

Water and space: Unraveling meaning in the weavings of Allina Ndebele

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Abstract

For more than three decades, artist-weaver Allina Ndebele has drawn on traditional Zulu symbolism and thought systems as inspiration for her work. She began her career as a trainee nurse in a Swedish mission environment at Ceza, KwaZulu-Natal, in the early 1960s, during an era when restrictions on traditional African beliefs and practices were being challenged by some enlightened missionaries. Ndebele then learned weaving from Ulla Gowenius, a Swedish art school graduate. She was encouraged by Ulla's husband, Peder Gowenius, to draw on African and personal themes, in a narrative, 'free weaving' style in the few such weavings she made at this early stage of her career. Later, when starting out on her own as a professional artist working independently from the weaving workshop at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift – which she had helped the Gowenies establish in 1963 – Ndebele experienced a crisis of uncertainty in her choice of subject matter. When she subsequently gave herself licence to draw on the traditional stories her grandmother used to tell during her childhood the dilemma was resolved, albeit that the themes were considered transgressive in the mission environment in which her family lived. These accounts became an ongoing source of inspiration for Ndebele's intuitive 'free weaving' works for some thirty years. This essay explores some of the layers of reference and interpretation in two of the concepts that appear repeatedly in Ndebele's iconography: 'living water' and the 'ordered homestead'. In the form of rain that falls from heaven, runs in streams, fills rivers and collects in pools, 'living water' emanates from the munificence of the great god in the sky, uMvelinqangi, fertilising the earth and making all forms of life possible. A further sense of prosperity is denoted by the ordered Zulu homestead, with its dwellings arranged around the central cattle kraal. These animals are markers of

economic wellbeing and serve as spiritual links with the ancestors. Conversely, the absence of these fundamental resources, and the consequences thereof, are played out in this work.

Introduction

*If you are a Christian you're not allowed to talk about ancestors, but it is in me. The ancestors are the link between us and Mvelinqangi. Mvelinqangi is God. I can only see Him when I am weaving.*¹

It could have been the interest of her Swedish early mentor, Peder Gowenius,² in the subject matter prompted by pre-colonial southern African world views, that gave Allina Ndebele (born Khumalo) the courage to develop the distinctive iconography that was later to characterise her virtuoso tapestry weavings. From the early years at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift,³ Gowenius encouraged weavers and artists at the centre to find inspiration in their own lifestyles, stories and belief systems, and not only to draw on Christian ideas. This would have been considered controversial by many in the divided Lutheran ethos of the early 1960s, that saw the official banning of traditional practices such as polygamy and 'ancestor worship'.⁴ However, African experience and belief systems featured prominently in Gowenius' quest for a balance of ideologies in the artworks produced at the centre.⁵

Ndebele's interest in traditional Zulu narratives was, however, kindled long before this, by the stories told by her gogo, or grandmother, Zihudele MaZulu Mhlongo, at the family home near Swart Umfolozi at Ekuhlangeni Mission, in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. Much later, when Ndebele established herself as an independent artist in late 1978, she set out to recover these old stories. This retrieval of traditional Zulu themes, or versions embellished by her grandmother, was to be a deliberate strategy in the formulation of her weaving iconography, giving meaning and impetus to the earlier experience of working with Gowenius in the 1960s. In time, Ndebele would augment this process of creative retrieval with inspiration from her own dreams.

This essay will show how, although she pursued her artistic career in a succession of Christian mission environments, Ndebele's

range of subject matter and ambitious production were accelerated through her resistance to Christian iconography. She would, in fact, experience the sensation of 'freedom' when her image making drew on aspects of traditional Zulu thinking, enriching her own interpretations of them.

Having given herself this licence, Ndebele developed a strong and recurring focus in her weavings over some three decades, and a number of iconographic themes linked to Zulu beliefs have emerged. We have selected two of the most prominent themes to explore in this essay: the significance of 'living' water and the conceptual structure of an 'ideal' Zulu homestead. In traditional Zulu belief systems and symbolism, the presence of plentiful, life-giving water and the ordered stability reflected in the layout of a 'proper' homestead are the markers of wellbeing, prosperity and abundance for the family and the larger community.

These two concepts of living water and the ideal homestead may, at the outset, seem unrelated, but they converge as integral elements in Ndebele's world view and manifest as woven motifs in her work. Although it is granted that there are many themes within an African conceptual framework that could be explored in a study of the weavings of Ndebele, not to mention secular, social and historical themes, it is this particular thematic congruency that is our focus here.

Shaping her future

For Allina Ndebele to have developed an artistic career⁶ was an admirable feat in itself, quite apart from evolving this personal artistic language based on traditional ideas. The constraints of poverty and apartheid posed improbable odds. Born in 1939 at Ekuhlengeni Mission near Swart Umfolozi, she grew up in a household of six children and her mother, Siphilaba MaHlongo Khumalo, struggled to support them. Her father was mostly absent, like so many black men caught in the system of migrant labour under colonialism, and then apartheid. Although the young girl completed her schooling to Standard 9, any thought of further education was thwarted not only by financial constraints, but also as a result of apartheid legislation – specifically the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, which enforced separate and reduced tertiary education for black students in South Africa.

So, like many other black women at the time, Ndebele applied to train as a nurse. In 1961 she was eventually accepted as a trainee at the Lutheran-run Ceza Mission Hospital near Nongoma, in what was then Zululand. But soon thereafter she was offered work as a paid Zulu–English translator for an occupational therapy project that was to be attempted at the hospital by Peder Gowenius and his wife Ulla.

Once Ndebele had begun translation work for the Gowenies early the following year, she was drawn into the actual occupational therapy teaching too, encouraging increasing numbers of female patients to make small handcraft items by knitting, crocheting, weaving and sewing. This prompted the Gowenies to establish a formal crafts-driven occupational therapy course – or Arts and Crafts Advisors (ACA) course, as it would later be called – designed to train black women to teach crafts at local mission hospitals. Ndebele was duly offered a place in the Gowenies' first intake of ACA students in 1963, when the project moved to Rorke's Drift. Her decision to accept this offer was a step towards independence that would change her future.

