

**Language of Colours amongst the Zulus expressed
by their Bead-work Ornaments; and some
General Notes on their Personal Adornments
and Clothing.**

By

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With Plate XXVII.

At the suggestion of Dr. Warren, Director of the Natal Government Museum, I propose to place before the reader a few notes on the personal ornaments used by Zulus, especially with reference to the meanings assigned to the variously coloured beads which are so generally used in certain of their adornments.

Before speaking of the bead-work ornaments, now very freely used by the Zulus in adorning their dusky bodies, it will be interesting to indicate the kind of ornaments that were formerly used before the advent of beads.

I.

Previous to the arrival of the white man nature supplied the Zulu with the materials for the following articles of ornament:

(1) For adorning the head the Zulu man uses the well-known head-ring (isicoco). Sewing fibre (uzi), obtained from the bast of the wild fig and certain other trees, is twisted to form a circlet, which is sewn into the woolly hair.

This ring of fibre is then covered with the viscous material (*ungiyane*) obtained from the sticky secretion of a scale-insect which lives on the thorn bush—*Dalbergia obovata* (*umzungulu*). Afterwards it is polished with a pebble until it shines like a well-polished boot.

The man with the head-ring is called *ikehla*. Formerly it was the sign of attaining manhood, and it gave the young man royal right to look for a wife. The time for putting on the head-ring, known as *ukutunga*, was announced to the young men by the Zulu king. To touch a man's head-ring disrespectfully was the greatest insult possible; and formerly such a deed was often revenged by putting the offender to death.

Besides the head-ring, men of importance or warriors would wear an ostrich feather; each regiment would have a uniform colour—all white, all black, etc.

Another head ornament which was, and still is, very much sought after is a bunch of tail-feathers of the large Kafir finch or long-tailed widow bird (*isakabuli*). The bunch of feathers may cover almost the whole of the head, and is called *isidhlo*.

Headmen wore, and still wear, below the head-ring a circlet of leopard, serval, otter, or other fur.

(2) As neck ornaments the men of the royal family wore circlets of lion or leopard claws. Royal princesses wore stiff collars of heavy, solid, brass rings, made by bending a brass rod into a spiral of two or three turns. It was called *umnaka* or *ubedu*. These collars must have been most uncomfortable to wear, as the head could not be turned without moving the whole body.

An ordinary Zulu woman would frequently wear around the neck a fibre string carrying a perforated brass ball (*indondo*) about an inch in diameter. The ball would hang about at the level of top of the sternum.

Sometimes a number of little sticks of the scented *umtomboti* tree (*Excæcaria africana*) would be threaded on a string to form a necklet; or large beads made of scent-powder

would be similarly threaded. The powder was prepared from various scented plants, which were dried and pulverised, and kneaded into balls.

The single brass ball (*indondo*) is no longer seen; but the circlet of scented balls (*amaka*) and the necklet of little sticks (*ubande*) of the scented *umtomboti* tree are still in use.

(3) For adorning the arms and legs the young men used the bushy ends of cattle tails (*amatshoba*), which were fastened above the elbows and below the knees. As in the case of the ostrich feathers, the various regiments were distinguished by the colour of the tails—white, black, brown, etc. Boys and girls satisfied themselves with grass wristlets and anklets, but princesses were obliged to wear heavy brass rings around the wrists and ankles (*umnaka* or *ubedu*), similar to those worn as necklets, only they were simple rings without spiral turns.

(4) Lastly, for covering and adorning the body grass belts (*izifociya*) were used, besides strips of skin of bucks or domestic animals.

Married women used formerly, as at the present time, the short petticoat (*isidwaba*) of goat- or ox-skin.

Men wore the loin-dress (*umutsha*), consisting of bushy tails in front (*isinene*) and a square or oblong piece of ox- or buck-skin behind (*ibetshu*). In place of the bushy tails strips of buck-skin were often used.

Grown-up girls clothed themselves with the *ubendhle*, which was a fringed loin-covering encircling the body. It was made from the veld plant *Gazania longiscapa*.

Witch-doctors were distinguished by their *iminqwambi*, which were strips of skin worn over the shoulders, and fastened together at the middle, before and behind, something like a pair of braces.

For the great *umkosi*, the Zulu king's annual festival, the warriors wore the state dress, consisting of three girdles or kilts of ox-tails. One was worn low down over the buttocks, another above the hips, and the third over the shoulders. In

this way the body was entirely covered from neck to knee. This state dress was called imiqubula.

II.

From the brief account given above we see that there has always been a great variety of different dresses and ornaments, distinguishing royalty, warriors, witch-doctors, and common folk; but when the European brought glittering coloured beads the sympathy of the Zulu was at once aroused, and he found a new field for his imagination and skill.

Beads were first brought by the Portugese, then by the Dutch, and now by the English. The natives show very considerable skill and taste in making ornaments and designing patterns. There are established colours and kinds of beads in use among the Zulus, and they will not look at any other kinds, however pretty they may be, which are not established by traditional use. Traders soon discover this peculiarity, and take care to only have in stock the kinds of beads and colours which are liked by the natives.

The natives have given each colour of beads a special name and meaning; and they have invented a kind of language of colour, whereby they can convey their thoughts from one to another without speaking. How this is done will best be explained by reference to the illustrations of bead work given in the plate (Pl. XXVII) attached to this paper; but I will first give a list of the names and literal meanings of the different coloured beads:

White beads	.	= itambo (lit. bone).
Black beads	.	= isitimane (name of a regiment formed by Mpande; also, nick-name for a very black person).
Blue beads	.	= ijuba (lit. dove).
Red beads	.	= nungazi (from igazi, blood).
Yellow beads	.	= incombo (lit. young Kafir-corn still yellow) or ipuzi (lit. bright yellow native pumpkin).

