

‘Oh hurry to the river’: the meaning of *uMamlambo* models in the Tyumie Valley, Eastern Cape*

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This article is about a clay-modelling tradition and Xhosa indigenous spiritual beliefs in South Africa’s Eastern Cape Province. We focus on one aspect of modelling in clay, by boys and young men, at the villages of Hogsback and e-Hala. Using ethnographic material and oral interviews, we place the beliefs of the economically impoverished artists and the reflection of these beliefs in their art in historical context, and attempt to explain the meaning of certain attractive objects made by the artists, portrayed as *uMamlambo* - ‘mermaids’ in the nearest single word to an adequate English translation - offered for sale to visitors in the picturesque mountain village of Hogsback.

Art, creativity and the market in e-Hala and Hogsback

The area around Hogsback and e-Hala epitomises aspects of Eastern Cape history. Hogsback, high in the Amatola Mountains above the Tyumie Valley, has been a holiday resort since the late nineteenth century. e-Hala, or Auckland as it was named before the British military settlement there was destroyed at the beginning of the Eighth Frontier War in 1850, is an isiXhosa-speaking village in what became the Ciskei homeland.¹ Locally, people from e-Hala have long climbed the mountain to work in the hotels, forestry plantations and white homes of Hogsback, as well as migrating to East London, Cape Town and elsewhere.²

e-Hala clay modelling is a product of this particular historical and geographical conjuncture. It originated in the widespread practice by young boys,

* This paper is related to a wider study, by the same authors, of the e-Hala clay modelling tradition. For the historical and social context of modelling in the area readers are referred to “‘Shaping in dull, dead earth their dreams of riches and beauty’”: Clay Modelling at e-Hala and Hogsback in the Eastern Cape, South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 27(1), 2001, 137-161. We have accumulated many debts of gratitude, obvious from the footnotes. We would particularly like to thank Manton Hirst, of the Amathole Museum, King William’s Town, upon whose work we have relied in one section of this paper.

1. Amongst works dealing with the nineteenth-century frontier between the Xhosa and the incoming colonial forces, which included the Amatola Mountains and the Tyumie Valley, are J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981); N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); C.C. Crais, *The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance to Colonial Advance, 1770-1865* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1992); T.J. Stapleton, *Maqoma: Xhosa Resistance to Colonial Advance* (Johannesburg: Johathan Ball, 1994).
2. Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Tembani Xwembe, Sandile Nqweni and Wowo Mzinyathi, Hogsback, 14 September 1998. Most interviews were conducted in isiXhosa and transcribed and translated into English by Nwabisa Vokwana. There is a large literature on labour migration. See, for example, J. Crush, A. Jeeves and D. Yudelman, *South Africa’s Labor Empire: A History of Black Migrancy to the Gold Mines* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991).



Figure 1: (Above) A view of Hogsback from e-Hala. The spectacular mountain pass road rises from e-Hala, in what was once Ciskei, to Hogsback, which was part of 'South Africa'.

Figure 2: (Below) Hogsback, e-Hala and surrounding areas.

