

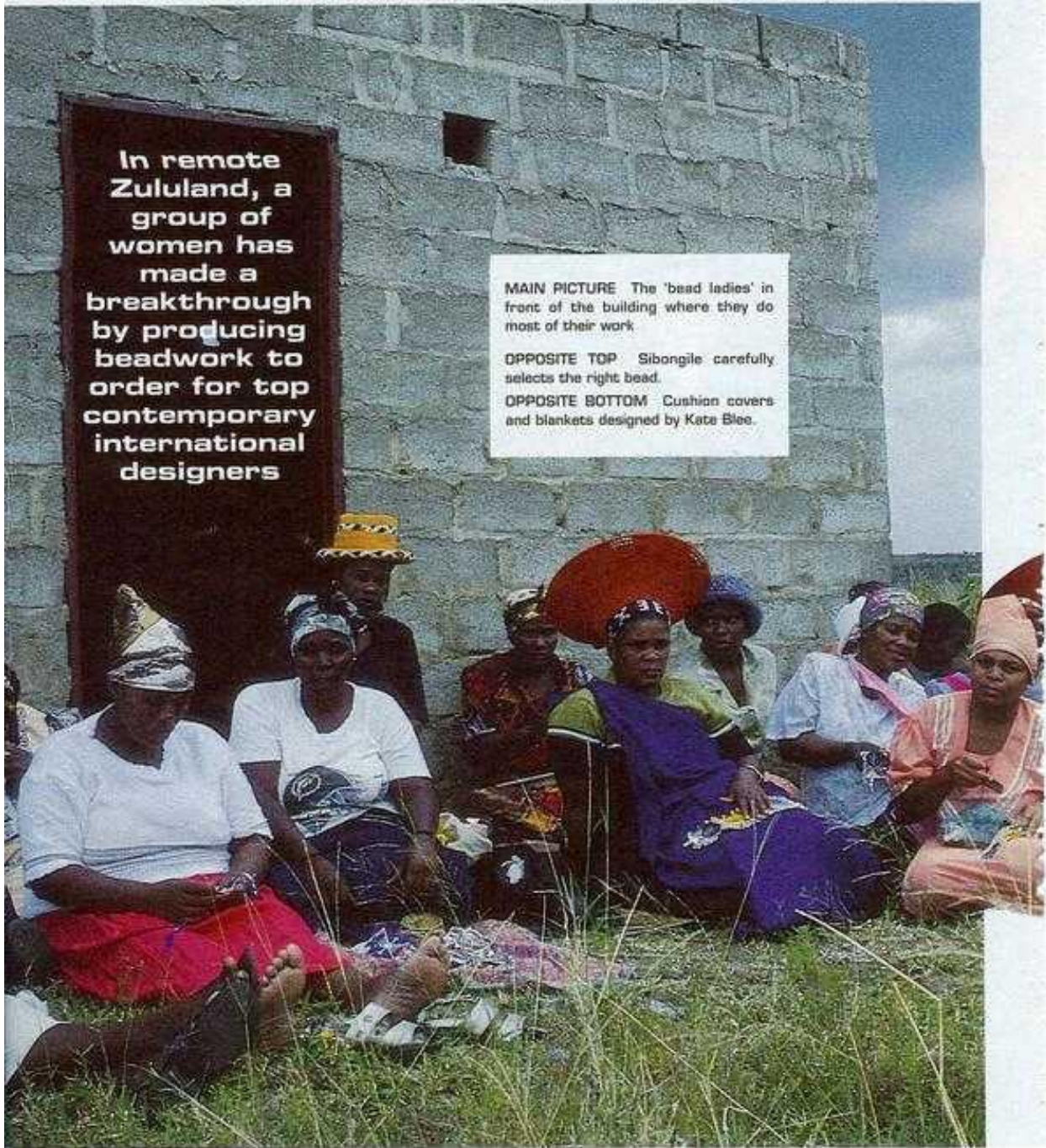
# KZN's Designer

**In remote Zululand, a group of women has made a breakthrough by producing beadwork to order for top contemporary international designers**

**MAIN PICTURE** The 'bead ladies' in front of the building where they do most of their work

**OPPOSITE TOP** Sibongile carefully selects the right bead.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Cushion covers and blankets designed by Kate Blee.



# Beaders

by Susan Colby With clouds looming overhead, threatening to douse us at any moment and turn the road into a river, my husband and I bounced over the rutted tracks, passing hordes of uniformed schoolchildren walking home, letting the car idle quietly as cattle and goats meandered across the road, and taking in the beauty of rural KwaZulu-Natal.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" asked my partner.