Green beads . . .	= ubuhlalu obuluhlaza (from uluhlaza, new grass).
Striped beads . . .	= intotoviyane (lit. large striped grasshopper).
Pink beads . . .	= ubuhlalu obumpofu (from impofu, poor, poverty).
Transparent brown beads . . .	= umlilwana (lit. a low fire).
Dark blue beads . . .	= inkankane (lit. Common Ibis).
Large-sized beads of any colour . . .	= amapohlo or amaqanda (amaqanda means eggs).

Anyone uninitiated in the secret meaning of the different beads, and seeing, for example, a number of white beads followed by a few red, green, blue, and black, and then again white, red, green, blue, and black in the same succession and the same number of each kind of bead, might think that the arrangement was simply for the sake of ornament and symmetry. But a kraal-native would say it was a letter, and would call it so, i.e. incwadi, or better, ubala abuyise, which means "one writes in order that the other should reply." In this way an uneducated Zulu girl will present her sweetheart with an ubala abuyise, and will expect his visit in return.

A variety of different bead ornaments are used as letters in this way, the chief of which are illustrated in the accompanying plate.

Fig. 1, ingeje, a single bead string.

Fig. 2, umampapeni, one square of beads with one or more bead strings.

Fig. 3, ulimi (lit. tongue), one long oblong piece of bead-work with one or more bead strings.

Fig. 4, igcagcane, a necklet consisting of a number of connected small squares of bead work.

These illustrations are taken from actual specimens in the Natal Government Museum, and the colours represent, as nearly as possible, the favourite shades established by custom.

The simplest form of *ubala abuyise*, or letter, is an *ingeje*, or single bead string (fig. 1), consisting of only two kinds of beads. In this specimen one half of the string consists of white beads, and the other half of pink. The meaning of this would be, that the girl's heart is full of love (white beads), but she tells her lover by the same number of pink beads that his poverty is as great as her love towards him. This implies, of course, an earnest appeal to him to work hard in order to get the cattle for the *lobola*, or payment, necessary to buy her from her father or guardian.

To express wealth yellow beads are used.

The remaining figures in the plate represent more complicated letters; and a succession of white, red, green, blue and black beads, for example, would be interpreted in the following way:

Inhliziyo yami imhlope ngezinsuku ezikude (expressed by the numerous white beads). *Kodwa sengikubeke, amehlo ami az'abomvu* (red beads). *Nang'ubala abuyise, kepa sengizacile ngaza nga'luhlaza* (green beads). *Uma bengi lijuba, bengizaundiza ngiyocotsha emyango kwenn* (blue beads). *Ngivinjelwe ubumnyama ngingeze ngaya kuwe* (black beads). *Kodwa inhliziyo yami imhlope*, etc. (white beads—the same story is repeated again and again).

The Zulu idiom can never be expressed in English, and in a translation the letter loses much of its force; but it would run in some such fashion as the following. My heart is pure and white in the long weary days (white beads). My eyes are sore and red by looking out for you so long (red beads). *Nang'ubal'abuyise* = here is my letter to you. I have become quite lean and sickly (green beads). If I were a dove I would fly to your home and pick up food at your door (blue beads). Darkness prevents my coming to you (black beads). But my heart is pure, etc., etc., and the whole message would be repeated several times.

The actual pattern does not appear to have any defined significance; it is rather the succession of colour, and the

relative amounts of the different colours, that express the tenor of the message.

In reading a letter of the *umampapeni* (fig. 2) and *ulimi* (fig. 3) types, the string which passes round the neck, beginning at the fastening, is taken first; and on the whole the string has the greater significance. In the case of the square and oblong piece the letter would be read from without inwards, but the edging or border is for the sake of ornament simply, and, as a rule, has no special meaning. In a string the number of successively placed yellow beads may indicate the number of cattle owned by the recipient of the letter.

Having thus obtained a key to the meanings assigned to the colours, it is an easy matter to interpret any of these epistles; and it may suffice to say that the Zulu lad is very proud of them, and hangs them all round his neck and head in order to show everyone how much he is loved by one or a number of girls.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE XXVII,

Illustrating Rev. Father Mayr's paper, "Language of Colours amongst the Zulus, etc."

The illustrations are reduced to five-eighths of the actual size.

FIG. 1.—*Ingeje*. The tenor of the letter is that the girl realises that the man is poor (pink), and she asks him to work for cattle, as she is in love (white) with him.

FIG. 2.—*Umampapeni*. The purport of the letter is that the recipient is well to do (yellow), and the girl is weeping (red) on account of his not going to her.

FIG. 3.—*Ulimi*. The general tone is that the girl is greatly in love (numerous white beads), and she thinks the man is sufficiently rich (yellow) to marry her. The blue border at the bottom is pure ornamentation, without special significance.

FIG. 4.—*Igcagcane*. The general tone is somewhat distressing. The girl is fond of the boy (white), yet there is difficulty in going to him (black), as he is poor (pink), and consequently she feels lean and sickly (green).



Fig. 1 x 5/8

Fig. 2. x 5/8.

Fig. 4. x 5/8

Fig 3. x 5/8