

Zulu girls' initiation ceremony

Diane Fitzgerald (with information & photos from Dr Frank Jolles)

An Excerpt from Zulu Inspired Beadwork by Diane Fitzgerald.

Umemulo, a traditional Zulu ceremony, is a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood.

Many of the girls shown are older girls who took part in the ceremony when it was last held about two years ago. They are now senior girls, most of them engaged to be married. Their role is to inspect the younger girls to assure that they are properly attired and know the rules. The candidates for *umemulo* must declare that they are virgins before the local *induna* (headman) or chief. Because the communities are small and tightly knit, there is little likelihood of cheating. These photos were taken at an initiation ceremony near Injasuthi, in the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in November 2006.

The beading that is worn continues the strong tradition of beadwork among the Zulus and is a chance to show off beadwork and beading expertise. Parts

of the fully beaded ceremonial costumes may be inherited, while other parts may be made for the occasion by the family of the girl, the girl herself or bought from older women who still remember how to do the complex techniques required by some of the beading.

The techniques used in these costumes include wrapping, brick, netting and herringbone stitches and lots of long fringes to show movement as dancers sway to the music. It is interesting to note the colour palette of aqua, white and black accented with bright orange and hot pink which varies from the more traditional primary opaque colors used in the past. However, it isn't unusual for new colours to be used because fashions among Zulus change just as they do elsewhere and like young women everywhere, they would want to be fashionable. The radios are a part of their costume and also indicate that they keep up with trends.

The ceremony usually takes place every second year and is a lengthy process which involves at least two weeks' preparation.

The ceremony involves much dancing, singing (the dancing to the rhythm and repetitive phrases of the singing) and mock fights by the young men of the area.

Festivities usually begin around noon and go on for most of the afternoon for two days, typically Saturday and Sunday. It is a great occasion and draws many onlookers including family, friends and members of the initiates' community. Elders and representatives of the local municipality are also present and are served home brewed beer, *utshwala*. For the feast, one or more cows may be slaughtered for the enormous pots of stew which are cooked in traditional three-legged iron pots and served at the end of the second day. Rain during the ceremony is regarded as a good omen as it brings fertility to the land.

Diane Fitzgerald's ninth book, *Zulu Inspired Beadwork* is published by Interweave Press. The book contains instructions for over 20 projects based on Zulu beadwork techniques, some never before published, with pictures of original Zulu beadwork and historical information.

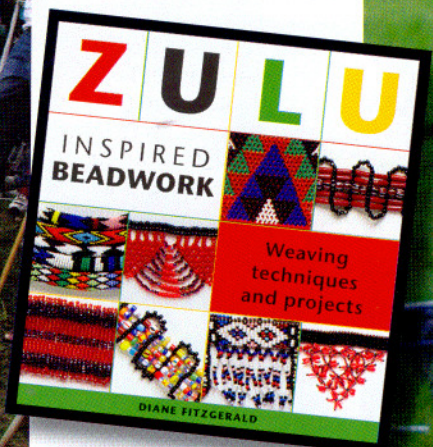


Fig 1 Senior Zulu girls wearing traditional flared red hats which indicate that they are engaged to be married, observe the umemulu ceremony.

Fig 2 Zulu girl with a radio which is part of her costume.

Fig 3 A Zulu girl gets help with her costume from another girl who is dressed in a typical male costume. Although these costumes are for males, they may be worn by girls for this ceremony.

Fig 4 Detail of the back of an initiate's costume.

Fig 5 Zulu girls ready for initiation. The cane is a traditional accoutrement and the woman's pose as she is leaning on a cane is typical. A similar pose was captured by watercolour artist and author, Barbara Tyrell in her book *Tribal Peoples of South Africa* (p. 128).

Fig 6 Detail showing profusion of beaded collars and bandoliers.



Fig. 6

photos: Frank Jollies