Ndebele's ACA course included, amongst other subjects, lessons in dyeing and spinning karakul wool, and she credits her success in these skills to Ulla Gowenius' exceptional technical and teaching expertise. From her, Ndebele would also learn the technique that would later facilitate the development of her iconography as a professional artist, the technique of 'free weaving'. This was a term used by the Swedes for weavings made spontaneously without a preconceived guide, much in the way a fine artist might paint. When the weaver departs from geometric patterns to make representational images, as Ndebele learned to do, this more diverse language of form demands a tricky technique of weaving curved shapes and interlocking them at the same time. The work in which she first developed her technical skills might well have been the small weaving she made at Ceza – an abstract, organic design of horizontal bands, bought by Dr Löening, who was on the hospital staff at Ceza.

From 1964–1965, Ndebele attended Steneby Folkshögskola in Dalsland, Sweden, where she had taken up a bursary to study, and here she learned a range of processes in fibre, including fine weaving in cotton. But what became apparent to her, Ndebele emphasises,

was her degree of preference for 'free weaving' in wool – a process that was not offered at Steneby. On her return to Rorke's Drift, Ndebele was employed to train new recruits to the weaving workshop. She would devote her energies to teaching and workshop supervision until 1977, training groups of about thirty weavers in three-month courses, as well as spinners in one-month courses. Although she dedicated herself to developing the creativity of others, Ndebele did, however, make a few weavings of her own in her evening leisure hours during the 1960s. But time constraints dictated that she would have to 'pick it up and put it down'.

Starting out on her own

After working at Rorke's Drift for some 15 years in a technical capacity, Ndebele took another bold step: she decided to set up a workshop of her own, where she could develop her potential as an artist. But there were many challenges. For one, Ndebele had no weaving equipment or start-up capital. However, she eventually managed to assemble a number of looms with the help of Klaus Wasserthal, a Pretoria gallerist who had recognised Ndebele's potential; and Uno and Lillemor Johansson, Swedish employees at Rorke's Drift. Wasserthal recalls transporting Ndebele to her family home at Ekuhlengeni, Swart Umfolozi, helping to procure bags of cement, poles and bricks, and often supervising the construction of a barn, completed in late 1977, for her to work in. Ndebele particularly remembers that Jules and Ada van der Vijver, who were teaching in the Fine Art section at Rorke's Drift at the time, gave her support and encouragement.

But the greatest obstacle in her journey to career independence, Ndebele emphasises, was not the establishment of Khumalo's Kraal Weaving Workshop, as she called her studio at the time, but her lack of confidence in her ability to develop an image. After all, the demands of training others in weaving techniques had left her little time to conceptualise and weave her own creative tapestries. All she really had as a guide was her memory of making a few free weavings under Ulla and Peder Gowenius' guidance some years before, as well as one or two pieces in the early 1970s, such as *Bird and Animal Indaba*. It is true that she had designed a number of weavings for other women to realise as finished

products at Rorke's Drift, but this process had enjoyed the continued support and feedback of staff and peers at the centre. As an untried independent practitioner, she had not yet built up a body of work with established themes, discourse and imagery to use as a point of reference in her weavings. Wasserthal recalls the severity of her anxiety: 'When the situation arose where she had to do creative weaving she got sick.'⁷ But, as history was to prove, she need not have been so apprehensive.

Harnessing ideas

When Ndebele began her first 'free weaving' as an independent artist she found a powerful means of generating ideas that would supply her with themes and imagery for decades to come. It was not to Christian themes that she turned, although these might have been considered desirable amongst the official mission community and their European visitors. Rather, it was her grandmother's stories that became her inspiration. She had once found great satisfaction in the storytelling experiences in her grandmother's *amaqugwana* or traditional 'beehive' home.⁸ Ndebele was all the more familiar with these tales because, as a girl, she herself had become adept at telling them to other children at the old lady's request.

Such exhilarating occasions had been reserved for the evenings, because the senior women in the family worked in the homestead fields all day. To secure their patience, the children were even warned that if they listened to such stories before nightfall they would grow horns. At the end of the day, while seated on a goatskin mat, Gogo would tell tales from earlier times or, as Ndebele remembers, 'of the time before missionaries came'; of the 'days when men wore *amabeshu*' or leather back-coverings and women wore *izidwaba*, or pleated leather skirts, that were part of Zulu customary dress. Ndebele adds that, once missionaries had arrived in the area and Christian ideas and values were being promulgated, many from her grandmother's generation abandoned their traditional clothing and housing, replacing them with European substitutes.⁹ Diminished ownership of land and cattle through economic hardships brought on by colonial rule also meant that the accompanying customs that a traditional way of life supported became even more difficult for her mother's generation to hold onto. But they did manage to maintain

certain aspects of their Zulu heritage, one of which was the telling of old stories. When she started out as an artist these narratives would become, as Ndebele says, 'pictures' in her mind, and rich subject matter for her tapestries. Some 25 years later, at the peak of her career, they remained an abiding source of inspiration.

Building an *amaqugwana*

To facilitate the reception of these stories in her imagination and augment their development as images, Ndebele felt compelled to reconstruct an *amaqugwana*, for it was here that she would be able to attract her grandmother's spirit, from whom these stories had emanated. This project required determination, however, because at Ekuhlengeni, as on many other Christian missions, building traditional housing was discouraged as un-Christian. The requisite structure for a 'Christian' home was rectangular. As she recalls, initially there was fierce resistance at Swart Umfolozi from the mission official responsible for the distribution of the sites to her seemingly 'heathen urge' to build a traditional dwelling. She recalls that the

mission questioned this traditionalism because they did not understand that I needed this inspiration. Also, I'd promised my grandmother.

Luckily, her gift for translation and letter writing was proving an invaluable resource amongst the community, bringing her some measure of popularity. Eventually the mission authorities, who decided that she was just a harmless eccentric, agreed to let her build an *amaqugwana* on her property, next to her house, where her father had left her land (1).

