

‘OH HURRY TO THE RIVER!’: *uMamlambo* IN THE EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA.

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Abstract

This paper stems from a wider study of clay modelling at Hogsback and e-Hala, in the Eastern Cape, published in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27, 1 (2001). Amongst the models are images the modellers refer to as *uMamlambo*, or ‘mermaids’. The authors discuss clay, *dongwe*, the raw material for these models, and the significance of beliefs concerning this material and the rivers with which it is often associated. They argue that the modellers derive these particular images from two elements in Xhosa cosmography. Firstly, they are based on a mutable and sinister familiar, or snake, which often takes the form of an irresistibly attractive, but extremely dangerous, woman. On the other hand, the images may derive from an old female ancestor-figure, one of the *abantu bamlambo*, river people, who must be treated with great respect, but who is not malicious. The authors contextualise their theme in terms of phenomena such as labour migration and changes in rural and urban society. They argue that culture is fluid and that the boys and men, essentially *bricoleurs*, who make these models, are combining whatever images are to hand, and especially the inheritance of Xhosa religious beliefs and ritual practices, to create these beguiling figures.

On 1 January 1998 the local newspaper and radio in the Eastern Cape city of East London, as part of a holiday publicity stunt for the city's aquarium, reported that a mermaid had been washed up on the shore, had been rescued by aquarium staff, and could be viewed over the following two days. The *Daily Dispatch* had a picture of the "mermaid" on the front page.¹ There was a surprising outcome: large crowds turned up to see the creature, some coming by public transport more than two hundred kilometres from places such as Umtata and Queenstown. A number went away convinced, it seems, that they had indeed seen a mermaid. However, when it became apparent to some of the crowd that she was not "real", they started to toss soft drink cans at her and at the aquarium staff, and demanded that they should be refunded the money spent on transport. Indeed, one of the authors of this study, while hitchhiking to her home, was given a lift by two young men, university graduates, who were on the way to see what they firmly believed was the mermaid. Mr. Willie Maritz, the Curator of the aquarium, reports that people told him that they had come to see 'Mam' river', which is a reasonable translation of the Xhosa word *uMamlambo*². Clearly, this concept resonates with many Xhosa-speaking people. This paper examines *uMamlambo*, looking in particular at visual representations created by modellers in clay at the village of e-Hala, or Auckland, in the Tyumie River valley at the foot of the Amatola Mountains in the Eastern Cape.

The clay-modelling tradition of e-Hala has developed from the making of toy cattle by herdboys, for their own entertainment, into a more varied art-form focussed on sales to tourists who visit the nearby mountain resort of Hogsback. As the market has developed since the 1950s, the modellers have tended to become somewhat older and to be drawn no longer from the relatively comfortable families owning cattle, but rather from amongst the very poorest villagers. This may explain the near-disappearance in the Hogsback and e-Hala context of model cattle and their replacement by other creatures. As well as hogs, horses and antelopes, the modellers now make a variety of other items, including what they call *uMamlambo*, meaning 'mother of the river'. 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.

The models, including those of *uMamlambo*, have their own particular origins, but also derive from the environment and creative processes of the artists. Like artists everywhere, the e-Hala modellers attempt to balance the market with their own creativity. They work as individuals, sometimes side by side, but making and selling separately, with no intermediaries between themselves and the market. They

This paper is a product of 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*, 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 East London *Daily Dispatch*, 1 January 1998, 'Mermaid Found Stranded at Orient Beach'.

² Telephone conversation Seán Morrow/Mr. Willie Maritz, 6 January 1998.

recognize and admire skilled individuals, and are easily able to identify which models have been produced by whom. They are not familiar with discourses that differentiate between tourist and other types of art, and, while they will happily produce to the specifications of a visitor, also tend to have a strong sense of their own originality and of pride in their skill. As Tembani Xwembe says, 'I make what I think I want to do – I think of nothing else until I have completed what I am doing - and nobody else can think what you're thinking'.³

uMamlambo, like all the e-Hala clay models, are seldom more than 17cm. high. This is dictated by the medium: unbaked clay models become unmanageably 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 modeller, Tembani Xwembe, uses the English word 'beret'⁴. There is, in other words, no apparent limit to the variations on the basic sitting mermaid-like figures. Participants might like to look at the selection of clay *uMamlambo* which we have brought to this conference.

The clay, *dongwe*, that the modellers use is a potent, even dangerous material. 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.⁵ Clay models, even those made in school, should not be brought into

³ Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Zithobile Mona and Tembani Xwembe, Hogsback, 10 September 1996. For further information on modellers' perceptions of their art, see Morrow and Vokwana, "Shaping in dull dead earth ..."

⁴ Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Tembani Xwembe, Hogsback, 12 December 1997, (henceforth interview NV/TX).

⁵ 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). These and most other interviews were conducted in isiXhosa.

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’.⁶

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’.⁷ 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.⁸

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, 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 neighbours⁹. However,

⁶Interview NV/WM and EM.

⁷ Manton Hirst, ‘A River of Metaphors: Interpreting the Xhosa Diviner’s Myth’, in Patrick McAllister, ed., *Culture and the Commonplace: Anthropological Essays in Honour of David Hammond-Tooke* (Johannesburg, 1997): 225.

⁸ Interview NV/WM and EM.

