

Jaco Kruger & Wessie van der Westhuizen

The Tambani embroidery project

■ Musicology, School of Music,
Graphic Design, School for Communication Studies,
North-West University



The Tambani embroidery project is located southeast of Musina in the Limpopo valley. The project was founded by Ina le Roux from Johannesburg, following her research among Venda female *ngano* song story narrators. Struck by their abject poverty, Ina turned their knowledge of folklore to practical use by involving them in the making of embroidered appliqué blocks that portray scenes from their narratives.

Approximately 65 women participate in the project and they produce about 400 appliqué blocks every month. Although their income is limited, it keeps starvation at bay. It also provides them with a sense of shared experience and belonging while keeping the moral issues addressed in their stories alive.

Ina designs and silkscreens the images onto material that she delivers to the women. The project employs two supervisors who distribute embroidery yarn and check quality. The blocks are stitched onto quilts, bags and dresses that are sold via the project's website (www.tambani.co.za) and at local and international quilt shows.

Ngano song stories

Ngano are associated with kitchens and winter fires, with grandmothers who tell stories and grandchildren who chant and sing with them. *Ngano* usually include several repetitions of at least one song. Songs and chants are not optional narrative elements. Not only do they allow participation and emotional involvement, they are also integral to dramatic presentation and unfolding plots. *Ngano* performances do not involve dance or any overt dramatisation. Actions by the narrator are limited to small movements of the head, torso, arms and hands.

Ngano offer a privileged view of human relationships in an African society. Their characters are enmeshed in a complex web of conflict and interdependency. As *The greedy hippo* shows, class, patriarchy, seniority and physical power are some bases from which the world is controlled. Primordial desires and vested interests find easy prey in women, children and the underclasses. Overt violence takes the form of kidnapping, sexual assault and murder. Men typically turn into marauding animals who hunt their human victims. But there

also are more subtle forms of violation, like rejection, jealousy and selfishness, which often are driven by loneliness and insecurity.

Although the persecuted appear helpless, they are not denied redemption. They find refuge within the community of the vulnerable, while their physical frailty belies a spirit of rebellion that enables them to escape and even undermine those who abuse them. Resistance by Hare, Tortoise and their human counterparts reminds society of the possibility of a different order. Venda oral artists attribute the power of a flying arrow to their voice: it can penetrate the heart of human darkness and generate shared emotions and strategies for redemption. Accordingly, the concluding *ngano* marker *Ha mbo di u vha ha nwana wa lungano* ('This is the death of the child who is a song story') points to *ngano* as a form of moral knowledge transmitted between generations: just as there will always be children, so there will be forms of artistic expression that engage social life incisively. It is clear that there is an intention for the resistant ideology of *ngano* to remain an enduring artistic objective.

This endeavour is, however, under severe threat. Storytelling usually takes a back seat when a television antenna comes to squat predatorily on a roof. The lounge with its radio and television has replaced the cosy kitchen where stories formerly were told. Only a few elderly *ngano* narrators remain. They may be some of the last exponents of a once vital performance culture.

The greedy hippo

While Hare, Baboon and Kudu dart amusingly across narrative surfaces, *ngano* in fact

are a deeply metaphorical mirror of human society in all its adversity. The greedy hippopotamus accordingly represents unscrupulous adult relatives of orphans who confiscate their inherited property, or, in recent times, welfare grants. This is made evident when the hippopotamus gobbles up the household items. But even worse, when the animal swallows the girl, there is a hint of kidnapping, slave labour and sexual assault.

The use of the musical bow to stab the hippopotamus also should not be taken literally. Like certain other instruments the *tshihwana* is used in this story to criticise the culprit publically in song and thus to shame him into submission.

The animation project: digitising the Tambani embroidery contribution

As part of the community outreach of component, Christiaan Erlank van der Westhuizen executed the final animation for this part of the book project.

Traditionally, cell-based or frame-by-frame animation is achieved by using multiple images that change or animate, in succession, over time. The content of these images usually consists of clay models, paper cutouts, paint, pencil or charcoal drawings, that are drawn onto and then rubbed out, or altered, and for each altered state a picture is taken to create an animation effect in this manner.

For the Tambani project, special character quilts and background artwork had to be embroidered by hand for Christiaan to be able to animate the story.

A draft storyboard and a special set of instructions were submitted to the Tambani

project coordinators, specifying how each part of the character/s should be embroidered separately for final processing on the computer.

The quilts were digitised, and each part of the animation literally was digitally stitched together to create each scene and character rig. Each character and scene were then given movement by applying the frame-by-frame technique, and then these were cycled through a series of loops that simulated the movement of walking, talking, throwing, burning and so forth.

The animated storyline was then carefully plotted out to match the traditional storyline and each scene of the story as animated separately so that small details could be applied, such as the chickens that peck the ground in the third scene originally were stationary, but later on the effect of pecking was added to reduce the austerity of the traditional storyline.

The almost stocky, jittery movement of the characters and scenery was intentionally applied to the animation, specifically to echo the movements of a traditional *ngano* narrator or storyteller.

Sources cited

KRUGER, J. & LE ROUX, I. 2007. The flamboyant rooster and other Tshivenda song stories. Potchefstroom: School of Music, NWU

