has been an imperative towards the fostering of pride in all things South African. And certainly, in a general sense, they convey meanings that would seem to conform with Thabo Mbeki's vision of an 'African Renaissance' that he first articulated in 1996 – one underpinned by a concept of South Africa as leading an economic and cultural regeneration of the continent through the celebration of indigenous traditions in all their diversity. But what is perhaps even more notable – at least in the more explicitly political works – is that they celebrate not only black leaders, such as Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, but also white leaders such as F.W. de Klerk (Fig. 5). Indeed one cushion cover, which was reproduced in a newspaper article in 1994, represented Mandela's negotiations with the Afrikaner Resistance Leader, Eugene Terreblanche.¹⁰ The kind of imagery used in embroideries such as these tallies with the multiculturalism that has characterised the



Fig. 5 Detail of Selinah Makwana, Untitled (*Bafana Bafana*)

rhetoric of the ANC-led government, particularly during Mandela's period in office. It is one which, in Sandra Klopper's words, has endeavoured to "accept and even celebrate difference in the interests of building an entirely new sense of nation-ness" and is "predicated on the belief that it is important not to alienate any of the many constituencies currently competing for economic and other resources".¹¹ It would be misplaced to see Mapula embroideries as deliberately propagandistic statements, and they might rather be viewed as intricately related to the women's newly acquired status as enfranchised South Africans instead of inadvertent residents of a so-called 'homeland': they are thus likely to be sincere celebrations of political transformation. But it does need to be acknowledged that the kinds of messages about reconciliation that the works convey as well as their celebration of diverse aspects of local culture have made them amenable to incorporation in events funded or organised by government agencies.

Mapula works have been included in number of temporary museum exhibitions. Some of these shows have focused on needlework specifically. "Embroidered Impressions", held at the Pretoria Museum in 1995 and on the Greek island of Naxos the following year, is

¹⁰ Lilla Fourie, "Winterveld's People at Work," *Beeld*, 29 July 1984, Property Guide Section, 27.

¹¹ Sandra Klopper, "Dressing for Political Success in Post-Apartheid South Africa", (unpublished paper written in about 1996), unpaginated. For a discussion of the ways in which clothing styles in contemporary South Africa are bound up with the concepts of the 'African Renaissance', see Sandra Klopper, "Re-dressing the past: the Africanisation of sartorial style in contemporary South Africa" in *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, eds. A. Brah and A.E. Coombes (London: Routledge, 2000), 216-231.

one example.¹² “Material Matters”, an exhibition held at five major galleries in South Africa in 2000 and 2001, is another (Fig. 6).¹³ Other exhibitions have looked at Mapula as an example of the creativity of South African women. These include “Women’s Voice”, which was shown in Stuttgart in Germany in 1998,¹⁴ and “Women of Tshwane”, which was shown at the University of Stellenbosch in 2001.¹⁵ Shows such as these have conveyed a message that embroidery, which is so often denigrated to the level of a minor ‘craft’, is in fact no less worthy of validation than works made in media which westerners more readily associate with ‘high art’, such as oil paint. They have undoubtedly also conveyed a message that Mapula works are worthy of inclusion in prestigious public, corporate or private collections, and that they warrant fetching prices that buyers might more normally pay for works in other kinds of media.



Fig. 6 The opening of "Material Matters" at the King George VI Art Gallery in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 19 October 2000. Photograph by Paul Mills.

But efforts to bolster the image of Mapula works as collectors’ pieces have been simultaneous with an agenda to make the embroideries affordable and readily available, and herein results a tension. The years following the first democratic election have seen a dramatic growth in South Africa’s tourist industry, and, with it, the introduction of structures that might enable people in art projects to take advantage of the increased numbers of visitors to the country. While it would be misguided to characterise art made for tourists as automatically low grade or deficient, it does need to be recognised that visitors to South Africa tend to make their purchases in different circumstances to buyers for public or corporate institutions, for instance, and are guided by different imperatives. While the ‘collector’ will normally contact Van der Merwe to explore the possibility of a purchase, or alternatively work via an art dealer or art advisor, the tourist will usually select works at shops. And while the former will normally want to establish that he or she

¹² See: Jánetje van der Merwe, *Embroidered Impressions* (Pretoria: Pretoria Art Museum, 1995), and Karin Skawran, “The Extending Thread”, *Vuka* vol. 2, no. 4, 1997, 37-42.