The symbolic space of her *amaqugwana*, which Ndebele maintained until after she gave up weaving in 2005, replicated that in which her *gogo*, Zihudele MaZulu Mhlongo, had once lived. Traditionalists believe the ancestors are drawn to this type of dwelling, and Ndebele is emphatic that her artistic inspiration has ultimately derived from the engagement with this spiritual domain. The ancestors, or *abaphansi*, are intermediaries to a supreme god, *uMvelinqangi*, a remote divinity beyond the reach of mortal humans. The realms of the departed ancestors and that of the living family are not seen as separate but as a continuum and, like many of those who subscribe to Zulu



1 Allina Ndebele in 1999 outside the dwelling she constructed as a replica of the one used by her grandmother. (Photograph: Phillippa Hobbs.)

traditional culture, Ndebele believes the spirits of the deceased relatives are never far away. Because they influence the lives of the living, it is imperative to honour and acknowledge them. When not venerated, ancestors are inclined to grow angry, withdrawing their goodwill and influence, causing misfortune to befall their neglectful progeny.

Like other traditionalists who believe that ancestral spirits dwell inside the *amaqugwana* and gravitate towards the *umsamo* or hearth, Ndebele felt her grandmother's presence strongly in this place. For Ndebele, communication with God takes the form of contact with her grandmother's spirit, and she observed a number of traditional procedures to facilitate this, such as making offerings of beer¹⁰ and the taking of snuff. When ready to receive inspiration for her work from the ancestral realm, Ndebele would sleep on a goat-skin placed on an *icansi* or grass mat. This, she says, allowed her grandmother to communicate with her through dreams – in which Gogo once more told stories, like she did when she was alive. Ndebele was thus able to draw her grandmother closer in order to receive the narratives she subsequently weaved into her tapestries. In this way, Ndebele utilised another traditional process, for dreams in non-Christian African societies are believed to come from the ancestors and often serve as a source of inspiration and information.

Congruencies in process

The 'free weaving' technique that Ndebele had learned from the Swedes was a spontaneous process, congruent with the fluid way in which she continued to evolve her ideas. This approach would best facilitate the richness of her visual (and inner) experience. Once she had identified a story, Ndebele visualised it and held the image in mental form, without resorting to a sketch to work from. Initiating the actual weaving process, she would then lay her linen 'warp' (or set of threads through which the weaving is to be worked) into her loom. This done, and with the tension of all the strands checked for consistency, she began to weave laterally into it, threading thicker karakul wool through the 'shed' or receiving space created as she raised every alternate warp strand. Ndebele generally used short scraps for the weft strands – the discarded off-cuts bought cheaply from the weaving studio at Rorke's Drift, and an

option she came to prefer. But at first she was forced to undertake the arduous process of dyeing her own wool near the Mbizankulu River, about two kilometres from her home, where there was a supply of water, and where she could hire help from local women. From about 2000, after the Rorke's Drift off-cuts had become scarce, she would have to dye and prepare her own karakul wool once more, although by this time it was less laborious as she had tapped water at her house.¹¹

As Ndebele worked the weft strands through the warp, she built up a roughly horizontal section of tapestry across the loom, with shape after shape emerging. As the woven surface grew longer she would progressively turn the completed section of the weaving around the roller at the front of the loom. This meant that only a small percentage of the tapestry was visible at any given time, requiring a remarkable ability to visualise the full image in the imagination. The exercise is all the more demanding in that the section visible on the loom at any one time is generally not a horizontal section of the image, as might be supposed, but a vertical side section. As her tapestries were almost always landscape format they had to be woven from the side, across the shortest dimension – a constraint determined by the size limitation of the loom. The large scale on which Ndebele regularly worked – two metres in length is not unusual – together with her penchant for the landscape format would be a daunting prospect to a lesser weaver.

Creative self-understanding

As mentioned above, Peder Gowenius, with whom Ndebele worked until the Goweniuses left Rorke's Drift in 1968, had helped her develop an early interest in visual representations of traditional narratives. His growing fascination with what he called 'old stories' (meaning Zulu stories untainted by Christianity) probably encouraged Allina to pursue this subject matter. Gowenius' conviction that a balance of world views in a studio was an optimal working environment, led him to make concerted attempts to draw out these 'old stories' from the weavers. His limited success in this enterprise was the cause of some frustration to him, as revealed in his comment: 'I tried hard but somehow [they responded with] the Christian "did-not-know-them" bullshit.'¹²

It might be assumed that Ndebele's years at Christian missions – Ekuhlengeni, Ceza, Umpumulo and Rorke's Drift – would have encouraged her to reject traditional Zulu ideas in her work. But by the early 1960s the Lutheran Church in South Africa was embroiled in ideological conflict regarding the acceptance of African beliefs and practices. On one hand conservative ministers of this period, like Rev. I.E. Hodne, considered that the African spirit world was 'a deadening influence' which 'limited progress in every aspect of life' (1997:19). On the other hand, liberal attitudes also prevailed. The former Ceza minister, Rev. Bengt Sundkler, for example, advocated a reconsideration of church practices that limited African beliefs. Sundkler even saw potential for the church to build on concepts like the ancestors and the Zulu creator, *uMvelinqangi* (Sunkler 1960:291). The denigration and dismissal of African world views became a point of theological debate, and it is very possible that the young Ndebele would have been familiar with this discourse, particularly as Peder Gowenius and others in the art community attended some of these theological debates when the project was briefly at the Umpumulo Church Centre, near Stanger.

On the subject of Christianity, Ndebele and Gowenius enjoyed some memorable exchanges. One such discussion led to her weaving the *Wedding* (c. 1964), the first substantial narrative tapestry she remembers making.¹³ As she recalls, Peder had suggested 'make your own wedding'. Reflecting on her reaction to this idea, Allina observes: 'I had a Christian marriage. That was where I was not free [in my response to making the image].' But although Gowenius' suggestion seemed restricting, his next suggestion, which was to 'make a jungle', triggered possibilities that would delight her imagination: 'I put animals in it. I felt more free. Ideas were coming to me.'