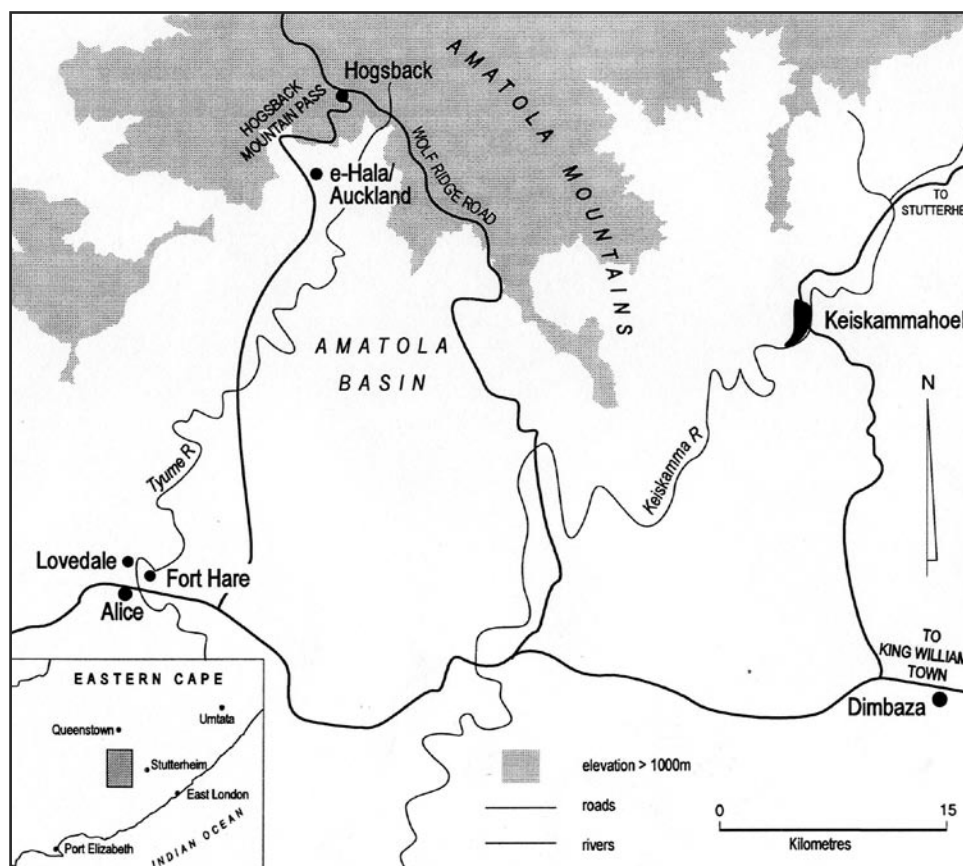




Figure 3: (Left) Hog by Bavele Mangqirha, September 1998.



Figure 4: (Right) Horse by Tam Nqweneso, painted by Pumlani Nini, September 1998.

herding cattle in the unfenced communal lands of the Tyumie Valley, of modelling cattle and other animals in unfired clay. In this particular area, however, the presence of passing tourists generated a market, and in the 1950s selling to motorists on the mountain pass road became common. The first models to be sold seem to have been drawn from the conventional repertoire of cattle and other domestic animals, but over time the range expanded, focusing in particular on the hog and the horse, modelled generally in red clay, and painted, on one side only, in white paint. At their best, these models, made with simple tools and materials – clay, house-paint, hair and fibre, a knife, a nail, water, a stone to wedge the clay and an open fire to burnish the unfired models – possess exceptional vigour and creativity.

Parallel with the development of a rudimentary market for the models, the social backgrounds of the artists tended to change. They remained entirely male, but increasingly schooling tended to take the children of more prosperous villagers away from both herding and selling, and the artists now came from the poorest sections of the village community, which was also the section unlikely to have many or any cattle. The link between herding and modelling became tenuous and then non-existent, and the art moved down the social scale.³

Today, the artists come from the very poorest in the e-Hala community. This generates a complex of social attitudes, ranging from the suspicious and even hostile amongst many white residents of Hogsback, to the warily protective amongst respectable villagers. To some of the latter at least the artists are ‘skol-

3. Morrow and Vokwana, “‘Shaping in dull dead earth ...’”.



Figure 5: (Left) Mbuyiseli Jonas making a horse, Hogsback, December 1996.

Figure 6: (Right) Sellers of clay models whistling and shouting to attract the attention of passing motorists, Hogsback, December 1996. The younger sellers are criticised by many of the mainly white householders for their raucous and sometimes perilous sales methods.

lies'.⁴ Indeed, there is an element of truth to this characterization, with some of the artists drinking excessively, smoking *dagga* and committing misdemeanours that bring them into conflict with the law.

The other aspect of the relationship of the modellers to the market is that of their interaction with tourists. This is an area that has received some attention by historians recently.⁵ However, the Hogsback artists are in a different and arguably more complex relationship to the market for cultural artefacts than those who perform at the behest of cultural entrepreneurs of one sort or another at Shakaland or elsewhere, or those who create beadwork objects under the direct supervision and sometimes inspiration of middle-class white, or increasingly black, managers who interpret their vision of the market, or even impose it on those making the objects.⁶ The Hogsback artists are independent creators, conscious of the market and responding to it, but driven also by their own artistic vision. They work as individuals, sometimes side by side, but making and selling separately, with no intermediaries between themselves and the customers. They recognise and admire skilled individuals, and are easily able to identify which models have been produced by whom. They are not under the guidance of entrepreneurial or

4. Conversation with André Joubert, Alice, April 1996.

5. See, for example, work by Caroline Hamilton and Leslie Witz, such as L. Witz, *Apartheid's Festival: Contesting South Africa's National Pasts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) and C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998).

6. For example, E.M. Preston-Whyte and J. Thorpe, 'Ways of Seeing, Ways of Buying: Images of Tourist Art and Cultural Expression in Contemporary Beadwork' in A. Nettleton and W.D. Hammond-Tooke, eds., *African Art in Southern Africa: From Tradition to Township* (Johannesburg: Donker, 1989), 123-151, and E. Preston-Whyte, 'Zulu Bead Sculptures', *African Arts*, vol. 24(1), 1991, 64-76.



Figure 7: (Left) Unpainted *uMamlambo* by Tembani Xwembe, May 1998.