¹³ See: Brenda Schmahmann, ed. *Material Matters: Appliqués by the Weya Women of Zimbabwe and Needlework by South African Collectives* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ See: *Women’s Voice* (Stuttgart: Mercedes-Benz Museum, 1998).

¹⁵ See: Lydia de Waal, *Women of Tshwane* (Stellenbosch: Sasol Art Museum, University of Stellenbosch, 2001).

is about to purchase the best examples of works by the group, the latter will usually make purchases spontaneously and without undertaking background research on the project.

Devising strategies that enable Mapula works to cater for different kinds of potential markets has required some subtle planning. Apart from making available works for exhibition, Van der Merwe identifies cloths she feels would be potentially suitable for inclusion in corporate or public collections, or for private buyers on the lookout for particular kinds of Mapula pieces. While remaining works are all disseminated to retail outlets, this is by no means done in an ad hoc fashion. Van der Merwe makes still further discriminations, sending works she regards as being of better quality to outlets such as the Kim Sack Gallery (Fig. 7) or Arts Africa (Fig. 8) in Johannesburg rather than to less established shops. And some of the embroideries – normally those Van der Merwe considers least impressive – are marketed at the Magnolia

Dell Fair, which is held monthly in Pretoria. While showing works in this context affords the project little prestige, it provides opportunities for Mapula women to do the selling themselves and thus to have some immediate contact with potential buyers.

The act of drawing qualitative distinctions between works is necessarily going to be informed by personal ‘taste’, and Van der Merwe’s sensibilities inevitably have an impact on her decisions. Also it is probably unavoidable that only some makers will get feedback from her that encourages them to produce the kinds of embroideries that she believes best lend themselves to inclusion in more prestigious collections. The project has included over eighty women for the last few years, and it would be unrealistic to expect



Fig. 7 The Kim Sack Gallery, July 2002. Photograph by Paul Mills.



Fig. 8 Arts Africa, July 2002. Photograph by Paul Mills

that every embroiderer might be supported to the same degree. Hardly surprisingly, then, a couple of women have distinguished themselves as the most capable in her eyes. Their works will not normally be found in shops or markets but will rather be made available to individuals Van der Merwe knows to be on the lookout for distinctive Mapula pieces. While Van der Merwe initially priced cloths according to their scale, since about 2000 she has allowed qualitative assessments to provide the primary determinant of cost. Rossinah Maepa and Selinah Makwana (**Fig. 9**), for example, will derive an income from one of their embroideries that may be two or three times higher than that paid to a colleague for a work of the same scale.



Fig. 9 Some members of Mapula (1998). Rossinah Maepa is third from the left and Selinah Makwana is on the far left. Photograph by Obie Oberholzer.

Adopting a policy of directing works by selected makers at more 'serious' collectors creates possibilities for some women to distinguish themselves as talented 'artists' and thus to achieve the possibility of gleaning more than the most basic income for their work. In this sense it is a strategy that has much to commend it. But it is also an approach that needs to be handled with caution. In the Winterveld, as in other areas in southern Africa where projects of this type have been initiated, an individual's too visible success is liable to make her the target of suspicion rather than automatically establishing her as a role model. Women have supported the idea that Van der Merwe should endeavour to achieve the best possible price for a cloth, but they are probably unaware of the implications of this pricing principle. Currently the payment each woman receives is a

private matter, and the records kept by Van der Merwe are not made available to the group. But steps may need to be taken to ensure that makers such as Maepa and Makwana do not begin to manifest obvious signs of their achievements. Making certain that Mapula women are ostracised within their community because they have been feted in the art world presents yet another challenge.

Post-apartheid South Africa has seen the opening of new markets and possibilities for a project such as Mapula. Quite apart from the Cultural Industry Growth Strategy, which focuses on developing art projects as a means of income generation, a new dispensation has brought with it a growth in tourism, and a greater interest on the part of public, corporate and private buyers in investing in the works of black South African women. And a post-apartheid situation has also brought about a greater willingness to interrogate and challenge the kinds of assumptions about visual images that have underpinned collecting and exhibiting policies from the past. These factors all bode well for Mapula. But taking advantage of a variety of opportunities is no simple matter, and, as I have indicated, it has involved devising rather complex marketing strategies – ones that encourage messages about and the value accorded to the embroideries to vary in accordance with the extremely diverse contexts in which potential buyers may encounter them.

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