Her description of her response as a feeling of 'freedom' suggests that she experienced a sense of relief at the prospect of an open-ended theme that was not inflected with Christian ideology and ritual. The future proliferation of such tapestries, made by Ndebele on an increasingly large scale, would seem to bear testimony to this. The early exchange with Peder Gowenius, no doubt encouraged by his praise of her 'good eye' in colour, was to be an important source of creative self-understanding for Ndebele.

An advantage, too, was that during the 16 years that she taught weaving at Rorke's Drift she would have had the benefit of close observation of diverse images and content. Despite Gowenius' disappointment at his failure to draw out African themes in the early weavings at Rorke's Drift, the workshop had grown to encompass an admirable range of topics and images. There were representations of animals, such as the project's earliest narrative weaving, *The red lion*, made at Ceza by a young disabled woman, as the Goweniuses recall. The genre was developed to include allegories of animals and people, such as *Once there came a terrible beast* (c. 1968) by Regina Buthelezi. Other topics reference Zulu history, such as *The life of Shaka* (1974), woven after a linocut by Caiphax Nxumalo; as well as social commentary, revealed in *The hungry lion* (c. 1965), by Mary Tshabalala and Josephine Memela. There were also weavings of Old Testament stories, such as *The Israelites crossing the Red Sea* (c. 1970) after a linocut by Albert Ndlovu. Armed with such experiences Ndebele was, in fact, well equipped to develop an independent aesthetic vocabulary by the time she left Rorke's Drift in 1977.

Water and the inverted image

Picking shells (1979) (2) was one of Allina Ndebele's earliest independent weavings after she set up her workshop at Swart Umfolozi, and here full rein is given to traditional subject matter. In this work that great body of water – the sea – features significantly. In traditional Zulu thought 'living water' that falls as rain from the sky becomes the sea, and that runs in rivers and fills pools, is believed to be sent by *uMvelinqangi*, the great Lord-of-the-Sky (Berglund 1989:157–158). It comes from heaven to fertilise the earth, making all forms of life possible. Understood as 'the fluid of the ancestors', it is linked to both semen and amniotic fluid and is the manifestation of life, fertility and goodness, healing, purification and coolness. It exists as the opposite of destruction, heat, anger and witchcraft, representing the positive and the good. The shells found in the sea, especially, are objects with unique powers. Not only are they associated with fecundity, they are believed to have healing and protective properties.

A commonly held belief in Zulu thought and spirituality is that water is the abode of the

ancestors, spirits and other denizens. It is from under the water that sangomas or traditional healers obtain their instruments and powers to heal. These divination tools are guarded by a serpent, which repels individuals unworthy or unqualified to receive them. Water is also understood as a realm from which people are born and into which they merge when they die. As a substance permeated with ancestral potency, it is associated with these custodians of traditional mores and with the power to judge the actions of humans.

Picking shells reveals a central section with blue wave-like shapes merging with a fish form that straddles a beach surface diagonally. The fish, sand and water motifs are edged at the top and bottom by single rows of seated girls, the one a mirror image of the other. Perhaps

for the first time, Ndebele taps into what was to become her frequently revisited theme of water, albeit the later manifestations would be of inland water in catchment, as rain, rivers or pools. What was to prove constant in later works, also, is the perspective from which the image is read here – a bird's eye view.

No doubt because it was amongst her first independent weavings, and therefore exploratory, this work remains one of Ndebele's most unusual: it shows a sea setting, far removed from the populous inland scenes she has since depicted. Besides the unusual choice of a marine subject, further features set *Picking shells* apart: this is a portrait-format piece, which she has woven vertically rather than from the side, as would become her custom. This means she would have been

able to see the tapestry from the correct viewpoint as she worked. Yet, interestingly, the image is no more complex than her other pieces, despite this apparent advantage.

Also unusually, while the bottom row of girls is read the right way up, the top row is inverted, so that the figures are upside down. This arrangement may inspire viewers to consider the reflective properties of water, in which the real world is mirrored. But more significantly in view of the fact that Ndebele is tapping into Zulu belief systems, this inversion may also be a reference to the parallel, but upside down, world beneath the waters where spirits and ancestors dwell (Berglund 1989:370). Moreover, the shells, being of this underwater world, would possess powers and properties associated with the numinous realm from whence they come.

Perhaps it was also the constraints on resources suffered by an artist just starting out on her own that determined this unusual design: Ndebele modestly observes that she has always managed to tailor her work and ideas to suit the colours and lengths of fibre she had available. But it would be a mistake



2 Allina Ndebele, *Picking shells* (1979). Weaving, 140 x 80.2cm. Vukani Museum, Eshowe.

to see aberration in her work as the result of constraint only. Her surfaces testify to a colour skill, identified years before by Peder Gowenius, that seems to defy any such limitations. In *Picking shells* Ndebele built rich passages by weaving faceted fields of colour in variations of hue and tone. The beige background, for example, consists of no fewer than 13 shades, and the waves are given life through slivers of blue in some twenty different tones. The brown figures of the shell collectors and border motif, as well as the red shells, are treated with similar intense variety.

The story behind this seascape is no less rich than her woven surface. A chief named Nonkanda, from a village called KwaMaqonqo, is warned by his ancestors that Nomalanga, his beautiful daughter who suffers the jealousy of his wives, is in grave danger. Ndebele recounts the narrative:

So one night, Nonkanda was sleeping in his hut. He dreamt a dream. He heard a voice calling, and it was from his ancestors, saying 'Nonkanda. We have noticed that all your wives are being jealous of your daughter Nomalanga. And

they might kill her, [so] you must tell all the girls in KwaMaqonqo to go to the sea and pick all the beautiful shells lying on the sea sand and make nice necklaces, arm rings and waist belts for her. If she can always wear these shells, she will be very strong against any bad witchcraft and bad spirits, [and] if she marries a man she will have a very happy marriage for the rest of her life'.¹⁴

The tapestry depicts the successful realisation of the chief's orders, as two ranks of girls sit and harvest the shells that are to protect the beautiful girl. If we are correct in assuming that the inverted row of girls is a reference to the ancestral realm, then this motif further evokes the role of the supernatural in the protection of the young Nomalanga. The magical properties of the shells, the proximity of the ocean and the inversion in the image are thus significant. Typical of what would be Ndebele's future tapestries, the story tells of human jealousy, greed and frailty. It also suggests the harnessing of ancestral power, the potency inherent in nature and a return to good governance – the



3 Allina Ndebele, *Isithembu / Polygamy* (1984). Weaving, 173 x 243 cm. Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria.

appropriate order of things, according to Zulu thought and custom.