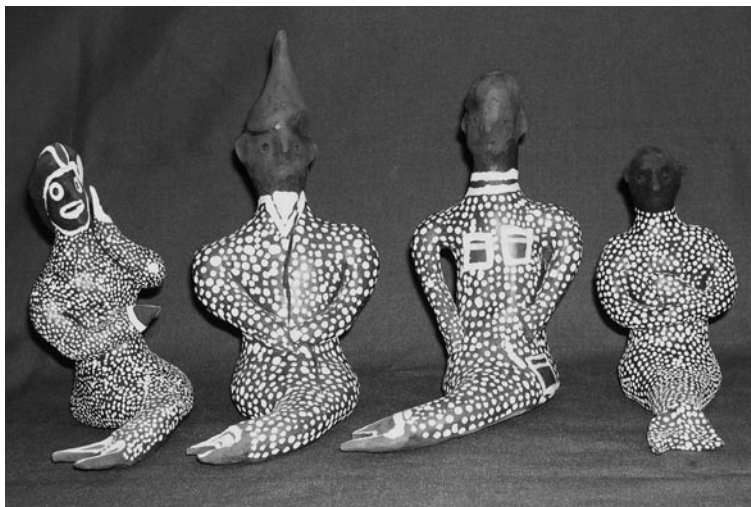


Figure 8: (Right) Selection of *uMamlambo* by Tembani Xwembe and Zithobile Mona, May 1998.

philanthropic systematisers of their art, and they are not conscious of any requirement for ‘authenticity’.

While they will happily produce to the specifications of a visitor, they also tend to have a strong sense of their own originality and of pride in their skill. One of the artists, Zithobile Mona says ‘it’s better to sell them what they’re asking for.’ Yet Tembani Xwembe adds that ‘when you make these models, you make one because you see it was sold out. But sometimes when you take your clay, some new idea will simply come up, and then you’ll do it.’ They operate within a shared artistic and social world, yet create objects that are distinctively individual. They are unaware of discourses that draw a distinction between creative art and the making of tourist curios, yet are in no doubt as to the individuality and creativity of each artist: ‘the hands of the people are not the same (*izandla zomntu azifani*).’ Tembani Xwembe elaborates: ‘I make what I think I want to do – I think of nothing else until I have completed what I’m doing – and nobody else can think what you’re thinking.’⁷

Clay, rivers, and the *uMamlambo* models

As well as hogs, horses and antelopes, the modelers now make a variety of other items, including what they call *uMamlambo*, meaning ‘mother of the river’. Models of *uMamlambo*, like all those from e-Hala, are seldom more than 17cm. high. This is dictated by the medium: unbaked clay models become unmanage-

7. Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Zithobile Mona and Tembani Xwembe, Hogsback, 10 September 1996.



Figure 9: (Left) *uMamlambo* by Tembani Xwembe, May 1998. Note the pockets integrated in the stippled, scale-like, effect.

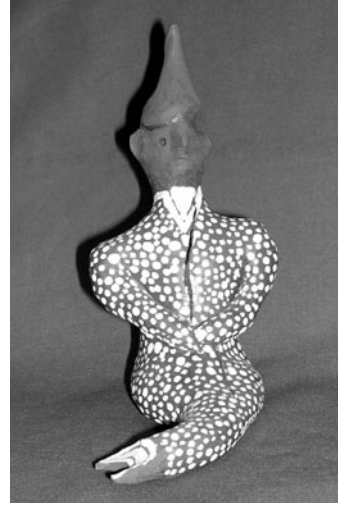


Figure 10: (Right) *uMamlambo* by Zithobile Mona, May 1998.

ably fragile if they are much larger. All clay *uMamlambo* seen by the authors have been in a sitting position, with arms by the side, on the lap, raised, or a combination of these. All have a human form above the waist, and are fish-shaped from the waist downwards, terminating with a triangular tail, sometimes forked and sometimes solid. The fish-like lower half of the body either points straight ahead or is slightly bent to one side. Beyond this, the artists' imagination rules.

Some figures are stippled all over, except for the head, in the cheap white paint that the artists habitually use, suggesting fish-scales, and indeed one of the artists says that the figures do not wear clothes. Overlaid on the scales, however, the authors have occasionally seen breast and side-pockets, as in a suit. Sometimes there is stippling above the waist with solid white lines on the tail. The hands can end indeterminately, but often strongly suggest the webbing of a water-creature. Female characteristics, notably breasts, are not always emphasised, but are sometimes strongly moulded and picked out with white paint. Hair may be represented by a peak or drooping tail of clay, or by a tuft of animal-hair or fibre set into the clay, in some cases protruding from beneath a hat. These hats vary, but often look like the knitted woolen caps much worn by poorer black South Africans: one modeler, Tembani Xwembe, uses the English word 'beret'.⁸ There is, in other words, no apparent limit to the variations on the basic sitting mermaid-like figures.