As I'd been this way only once before, and that a year ago when I'd approached from the opposite direction, things looked very different. But I could always bluff my way through. "Of course," I said.

It was like looking for a needle in a haystack, but I knew that somewhere out there, deep in the verdant hills of Zululand, was an inconspicuous cement-block building that is home to a gifted group of 32 women whom you might say have been 'discovered'. It was them we were looking for. Their official name is Imvunulo Yesizwe, meaning 'official attire', but I think of them as the 'bead ladies'.

The previous year, by sheer luck, I'd stumbled across Mary Rose, the dynamo behind the group. Mary is director of the Siyazisiza Trust and she has accomplished the incredible feat of fusing the traditional skills of Zulu beaders with the contemporary concepts of some of the world's finest designers. So successful has she been that Sotheby's of London recently exhibited some of the bead ladies' finished work.

While the exhibition was underway, Mary Rose had breathlessly confessed to me that they were overwhelmed with orders.

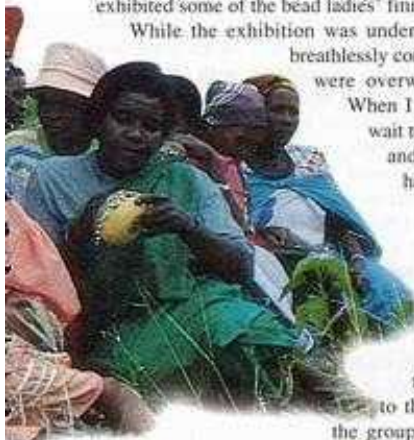
When I heard this, I couldn't wait to see the women again and find out how it had changed their lives. Hence our trip.

We found them in the back room of Xolo trading store at Mahlabathini, their colourful garb greatly brightening the surroundings. (Due to the size of the project, the group were using premises donated by the store's owner until they could expand their own building.)

Two blankets bearing partially finished designs by Kate Blee were laid out on tables. Each will end up taking two beaders two weeks working eight and a half hours a day to complete. "The first blanket we did took a month," the bead ladies told us. "They take a lot of practise."



photographs by Julia Leakey





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Nomusa Mkhwanazi, a large, jovial woman, heads up the group, which consists of women of all ages, from girls who are still being taught the traditional skills to young mothers with infants strapped to their backs and aged grandmothers.

"I came from a dark place before KhumbulaZulu came into my life," Nomusa told us. (As the trust cannot take on commercial ventures, the women operate under KhumbulaZulu Craft, an arm of the trust that's registered as a Section 21 company.) She then literally glowed as she explained how the beadwork had changed the women's lives even prior to the designers' appearance on the scene. "We have kicked poverty out the door," she said, and the rest of the group wholeheartedly agreed, clapping and ululating.

"We can now pay our children's school fees and buy their uniforms," Jabulile Sibilya exultantly told us. "There is no longer poverty here. The beads are what make me want to get up in the morning."

Although Imvunulo Yesizwe was already operating when Mary met the women in 2000, she said they had very little work. But since they've come under Mary's wing, their fortunes have soared and they are now totally self-sufficient, buying their own beads and funding their own activities. The trust assists with business and marketing skills, and also presented the group with the opportunity of working with the designers.

"It has been a challenge for us," Nomusa said. "For one thing, we've had to learn a new stitching method." But it's obvious that they've enjoyed the challenge. And amidst all this, the traditional skills and designs are being maintained and passed on to the next generation. One of the first projects the group undertook was replicating authentic Zulu beadwork that Mary had discovered in museums.

Most of the women have either never been employed or have been out of work for many years. As they have taken over the breadwinner role, their menfolk, most of whom were laid off from the mines and industries on the Rand, have rallied behind them. They make the spears that the women so beautifully bead, and it was they who erected the cement-block building. "I've told them that they must build onto it now so there is space for the blankets too," said Busi Chipeya, a field trainer for Siyazisiza Trust.

As we were preparing to leave, I was presented with a beautiful necklace, an iqabane, with colours that complemented the blue shirt I was wearing. What a treasure. Then, much to our surprise, Nomusa presented my husband with a necklace as well.

What a treat to meet these wonderful women, so gracious and so appreciative of the opportunities they have. It's a side of South Africa that is seldom seen or acknowledged, and we came away with renewed faith in this country of ours. 🐘



KhumbulaZulu Craft, Mary Rose,

☎ 011 883 7407, or visit [www.zulucraft.com](http://www.zulucraft.com)

TOP A Kate Bine blanket.

CENTRE Bracelets designed by Heather Kingsley Heath.

LEFT Beaded chokers by Jessica Rose.

OPPOSITE Examples of the high quality beadwork produced by Imvunulo Yesizwe.