Reading from *Picking shells* and interpolating from knowledge about Zulu belief systems, it is possible to corroborate the belief that the shells from the sea that adorn Nomalanga as necklaces, arm rings and waist belts, will protect her from harm. The protective power of shells is well known. Zulu traditional healer, Nana Ngcobo, for example, comments on the necklace of cowrie shells she herself wears around her neck and indicates their universal relevance: 'The shells I am wearing are connected to my ancestors but anyone can wear shells as protection.'¹⁵ Ngcobo also comments on the element from which shells come:

The sea is more important than other water – it is powerful. The water from the sea is not the same as that from the river. The ancestors love the sea. The sea is like a man or woman who can't do anything bad. The shells come from the ancestors and they show me like a dream.

Inspiration from land-based water

Given the status attributed to the sea by Zulu-speaking traditionalists, it may seem surprising that it does not appear to have featured in Allina Ndebele's tapestries since she made *Picking shells* in 1979. However, she has derived much inspiration from land-based water in the form of rain, rivers and pools. In *Isithembu / Polygamy* (1984) (3), made five years after *Picking shells*, a rainbow-like river winds its way through the traditional Zulu homestead as evidence of a good rainfall that replenishes the soil so that grazing for cattle and corn for food and beer are plentiful. With this abundance comes the opportunity to buy new wives,¹⁶ thus securing the prosperity of the family and the continuation of the lineage.

On the other hand, the negative outcome of the absence of water in times of drought has also emerged as a significant theme in Ndebele's work. *Nomkhubulwane / Queen of the Rain* (1992) (4) shows the fierce forces of nature causing turmoil in the sky above and on the land below. Ndebele associates this weaving with her grandmother's account of a devastating drought in the country. The men of



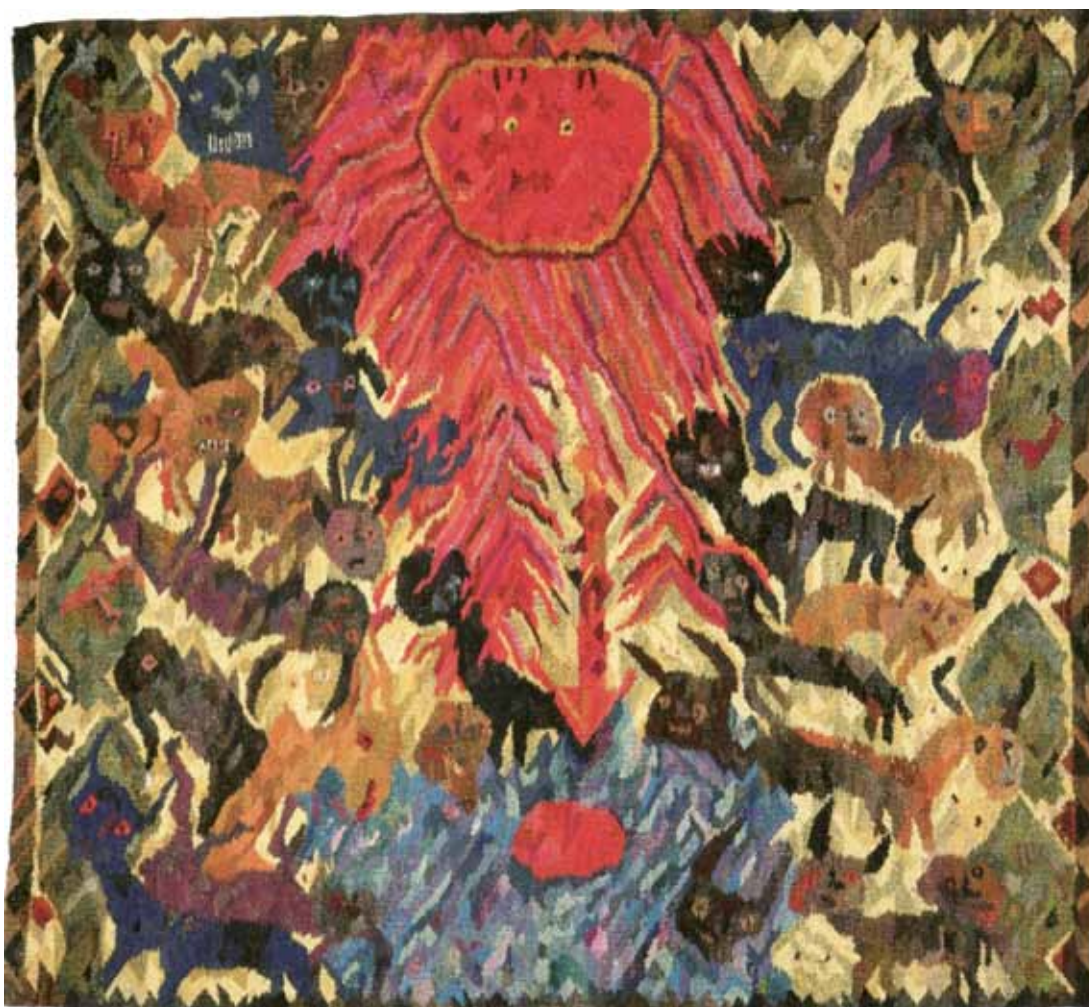
4 Allina Ndebele, *Nomkhubulwane / Queen of the Rain* (1992). Weaving, 167 x 232 cm. Carnegie Gallery, Newcastle.

the village called a meeting and decided that each would bring a black ox – a colour loved by the ancestors – from their homestead herd that they would sacrifice to Nomkhubulwane. To do this they had to climb a mountain, on whose summit they made large fires and prayed to the deity. Here the oxen were slaughtered and eaten, traditional beer was drunk and the men danced in honour of Nomkhubulwane. When they left for their homes heavy rains began to fall, and when Nomkhubulwane saw that enough had been received the downpour stopped and a rainbow appeared. At its end many seeds were found, which the women planted, and soon there was no more hunger.