The clay, *dongwe*, that the modelers use is a potent, even dangerous mate-

8. Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Tembani Xwembe, Hogsback, 12 December 1997.

rial. In Xhosa culture clay is endowed with a mass of associations. It demands respect, and, if handled inappropriately or in the wrong context, requires propitiation. At worst, it can breathe witchcraft and death. Clay is sensitive to the human body and its functions: menstruating women could not make clay pots, and if a child farted, his clay model would break, it was believed.⁹ Clay models, even those made in school, should not be brought into the homestead, and old people ‘stressed that all of these things should be made away from the home’ as it was believed that ‘clay brought death’.¹⁰

Clay, the substance in which bodies are laid to rest, as well as being associated with death, was also linked with rivers, which are of great significance in Xhosa belief, and tend to be regarded, as Hirst says, ‘with a mixture of fear and supernatural awe’.¹¹ The neophyte *igqirha*, or healer, is said to disappear into a river, to emerge hours or days later reborn into his or her newly potent state. The raw material of the art suggests the relationship between humanity and the world of the river people, *abantu bamlambo*, which it is believed exists under the water. Reverend Wilson Mafika tells a story that illustrates the dangers of the river and the associated clay:

Sometimes you’d be in a group of five to ten, you’d then decide to do something, and maybe model. For instance, out in the rural areas (*emaXhoseni*) boys after herding usually go swimming in the river, and then afterwards they would do clay models, and then the following day, when they came back, the clay models were broken and then they start arguing and saying that this was done by the older boys, and then on the third day they made clay models and went swimming and then they came across a house underneath the water and they were then asked why they were making the place untidy, and then they were released, but instructed that they should ask to be beaten at home. If they were not beaten, that would be a problem. There are people who belong to the river, so kids are not supposed to play around the river leaving the place untidy. That is why the older people didn’t want clay next to the house, because clay belongs to the river. You should not bring it home. It’s difficult to conceptualise the Xhosa ways (*Incubeko yama Xhosa inzima*), but I’m trying to say that the clay issue has a long history.¹²

Many do not now accept such beliefs uncritically. Certainly those from the Christian Mfengu elite of e-Hala, Xhosa-speaking but with a history differentiating them from their neighbours along complex fractures of ethnicity and class,

9. Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Mrs. Majali Rwanqa, e-Hala, 6 June 1996; interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Revd. Wilson Mafika and Mr. Enoch Mafika, 12 June 1996 (henceforth interview NV/WM and EM).

10. Interview NV/WM and EM.

11. M. Hirst, ‘A River of Metaphors: Interpreting the Xhosa Diviner’s Myth’ in P. McAllister, ed., *Culture and the Commonplace: Anthropological Essays in Honour of David Hammond-Tooke* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1997), 225.

12. Interview NV/WM and EM.

would have been, and still are, dismissive of such ideas, which they identify with the poorest of what would once have been called their 'red' Xhosa neighbours.¹³ However, for some of the less formally educated people typically involved with modeling, and even for some of those with a higher educational level, clay remains a sensitive, symbol-laden, and, in some circumstances, even dangerous material. It is associated with rivers, and with river-beings. Amongst the themes that constantly recur in the modelers' art is that of the mermaid.¹⁴

uMamlambo as a familiar

The ambivalent *uMamlambo* is one of the many Xhosa spirits and familiars. However, this pantheon is diverse, mutable and ambiguous, and may also, in the case of the clay mermaids, have incorporated elements from other cultures of the Eastern Cape. It would seem that the modelers have taken elements from two distinct aspects of the Xhosa cosmography, namely, on the one hand, the vindictive familiar *uMamlambo*, often taking the form of a beautiful woman, and on the other the elderly mermaid, one of the river people, *abantu bamlambo*, who plays a crucial role in the induction of the diviner, or healer, *igqirha*, into his or her craft.

The significance of rivers continues in modern Christian communities, especially amongst Zionists, where novices may be apprenticed to prophets much as trainees are apprenticed to fully-fledged *amagqirha*, and where the river pool tends to play a similarly crucial role.¹⁵ Commonly, *amagqirha* receive their powers when drawn to a pool into which they descend and remain for a period.¹⁶ A mirror-world exists under the water, populated by river-people, river-cattle, and all the other aspects of Xhosa society. While the river-people are not necessarily hostile to human beings, as are witches, they are unpredictable beings that must be treated with care.¹⁷

