

# AFRICA

EXCERPTED FROM THE FORTHCOMING BOOK *BEADING WITH BRICK STITCH* BY DIANE FITZGERALD



FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR



PHOTOGRAPH BY Z. J. S. NDIYANDE & SON, 1974, GREYOWN, NATAL



Xhosa Decorative Shawl Pin. A safety pin, 3.5 inches long, is the base for this brick stitch and fringe piece. Note the flowerets on each strand of fringe.

Among Zulus, brick stitch is one of the most popular beading techniques. Their many variations of it are used in bracelets, armbands, necklaces, earrings, bandoliers, and aprons.

Xhosa Pendant Necklace. This is done in brick stitch with geometric designs, probably about 1920.

**a**frica is well-known for its beaded adornments and beadwork; little wonder considering the supply of beads brought to this continent in the last several centuries. According to a publication of the South African National Gallery, *Ezakwantu: Beadwork From the Eastern Cape* (Capetown: 1993), between 1932 and 1955 alone, the Societa Veneziana Conterie of Venice, Italy, shipped 3.7 million kilos of beads to Africa. Of these, almost half, or roughly 1.6 million kilos, were shipped to South Africa and Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). It is likely that this amount would be at least doubled if we were to include the beads imported from Bohemia! Even before European beads were exported to Africa, beads had been traded into southern Africa for centuries, probably first by Phoenicians bringing Egyptian beads, and then later by Arabs bringing beads from India, and still later by the Portuguese bringing European beads. It is here, in Africa, that we can see some of the best beadwork done with brick stitch.

**THE ZULU**

To the Zulu women of South Africa goes the prize for not only the most prolific use of brick stitch, but also for the most creative use. As a precious commodity, mysterious in production, glass beads were often reserved for royalty, thus making beads and beadwork items deserving of awe and respect. Over time, beadwork became an intimate part of the Zulu culture. Most beadwork is made by young women who define the meanings of colors and patterns, but both men and women wear it. Young girls learn the language of beadwork as they visit a local store to buy beads. They learn about color and social significance by discussing the beadwork worn by others. Men learn the meaning of beadwork colors and patterns from female family members. The beadwork then communicates who has reached the various stages of courtship and marriage, as well as where a person lives. Beadwork thus becomes a sign

proclaiming, "I am available," or "I am committed."

Although Zulu women use many off-loom beading techniques, most of their techniques are based on brick stitch or netting. However, they use these basic techniques with such unusual creative variations that, in my estimation, their beadwork is unsurpassed for structural intricacy. In addition to the simple rectangular pendants worn around the neck, Zulu women use diamond and triangle elements, short or long flowing fringe, swags and loops of beads, picot edgings, delightful baubles, and other shapes to vary their beadwork. And, of course, these beadwork techniques and patterns were transferred from woman to woman without written instruction, without videos, without color-coded diagrams, and without the Internet! In addition, they usually used sinew (which they made themselves) without a needle.

Many beaders may be familiar with the Zulu "love letter" pendants, usually made with brick stitch and attached to a safety pin. Colors were chosen to communicate or symbolize a message for a loved one to wear and remember. While many interpretations have been offered for the color meaning, it is just as likely that the color choice of the maker was unique to her situation. What is more interesting is that these simple rectangular pendants have been worn by Zulus for more than one hundred years. A similar pendant is showcased in the South African National Gallery in Capetown. It had been the prize of an English soldier taken during the fierce colonial battles in South Africa and was recently returned from England. In faded graceful script, it still bears a tag which reads, "Brought from Natal, 1879."

Lionel PHM Marshall, South Africa's minister of arts, culture, science and technology, added this message, which is displayed with the piece:

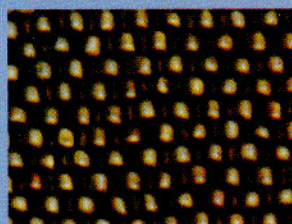
I was deeply moved to see and handle the Zulu necklace worn by Zulu warriors. This artifact, which was repatriated into the country, is a reminder of the creative talent of Zulu women. They expressed their deep feelings and support for their beloved ones through beadwork. The dominance of red beads symbolizes spiritual warmth and love. The necklace evoked heroic feelings to a person of Zulu stock. The necklace is a living symbol of a gallant Amabutho who fell at Ulundi on July 4, 1879.

It would be hard to find a group to whom beadwork has more meaning than the Zulus. ❁

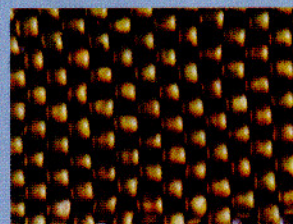


*Beading with Brick Stitch* will be available at your favorite craft shop or you can order on-line at [www.interweave.com](http://www.interweave.com). \$21.95 plus shipping.

## Identifying Brick Stitch



Brick stitch worked from bottom to top.



Peyote stitch worked from bottom to top, which, rotated 90 degrees, appears identical to brick stitch.

I do not claim to be an authority on either brick stitch or beadwork, and in searching for material for this section of the book, it soon became apparent how difficult it is to determine whether a piece was made with brick stitch or peyote stitch. They look the same if you rotate one or the other a quarter turn. If you take a magnifying glass and look closely between the beads of any piece done with these stitches, you'll see what I mean. Many pieces done with brick stitch will look like peyote stitch because the thread bridge from the previous row is often pulled up inside the new bead, especially if the beader worked with tight tension. The result is that you see two threads entering and exiting each bead, just like peyote stitch, and the loop is hidden. Sometimes one has only a picture to look at and can only guess which stitch was used by analyzing which way the work would have been done most conveniently. Sometimes it's easy: A piece will have a broken bead and then it is clear which stitch was used. You will see either two threads lying parallel with peyote stitch or one thread looped around the other with brick stitch.

Even if you have the good fortune to see a museum collection firsthand, unless you pull the beads apart (which most curators aren't likely to allow!) or see where a bead was broken out, it is difficult to be sure of the stitch used. In the case of beadwork that has been buried for hundreds of years, such as ancient Egyptian beadwork, the thread may have disintegrated and only the position of the beads can give you a clue. If the straight edge is on the width of the piece and the uneven edge on the length, it may be brick stitch. If it is the opposite, the straight edge on the length and the uneven edge on the width, it may be peyote stitch. But even these are not hard and fast rules. So you just have to ask yourself, "Is it likely that this piece was done with brick stitch? Did the people who made it often use brick stitch? Could it be worked with another technique and get this result?"