The weaving shows an upper realm filled with the overwhelming power of the heavenly domain, both good and bad. Ndebele uses strong colour to emphasise the might of

these natural forces: the large red visage of Nomkhubulwane with her grimacing teeth is centrally placed and surrounded by other red and brown faces, some likewise baring their teeth, as well as snouted forms with red and yellow eyes. A red bolt of energy flares out from Nomkhubulwane, and from this central streak a rainbow extends.

Ndebele undoubtedly took artistic licence in her interpretation of Nomkhubulwane as an exaggerated, grotesque presence, with red arterial extensions penetrating both heaven and earth. But the concept of a rain queen is by no means her own construct. Nomkhubulwane is generally thought of as the heavenly princess, daughter of the Lord-of-the-Sky. The ubiquity of this deity is recorded by Lutheran missionary and anthropologist Axel-Ivar Berglund, who tells us that she is thought to be a virgin and



5 Allina Ndebele, *Isomiso / Drought* (1986). Weaving, 171 x 188 cm. Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria.

closely associated with young women, and the fertility of mankind and animals. She must not be looked at by men, but reveals herself to children and maidens. She appears in the morning mists and is associated with the rainbow, and is sometimes even accepted as the rainbow itself. Many believe that she can bring steady and frequent rain by pleading with her father, the Lord-of-the-Sky (Berglund 1976:64–65).

If the spectre of the rain queen is terrifying, the withdrawal of her munificence is devastating. The consequence of an absence of rain is the theme of the tapestry *Isomiso / Drought* (1986) (5). As a child, Ndebele listened to her *gogo's* account of a particularly severe drought. Decades later, Ndebele's woven conception portrayed a burning sun beating down from the zenith of the sky onto the creatures below. The snaking tentacles of power in the image of Nomkhubulwane here take the form of assegai-like bolts of heat incinerating everything within their reach. The artist describes how, during this terrible drought, the sun's rays were so intense that they were like spears striking the water until it boiled. The grass dried up and the animals cried. The water in the dams was too hot to drink and people were even too ill and weak to make appeals to Nomkhubulwane.

The river Mbizankulu traverses the tapestry *Nqakamatshe and his muti magics* (1999) (6). Beneath its waters a powerful creature, Mamlambo, lurks. This is not an ancestral

snake but a cryptid – part snake, part fish – that can bring luck and wealth to those with the ability to control it. But this terrifying carnivore can also kill animals and people. This tapestry tells of Nqakamatshe, a powerful and well-established sangoma, who abuses the powers granted to him by his ancestors. Nqakamatshe induces married women from the nearby village of KwaMaqonquo to fall in love with him. When their husbands plan to avenge themselves by plotting to kill Nqakamatshe, he is warned by his ancestors and appeals to Mamlambo to support him in the imminent battle. The cryptid duly obliges and devours Nqakamatshe's enemies.

The next morning an angry Mamlambo thrashes up and down the river, exposing itself for the first time after the dreadful event. Nqakamatshe and his *amathwasa*, or trainee sangomas, are overcome with terror – appropriately so, because the sangoma's enraged ancestors admonish him for his misuse of the supernatural abilities with which they had entrusted him. As a consequence of his misdeeds, they remove Nqakamatshe's powers and banish him to live in the depths of the Mbizankulu forever, and peace returns to the village.

The complex image of *Nqakamatshe and his muti magics* contains registers devoted to both order and chaos. In this tapestry Nqakamatshe's fall from grace is expressed though his central placement in the lower half of the composition, descending into the



6 Allina Ndebele, *Nqakamatshe and his muti magics* [sic] (1999). Weaving, 200 x 450 cm. MTN Art Collection, Johannesburg.

watery realm in which the moral weight of the ancestors is felt. A lateral band of chaotic zoomorphic shapes reflects the disordered and potentially dangerous space that exists outside the orderly domain of the homestead. The extent of Nqakamatshe's loss through expulsion from a decorous life as a result of his misdemeanours is suggested through the depiction of a prosperous homestead, replete with its many *amaqugwana*, wives and cattle. The cattle byre occupies the central space between the villages and the sky, and from here horned cattle peer out. As the interlocutors between heaven and earth, and as the economic and spiritual core of a traditional homestead, Ndebele has placed these beasts at the heart of the tapestry. All the assets derived from maintaining a good relationship with the departed are arranged around this central focus. Through his transgressions of the required moral code, Nqakamatshe has forfeited the benefits that an ordered and exemplary life would have ensured.

The order of the homestead

In as much as water is a spontaneous, unpredictable element, almost always worked up into curves in Allina Ndebele's tapestries, so other aspects of her design are based on a symmetrical matrix, seemingly a counterpoint to the more fluid images of water. Weavings such as *Nqakamatshe and his muti magics* draw on the symbolic structure of the Zulu homestead as a formal element that reflects the underlying systems of order and *hlonipha* or respectful behaviour. These govern the wellbeing of the homestead and the community. In classical African cosmology, the domesticated realm of the homestead or village and the surrounding cultivated fields is contrasted with the uncivilised and chaotic regions or bush. The ancestral spirits demand that order and respect prevail in the civilised domain. In contrast, 'the bush' is a treacherous region, but a necessary one filled with energy and power.

Also drawing on this structure is the tapestry *Isithembu / Polygamy* (1984) (3). It tells of Ngolende, a wealthy and powerful *umnumzane* or head of the homestead, who has many wives, children and cattle. Ndebele writes:

All the other men in the village were very jealous because in the olden times this

meant you were very rich. If you had only one wife you were looked upon as a poor man because you had no cows for *lobola* [or dowry].¹⁷

Ngolende's neighbours decide to kill him and take his wives for themselves. But a premonition of danger comes to him in a dream and he and his sons manage to thwart the evildoers.