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13. Interview Seán Morrow/Mr. Monde Madubedube, University of Fort Hare, Alice, 6 December 1996. Interview in English. For a classic discussion of 'red' and 'school', see Philip and Iona Meyer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961).
 14. There is a large and growing literature on Mami Wata or variants of that name. This tends to concentrate on West Africa, though there are references to similar figures elsewhere in Africa. See, for instance, H.J. Drewal, 'Mermaids, Mirrors, and Snake Charmers: Igbo Mami Wata Shrines', *African Arts*, vol. 21(2), 1988, 38-53. For a study concerned to see Mami Wata in 'specific, autonomous contexts' (60), see C. Gore and J. Nevadomsky, 'Practice and Agency in Mammy Wata Worship in Southern Nigeria', *African Arts*, vol. 30(2), 1997, 60-69. Though beyond the scope of this study, the Xhosa mermaid figures do on the face of it have fascinating parallels with possibly similar phenomena in other parts of Africa, though Gore and Nevadomsky's caution about creating a possibly misleadingly 'unanimous representation' (69) should be remembered. See a discussion on the diffusion of images of this type in southern Africa initiated by Brian Siegel on 9 October 1996 on the H-Net List on the History of South Africa.
 15. See C.M. Lamla, 'Present-Day Diviners (Ama-Gqira) in the Transkei' (University of Fort Hare, MA thesis, 1975), 72. Note also the apocalyptic visions of Nongqawuse by the Gxarha River, which persuaded many Xhosa to destroy their herds in 1856 in the confidence that the invaders would disappear and that new cattle would appear from the rivers and the sea. See J.B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-57* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989), especially 78-94.
 16. See, for instance, M. Wilson, S. Kaplan, T. Maki, E.M. Walton, *Keiskammahok Rural Survey, Vol. 3: Social Structure* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1957), 191. See also W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society: A People of the Transkeian Uplands, South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1962), 313-14.
 17. Note the study by W.D. Hammond-Tooke, 'The Symbolic Structure of Cape Nguni Cosmology', in M.G. Whisson and M. West, eds., *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1975). However, note also the critique of this approach in M.M. Hirst, 'The Healer's Art: Cape Nguni Diviners in the Townships of Grahamstown' (Rhodes University, D.Phil. thesis, 1990), 252-53.

In one aspect, *uMamlambo* is a familiar rather than one of the river people. Sometimes it is taken to be synonymous with another being, *iChanti*, but there is disagreement on this point, and Monica Hunter, writing of Pondoland in the 1930s, suggests that though the two are often identified, the well-informed draw a clear distinction between them.¹⁸ To some, *uMamlambo* is the offspring of *iChanti*, while to others it can be created by putting certain herbs into a bottle filled with sheep's milk, which is then buried in the manure in a kraal. After some days 'a kind of caterpillar' appears. This is *uMamlambo*, which in recent times, is normally 'purchased by migrant workers from Malays in the cities and brought home by migrant labourers.'¹⁹ In the Keiskammahoek area, close to e-Hala, *uMamlambo* was in the 1950s described as 'the snake of men', *inyoka amadoda*, often a male witch's familiar, able to manifest itself in many forms such as a beautiful woman, a baby, or a beguiling charm or ornament. It promotes the prosperity of the owner, but causes the death of most of his family.²⁰ The essence of *uMamlambo*, in fact, is whatever a person most profoundly lusts or craves. This need not necessarily be a seductive woman, though to a man it is likely to be.²¹

Writing of the Bhaca Xhosa-speakers from Transkei, Hammond-Tooke confirms the characterization of *uMamlambo* (or *iNathlathu*) as a particularly sinister familiar, mainly possessed by men, often demanding the death of a parent to ensure its possessor's wealth. Typically taking the form of a snake, it may also make its appearance as an overwhelmingly attractive woman. He reports the story of a man who refused to marry in spite of his friends' teasing. One night, however, this man was seen with a beautiful woman who disappeared when people approached. 'This', his informant stated, 'was his *uMamlambo*.'²² Broster writes that to men *uMamlambo* invariably takes the form of a woman of just such beauty and sexual attraction. When the man falls in love with her, she takes up residence at his kraal and, though he will prosper materially, the familiar causes his father or senior male relative to die. Another manifestation of *uMamlambo* is when she hides herself in a container of beer. The beer will taste delicious, but one of the men drinking it will be bewitched.²³ *iChanti*, also associated with rivers, or caves, is specific to women. It is also mutable, and, in the guise of a snake, by licking her can make its owner beautiful.²⁴

Both *uMamlambo* and *iChanti* can take many forms. In the words of John Henderson Soga, 'its appearance and qualities depend entirely on, and are subject to, individual fancy.' He gives an account of two girls who saw bracelets glittering just under the surface of a river, which, when lifted out, turned into kitchen

18. J.H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, [1931]), 193-196; M. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa*, second edition (Oxford University Press: London, 1961), 287; Wilson, Kaplan, et al., *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey*, 190.

19. *Greater Dictionary of isiXhosa*, vol. 3 (Alice: University of Fort Hare, 1989), 718.

20. Wilson, Kaplan et al., *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey*, 190.

21. Discussion Seán Morrow/Mr. Loyiso Pulumani, Fort Hare, 26 August 1997. Bheki Maseko's 'Mamlambo' in his *Mamlambo and Other Stories* (COSAW: Johannesburg, 1991), 133-142 is a literary treatment of *uMamlambo*.

22. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society*, 285-6.

23. J. Broster, *Amagqirha: Religion, Magic and Medicine in Transkei* (Goodwood: Via Africa, [1981]), 59-60.

24. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society*, 285-6.

utensils. On running home, terrified, one girl spoke of the experience and was found dead the next morning. The other girl kept the experience to herself, and survived.²⁵

While the influence of the *uMamlambo* image on e-Hala modeling seems recent, this familiar, like the male migrants of the Eastern Cape, has a long-standing connection with the western-influenced industrial areas of South Africa. Hunter, in the 1930s, noted that in Pondoland it was believed that the familiar was acquired by migrants working at the mines from Europeans or Indians, and she quotes an informant who describes *uMamlambo* metamorphosing from a piece of leather that will not burn, to a snake, to a beautiful woman to whom the man makes love: 'he does not tell at home that he met that girl because it was *mamlambo*.' The girl, some report, always appears in European clothes, and the possession of this familiar will inevitably lead to the death of wife, children and parents.²⁶

Mr. Maton Makhapela, born more than eighty years ago, recollected an incident when he was a young migrant on the Witwatersrand. On the train coming back to the Eastern Cape, close to the bridge over the Orange River, a friend found that his trunk contained a snake. He had bought medicine that the Johannesburg vendors, 'the Islams', said was part of *uMamlambo*. Though Mr. Makhapela did not associate *uMamlambo* with water, he reports that he said to his friend that 'once the train gets to the middle of the bridge, I would shove the trunk into the river, because Sis'Mamlambo would kill many people at home.'²⁷ It is reported that in March 1997 an educated and sophisticated isiXhosa-speaking woman working in the field of cultural development, when introduced to two modelers and shown models of *uMamlambo*, 'cringed with horror and refused to talk or continue doing a transaction with them.'²⁸

uMamlambo moves with the times. For example, contemporary rumour has it that a wealthy businessman from the large East London township of Mdantsane was reputed to have a snake, *uMamlambo*, which he kept in the swimming pool of his large and luxurious home. From time to time he would bring a woman to his house, but *uMamlambo* was jealous and scared them off. However, the man was particularly smitten by one woman and wished to marry her: the familiar arranged it that the man first killed the woman, and then himself.²⁹

There are sufficient elements in the culture of Xhosa-speakers to account for the distinctive appearance of the clay *uMamlambo*, and local informants refer only to these indigenous beliefs. However, the appearance of the models may owe something to western mermaid iconography, or to local Khoi, or 'coloured' images. The Kat River valley, some twenty kilometres from e-Hala, has a population substantially descended from the Khoi population settled there by the British

25. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*, 193-6.

26. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, 287.

27. Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Mr. Maton Makhapela, e-Hala, 20 October 1997 (henceforth interview NV/MM).

28. Written communication from Annette Loubser, 7 September 1998.

29. Discussion Seán Morrow/Mr. Brown Maaba, Fort Hare, 25 September 1997.

from 1829 in an attempt to create a buffer between the British invaders and the Xhosa.³⁰ This community's beliefs include figures known as *watermeids*. There is constant interaction between the Afrikaans-speaking coloured population and Xhosa-speakers, and Xhosa-speakers often consult coloured healers, who have a reputation for considerable skill.³¹ Xhosa culture has been considerably affected by the Khoi presence. In the past Xhosa-speakers did not eat fish, but Khoi-symbolism has entered Xhosa imagery.³²

uMamlambo as one of the abantu mamlambo

There is, however, another element in the culture of Xhosa-speakers that complicates the picture. As has been seen, *uMamlambo* is mutable, often taking the form of a seductive young woman, associated with water and possessed, to their immediate gratification but ultimate danger, by some males. There is a complex of beliefs associated with the process of *ukuthwasa*, the life-crisis leading to initiation as an *igqirha*, which includes a female ancestor-figure, part human and part fish, old and beyond the age of sexual activity. This figure seems also to have contributed to the clay models. The best study of this phenomenon, part of the 'river myth' in Xhosa cosmology, which we follow, is by Manton Hirst.³³

In Hirst's fascinating description and analysis, the old woman is a crucial figure in the transformation of the postulant into a fully-fledged *igqirha*. This calling is intimately involved with water, and even when the individual concerned is summoned to the forest or mountain rather than the river, it is likely that the culmination of the incipient *igqirha*'s initiation will take place at a mountain pool. Broster quotes a song revealed to one candidate *igqirha* by her ancestral spirit that catches the urgency of this call:

Oh hurry to the river!
Oh hurry to the river!
What is detaining you?
I am complaining!
What is detaining you?
Oh hurry to the river!³⁴

The immersion of the postulant, whether believed to be an actual happening or a dream or vision, is a multi-layered symbolic event. The river is a potent metaphor for the paternal ancestors, the crucial descent-group in Xhosa society, and the descent into the water also parallels the washing off of white clay after circumcision and echoes the disappearance of the great king Gcaleka in a pool

30. Still useful on the settlement is J.S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1957), esp. 216-245.

31. Information from Yvette Ferguson, Fort Hare, 19 September 1997. Ms Ferguson carried out a study of the culture of the Khoi-descended groups of the Kat River Valley.