Unlike in the story of *Nqakamatshe and his muti magics*, in *Polygamy* the protagonist, Ngolende, who is an honourable individual, prevails and the structured and ordered nature of his prosperous homestead (*imizi*) and its surrounds remains intact. A semicircle of *amaqugwana* lines the top edge, encircling Ngolende and his many wives and children. Prominently embedded in the lower central section of the tapestry is the cattle byre, the oval motif at the very heart of this family's existence. Beyond the *amaqhugwane*, and the rainbow-like stream of colour that extends across the lower section of the work, are the uncivilised regions of the bush, inhabited by strange and unpredictable creatures.

The contrast between the formal arrangement of motifs, lines and colours in these two tapestries is telling. In *Nqakamatshe and his muti magics*, swirling, fragmented shapes in jarring reds and blues characterise the turmoil that follows transgression. In *Polygamy* forms flow harmoniously, edges are intact and the rainbow-like river denotes water in its nurturing aspect, where the land and all its inhabitants are replenished.

The formal visual structure of many such weavings by Ndebele emphasises the importance of cattle by locating the byre at the centre of the *imizi*. Cattle are important not so much as a source of meat, but as food in the form of milk, especially in its soured form, *amasi*. Livestock also represent exchangeable wealth for the procuring of wives for the family head or his sons. Wives who work in the fields and bear children ensure the fertility, continuation and economic wellbeing of all the members of the homestead.

When a man enjoys wealth in cattle he can acquire many wives, who in turn have sons and daughters. He is able to receive more cattle in the form of *lobola* when his daughters marry and leave the paternal homestead to live with their husbands at their new in-laws' homesteads. The loss of a daughter's contribution to the household economy is

compensated by the *lobola* cattle that are, in turn, used to acquire wives for the sons of the homestead. The gain of a daughter-in-law through the payment of cattle replaces the previous loss, also securing the survival of the family lineage. It is not surprising, therefore, that cattle are centrally important to the survival of the homestead and are considered to belong not only to the household head, but to all the male lineage ancestors, be they living or 'late'.

In some tapestries Allina Ndebele set out to show the antithesis of ordered prosperity. Unlike in works such as *Nqakamatshe and his muti magics* and *King Mangethe and his army* (1993), where the wilderness is kept at bay on the peripheries and the cattle byre is situated at the centre of a well-structured homestead denoting order, prosperity and harmony, *Inkosikasi Eyayihlupheka / The poor widow* (1987) (7) is a tale of disfunction. It tells of an unhappy woman who has no husband and only one son. Without fields and cattle of her own, she is obliged to work in a neighbour's

land and her son has to herd the cattle of others. Reflected in the tapestry is the absence of the stability that *Polygamy* depicted. It is replaced by a chaotic and scattered rendering of people, *amaqugwana* and birds, alluding to the collapse of proper social and cosmological structure. It is a homestead without a centre. The jarring reds, blues and yellows Ndebele has selected for this weaving add to the general feeling of disarray. Fortunately the story turns out well for the widow and her son. Led by the spirit of his father, the son captures a beautiful bird that is able to produce unlimited supplies of skimmed milk. Ndebele writes that 'they were very happy and also realized that they would hunger no more'.¹⁸

Challenging the church

Unlike so many South African weavings made for a popular market that have portrayed shallow stereotypes of 'village' life, Ndebele tapped into a rich symbolic system that is reflected in the formal structures of her work.



7 Allina Ndebele, *Inkosikasi eyayihlupheka / The poor widow* (1987). Weaving, 162 x 214 cm. Private collection, Johannesburg.

The aesthetic of her tapestries is compelling, partly because of the underlying concepts that are a constant reference for her. Although these tapestries are based on stories told to children, their conceptual frameworks are dependent on African social and spiritual structures. As anthropologist Jean Marie Dederen explains:

For those who are prepared to look beyond its primary function – the entertainment of children – the craft of storytelling offers an exciting window into indigenous culture. Careful analysis reveals a treasure of symbols and hidden meanings, references to sacred rituals, beliefs and cosmology. Not unlike their European counterparts, many stories contain lessons of a moral kind. (2007:105)

It is clear that an Africanist perspective dominates Ndebele's tapestries, which shed Christianity in favour of indigenous accounts and personal interpretation. In these the artist often assumes the role of the teacher or moral guide, depicting stories in which wrongdoers get their just desserts. Works such as *Umshado wesithwambiza / The mantis wedding* (date unknown) are gentle exhortations, deploying humour to make the lessons more compelling. Many of her tapestries also depend on a narrative recounting in an allegorical style. In fact, Ndebele provided a written account of the tale with each tapestry she made for her clients. Her works are dense with details of names, characters and populous settings that appear at first to have little reference to a specific time and place in either woven or written form, but which, through careful analysis, often reveal links to historical events, people and places.¹⁹

Because Allina Ndebele has spent most of her life in a mission environment and saw art referencing biblical narratives by Rorke's Drift artists such as Azaria Mbatha and John Muafangejo, it might be imagined that the Bible and its visual vocabulary would have been an obvious source for her story-telling in tapestry. But the introduction of Christian themes would have denied Ndebele her inspirational source and innovative interpretation. Ndebele ascribes her inspiration to her grandmother's spirit – a manifestation that would be frowned upon in a Christian context. Furthermore, Christian doctrine, by virtue of being written, is more fixed and proscriptive and therefore less congruent with the fluid transmission of

knowledge through oral history, as is customary in pre-colonial Africa. The absence of Christian imagery in Ndebele's work is less a lack of interest than an act of deliberate exclusion. Even though she often goes to Sunday school today, she feels that Bible stories block the spontaneity of the image-gathering process that is the basis of her work:

What I was told in the Church becomes dull. But I don't know why. I feel the need to know how to draw. I cannot be spontaneous with Church stories.