32. Conversation Seán Morrow/Manton Hirst, Amathole Museum, King William's Town, 19 September 1997.

33. Hirst, 'The Healer's Art'; *idem.*, 'A River of Metaphors' in McAllister, ed., *Culture and the Commonplace*.

34. Broster, *Amagqirha*, 47.

in the Ngxingxolo river in about 1778.³⁵ The long-haired river people are human down to the waist, and the rest of their bodies are fish-like, paralleling the diviner's skin skirt.³⁶

The 'river myth', the symbolic account of the bestowing of his or her power to the *igqirha*, is recounted in versions specific to each individual. However, constant themes include stripping off and entering the river, the necessity for the safety of the candidate, for relatives not to complain or grieve at his or her disappearance; the covering of the body with white clay, *ifutha*, the Xhosa symbol of liminality; the meeting with *iChanti*, the snake guarding the river world, and particularly the cavern which Hirst argues represents the grave of a chief; and the medicines spread out on grass under the river. Crucial, from the point of view of this discussion, is the meeting with an old woman, representing the candidates' paternal ancestors, who imparts the diviner's art. She has long hair hanging down to her back, and a fish tail, or fish-tail girdle, parallel to the skin hat, *isidlokolo*, and skin skirt, *unthika*, of the *igqirha*. From this representative of the shades, the candidate learns that there are rituals, *intlwayelelo*, which must be performed at the river. Observing this instruction, on return to the world above the water, the new *igqirha* is secluded for a period, and there is sorghum beer, singing and dancing.³⁷

The account of the meeting with the old woman by Mandla, one of Hirst's informants, deserves quotation. The candidate has passed the Cerberus-like figure of *iChanti*, which will kill him if the family questions his disappearance into the world of the ancestors, and has also passed the medicines laid out the grass:

[B]eyond the grass there is a human being, an old woman, wearing a girdle round her waist, who lives there. She will come to see one to inquire what one wants here. Now this old woman is the one who initiates diviners at the river ... That old woman is a human being in the upper part [of the body] and a fish in the lower part. Her hair reaches down her back, [and] her skin is a scaly covering with no flesh thereon. She is a fish but a fish which is a human being in the upper part [of the body]. She is a person of the river. The old woman is the one who resides in the river, she is the female diviner of that place who has favoured one when one has met the ancestors of the river.

Each clan, Mandla says, is represented by a different old woman who tells the candidate that she is 'your great, great grandparent'. When she has instructed the candidate, in what is in effect a divinatory consultation, he or she has now been called by the ancestors to the vocation, and the new *igqirha* 'belongs to the river', *ungowasemlanjeni*.³⁸

35. Hirst, 'The Healer's Art', 119, 172.

36. *Ibid.*, 215, 219-20.

37. *Ibid.*, 257, 277. Hirst gives the full text of one diviner's account of the river myth in the original Xhosa (411-4) and English translation (261-6).

38. *Ibid.*, 263-4.



Figure 11: Two artists: Zithobile Mona, left, and Tembani Xwembe, right, Hogsback, May 1998. Tembani is holding models of *uMamlambo*.

Another aspect of the ancestral woman is how she relates to chieftainship. It was once the practice in Xhosa-speaking societies, on the death of a commoner, to expose the corpse in the veld.³⁹ Chiefs, on the other hand, were entombed in a side-chamber off a larger cavern, and it was the practice to ‘smell out’ an old, barren, female commoner so that her body should accompany the chief. The presence of the old woman echoes this practice. The people and other entities of the river, even *iChanti*, the snake that can bring death, are not arbitrary or vindictive, like *uMamlambo*. Only those suffer at their hands that have rejected or failed to propitiate the spirits.⁴⁰ The old woman is not sexually alluring as mermaid-figures in European legend tend to be, and that her hair is long and tangled indicates that she has long been widowed, since a widow’s hair is shaved on the death of her husband.⁴¹

The myths and the artists

Much of this appears to mesh with the accounts of the artists. One modeler, Zithobile Mona, described an encounter with *uMamlambo*, or ‘Mama River’ as he calls her in English, while fishing. It seems he forgot to throw a stone into the

39. See, for example, Lamla, ‘Present-Day Diviners’, 192.

40. Hirst, ‘The Healer’s Art’, 269.

41. Conversation Seán Morrow/Manton Hirst, Amathole Museum, King William’s Town, 19 September 1997.



Figure 12: Tembani Xwembe making a model, Hogsback, May 1998.

river and say ‘stay aside (*kwelela*)’ as is advisable. Luckily, he escaped the swelling and possible death that such an encounter often involves. It was this experience, he says, that led him to make these particular models.⁴² He sets his account in the context of the river-people, of whom his mermaid models represent one. She is white, he says, with long pitch-black hair.⁴³ This figure appears to be an echo of the old fish-woman who inducts the *amagqirha*.

Tembani Xwembe makes a clear distinction between ‘the *uMamlambo* who is a snake ... it’s the one people buy so that they can get rich’, and ‘the one from the river’. He emphasizes that he is modeling his mental picture of the river-creature, though, unlike Zithobile Mona, he does not claim to have actually seen one. Both types, he says, are to be feared, but the snake-familiar more so, as the person with it behaves in an anti-social manner, and fights against the *igqirha*, whose task it is to protect humanity from witches and those who do evil. A person seeing the river-creature runs the risk of having a twisted face, or even of death, but this is not intentional on the part of these beings, and indeed they assist humanity by playing an essential role in the emergence of the *igqirha*. He appears to be fending off any implication that he is creating images of the malign entity that haunts the Xhosa imagination, ‘the one you buy ... that when the wife

42. Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Zithobile Mona, Hogsback, 12 October 1997.

43. *Ibid.* Long hair characterises the river people. See, for instance, C.C. Olivier, ‘Die Religie van die Gcaleka’ (University of South Africa, MA thesis, 1979), 16.

wants to go to the room to see what's in the case – she opens and finds a snake and will die.' He steps back from any association of his art with this image: 'there are people who think about a snake, but no, that can't be. People who talk that way are those ... who do not bring things like the Bible, nature and Xhosa culture together properly.' However, as has been seen, Xhosa-speakers can indeed associate these models with 'uMamlambo who is a snake', and the presence of this imagery in the models cannot be discounted.

To Tembani Xwembe, the age, race and sex of uMamlambo are indeterminate: 'some I make to have a beard, and some I make as a young woman. A person can then decide ... what it is that I have made, whether also white or black ... there is no age ... even with a fish, there is no age.' His account also suggests that elements external to Xhosa mythology may have influenced his images, though perhaps marginally. He says he has never seen uMamlambo, 'except in the book, and also by being told by people.' However, he draws a clear distinction between uMamlambo and whatever mermaid images he may have seen: 'the one in the book', he says, 'is not the same, because they have crocodile scales, and they don't have hair.' Indeed, conventional 'European' mermaids could be perceived as having 'crocodile scales', though lack of hair is harder to understand.

Tembani Xwembe says that uMamlambo is now seen more frequently than previously, as the rivers are drying up. Also, the custom had previously been to take out the smaller stones from the river, leaving the bigger ones for uMamlambo to sit on, so that they could see human beings coming and slip into the water before catching a person's eye and involuntarily harming them. Now, even when they do dive in, with less water to cover them they more easily catch a person's eye and harm them.⁴⁴

It is important, however, not to over-codify beliefs which are often mutable and individualistic. An example is Mr. Maton Makhapela, a complete sceptic about the powers of the *amagqirha* and their alleged descent into the water, who recounted with cynical gusto his experience of stumbling over the ribs and rotting flesh of sacrificial cattle that had been thrown into the river for the *abantu mamlambo*. Perhaps this explains his rejection of any connection between uMamlambo and rivers, since he also believes he saw the body of Sis'Mamlambo some time before the Second World War when he was a migrant labourer on the Witwatersrand. He described a body that he took to be uMamlambo:

A person with long hair. Sis'Mamlambo has a beautiful head. Her hair is pointed upwards: there she is – she's been trapped – she's dead ... We could not get anything, we from Daggafontein ... She was pretty. It's just that she had bits cut off – cutting off fingers, arms and things. People who knew about medicine, they were buy-

44. Interview NV/MM.

ing bits with huge amounts of money. Even white people were around, to buy, with their cars, to buy Sis'Mamlambo. There, in Johannesburg, in Daggafontein, before you go to South Nigel.⁴⁵

It is difficult to separate fascination at the description from horror at this obscure tragedy of some seventy years ago.

Conclusion

Though an artist such as Tembani Xwembe is clear that he is creating river-creatures, overall it appears that the modelers have drawn on a range of influences in creating clay *uMamlambo*. Their raw material itself, damp and waterlogged, may suggest creatures of the river, and there may even be influences from Khoi or European imagery. With more certainty, we may say that the modelers have incorporated in these figures elements of the familiar, *uMamlambo*, and of the elderly fish-woman, representing the ancestors, one of the river-people who inducts the *igqirha* into his or her craft. Indeed, we should not expect consistency from these artists, and its absence does not detract from their achievement. Culture is fluid, not constant, and the boys and young men who make the models are not in any sense ritual experts. They are in fact *bricoleurs*, using whatever is to hand, and particularly the inheritance of Xhosa religious belief and ritual practice, to create images that resonate with their world, and delight the customer.

45. Interview NV/MM.



Figure 1: *Wreck of the Grosvenor, East Indiaman* by Robert Smirke, c. 1783-4. Smirke based his painting on first-hand accounts of the wreck received in London in 1783. The canvas is split dramatically along the diagonal into realms of darkness and light, sea and land. Note the prominence given to the white clad *Grosvenor* women and children in the foreground. The natives lurk menacingly ashore under a grim crag and a stormy sky.

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