Her experience of weaving her *Wedding* as an image of a Christian institution was perhaps her first taste of what she felt was a creatively limiting Christian world. Moreover, she mentions that she found little inspiration in subject matter associated with European lifestyles generally.

The structural matrix onto which Ndebele projects her visual imagery is defined by the underlying principle of traditional Zulu and African thought systems, lending the works a conceptual coherence and logic, albeit not a Western one. Perhaps this is why people are so often engrossed by Allina Ndebele's weavings – even viewers unfamiliar with African life and thought.

In this article we have explored two of the many conceptual entanglements based on Zulu belief in her work – living water and the ordered homestead. Although there are more ideas to be unraveled in Ndebele's imagery, we have chosen these two as anchor themes because Ndebele herself affords them significance through the number of times she articulates them in both her weavings and written descriptions. Moreover, past anthropologists and present scholarship have also drawn attention to these great themes. Within the framework of Zulu thought systems and symbolism, Ndebele has given herself licence to interpret and re-interpret. The complexity of her works undoubtedly also lies in the uncertain interface of what is derived from tradition and what is personal invention.

Acknowledgement

All artworks are reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, this and other quotations and facts attributed to Allina Ndebele

- are from the interview between Philippa Hobbs, Nessa Leibhammer and Ronel Loukakis and Allina Ndebele, at Swart Umfolozi, KwaZulu-Natal, on 16 January 1998; and from the Leibhammer and Hobbs interview with Ndebele on 18 December 2010.
- 2 The Swedish couple, Ulla and Peder Gowenius, studied at the Konstfackskolan, Stockholm's premier art school; Ulla completing a major in Textile Art in 1960 and Peder taking courses in Sculpture and Printmaking. He followed this with a specialisation in Art Education, completed in 1961.
 - 3 This initiative was established by Ulla and Peder Gowenius, at first as an occupational therapy programme at Ceza Mission Hospital, in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. In 1963, when space was needed for a weaving studio and an Arts and Crafts Advisors Course, the project moved to Rorke's Drift on the Buffalo River in northern KwaZulu-Natal (having been temporarily housed at Umpumulo Mission near Stanger). 'Rorke's Drift', as the centre became known, would play an important role in the lives of many black South African artists otherwise denied a formal art education under apartheid.
 - 4 Philippa Hobbs' interview with Bishop Helge Fosseus, Onsala, 20 May 1999.
 - 5 Unless otherwise stated, facts and quotations attributed to Peder Gowenius are from lengthy interviews between Philippa Hobbs and Peder and Ulla Gowenius in Växjö, Sweden, from 14 May 1999 to 24 May 1999.
 - 6 Ndebele is represented in almost every major South African art museum, for example Durban Art Gallery, Pretoria Art Gallery, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum (Port Elizabeth), Tatham Art Gallery (Pietermaritzburg), Unisa Art Gallery (Pretoria), Johannesburg Art Gallery and Iziko South African National Gallery (Cape Town). However, most of her weavings are in overseas collections, in the USA, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Australia. She has also held prestigious solo exhibitions at the Standard Bank Gallery (1993), Pretoria Art Gallery (1985) and the Thami Mnyele Institute in Amsterdam (1998). Allina Ndebele was artist-in-residence at the Thami Mnyele Institute (1998) and the MTN SA Foundation (2001).
 - 7 This and the following quotes by Wasserthal are from an interview with Hobbs and Leibhammer at Höeningskrans on 19 November 2003.
 - 8 The frame of this hemispherically shaped dwelling is made of flexible branches and its covering from thatching grass. The floor is made from a mixture of cow dung, earth and water, which hardens when dry. At the back is the *umsamo*, a platform where beer vessels are stored and to which the ancestors are believed to be drawn.
 - 9 From the time that English settlers founded Port Natal (now Durban) in 1824, missionaries set up stations, preached the Christian gospel and solicited conversions in the region. However, until the mid-19th century, successive Zulu kings restricted their activities to the area south of the Thukela River (more popularly known as the 'Tugela', but revised to 'Thukela' by historians such as Carolyn Hamilton and John Wright). The Zulu kingdom lay to the north of this river and it was only after the 1850s, when the power of the Zulu kingdom had begun to wane, that missionaries were able to gain access to the Zulu heartland.
 - 10 A blackened ceramic vessel is normally used for the serving and drinking of *utshwala* or traditional beer. Instead of this, Ndebele uses a decorative vessel made by Dina Molefe, a well-known Rorke's Drift ceramist.
 - 11 With the increasing scarcity of wool, the weavers at Rorke's Drift needed their own off-cuts – an eventuality that Ndebele and her dealer, Caja Stort, had fortunately anticipated. Her workshop has since procured white karakul from Fibres International in Port Elizabeth, and Ndebele's son has learnt to dye and moth-proof the consignments. The weavers in her studio, for example Allina Zulu, Thembekile Ngobese, Besta Mbatha and Khosi Zulu, learn to card and spin the wool.
 - 12 Notes written by Peder Gowenius on slides sent to Hobbs, 2003. Gowenius' archive contains at least two weavings of such 'old stories', the details of which are unfortunately lost. One features people in traditional clothing with a snake, and the other a buck and a python.
 - 13 We can find no record of the whereabouts of this and other early narrative weavings by Ndebele.
 - 14 Ndebele, A. Unpublished tapestry stories. (Undated.) Caja Stort archive, Eshowe.
 - 15 Personal communication, Farraday Street Muti Market, Johannesburg, 19 June 2010.
 - 16 In polygamous Zulu society, wives were acquired through the payment of *lobola* or bride wealth, and this was usually in the form of cattle.
 - 17 Ndebele, A. Unpublished tapestry stories. (Undated.) Caja Stort archive, Eshowe.
 - 18 Ndebele, A. Unpublished tapestry stories. (Undated.) Caja Stort archive, Eshowe.
 - 19 An example is the tapestry *King Mangethe and his army* (1993); King Mangethe is a known figure in Zulu history and was head of one of the Khumalo clans, possibly in the 18th or early 19th century.

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