⁹ 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, 1961). For the historical setting, see *inter alia*, J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo: a History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence* (Johannesburg, 1981); Noël Mostert, *Frontiers: the Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (New York, 1992); Clifton C. Crais, *The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Johannesburg, 1992); Timothy J. Stapleton, *Maqoma: Xhosa Resistance to Colonial Advance* (Johannesburg, 1994).

for some of the less formally educated people typically involved with modelling, 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 modellers' art is that of the mermaid.¹⁰

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 modellers 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.¹¹ Commonly, *amagqirha* receive their powers when drawn to a pool into which they descend and remain for a period.¹² 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.¹³

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

¹⁰ 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, Henry John Drewal, 'Mermaids, Mirrors, and Snake Charmers: Igbo Mami Wata Shrines', *African Arts*, XXI, 2 (1988): 38-53. For a study concerned to see Mami Wata in 'specific, autonomous contexts' (p.60), see Charles Gore and Joseph Nevadomsky, 'Practice and Agency in Mammy Wata Worship in Southern Nigeria', *African Arts*, 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' (p. 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.

¹¹ See C.M. Lamla, 'Present-Day Diviners (Ama-Gqira) in the Transkei', University of Fort Hare MA thesis, 1975, p. 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, 1989), especially pp. 78-94.

¹² See, for instance, M. Wilson, S. Kaplan, T. Maki, E.M. Walton, *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey*, Vol. iii, *Social Structure* (Pietermaritzburg, 1957): 191. See also W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society: a People of the Transkeian Uplands, South Africa* (Cape Town, 1962): 313-14.

¹³ 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, 1975). However, note also the critique of this approach in Manton Myott Hirst, 'The Healer's Art: Cape Nguni Diviners in the Townships of Grahamstown', Rhodes University D.Phil. thesis, 1990, pp. 252-53.

draw a clear distinction between them.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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*’¹⁷. 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.¹⁸ *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.¹⁹

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 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.²⁰

While the influence of the *uMamlambo* image on e-Hala modelling 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

¹⁴ J.H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale, [1931]): 193-196; M. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa*, second edition (London, 1961): 287; Wilson, Kaplan, et al., *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey*, p. 190.

¹⁵ Wilson, Kaplan et al., *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey*, p. 190.

¹⁶ Discussion Seán Morrow/Mr. Loyiso Pulumani, Fort Hare, 26 August 1997. Bheki Maseko’s ‘Mamlambo’ in his *Mamlambo and Other Stories* (Johannesburg, 1991): 133-142, is a literary treatment of *uMamlambo*.

¹⁷ Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society*, pp. 285-86.

¹⁸ J. Broster, *Amagqirha: Religion, magic and Medicine in Transkei* (Goodwood, [1981]): 59-60.

¹⁹ Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society*, pp. 285-286.

²⁰ Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*, pp. 193-96.

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.²¹ 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'²². 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 modellers and shown models of *uMamlambo*, 'cringed with horror and refused to talk or continue doing a transaction with them'.²³

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.²⁴

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 more likely, to local Khoi, or "coloured" images. The Kat River Valley, some 20 kilometres from e-Hala, has a population substantially descended from the Khoi population settled there by the British from 1829 in an attempt to create a buffer between the British invaders and the Xhosa.²⁵ This community's beliefs include figures known as *watermeids*, which are derived from the Khoi element in the local culture. Khoi culture, understandably in a population which has tended to be marginalized to arid areas, is preoccupied with images and beings associated with water. There is constant interaction between the Afrikaans-speaking coloured population and Xhosa-speakers, and Xhosa-speakers often consult coloured healers, who have a

²¹ Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, p. 287.

²² Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Mr. Maton Makhapela, e-Hala, 20 October 1997 (henceforth interview NV/MM).

²³ Written communication from Annette Loubser, 7 September 1998.

²⁴ Discussion Seán Morrow/Mr. Brown Maaba, Fort Hare, 25 September 1997.

²⁵ Still useful on the settlement is J.S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937* (London, 1939), esp. pp. 216-245.

reputation for considerable skill.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸

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!²⁹

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 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 in the Ngxinxolo river in about 1778.³⁰ 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.³¹

The ‘river myth’, the symbolic account of the bestowing of his or her power to the *igqirha*, is recounted in the versions personal to each individual. However, constant themes include stripping off and entering the

²⁶ Information from Yvette Ferguson, fort Hare, 19 September 1997. Ms Ferguson is engaged in a study of the culture of the Khoi-descended groups of the Kat River Valley.

²⁷ Conversation Seán/Manton Hirst, Amathole Museum, King William’s Town, 19 September 1997.

²⁸ Hirst, ‘The Healer’s Art’; *idem.*, ‘A River of Metaphors’, in McAllister, *ed.*, *Culture and the Commonplace*.

²⁹ Broster, *Amagqirha*, p. 47.

³⁰ Hirst, ‘The Healer’s Art’, pp. 119, 172.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215, 219-20.

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.³²

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*.³³

Another aspect of the ancestral woman is her relationship to chieftainship. It was once the practice in Xhosa-speaking societies, on the death of a commoner, to expose the corpse in the veld.³⁴ 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 who have

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 257, 277. Hirst gives the full text of one diviner's account of the river myth in the original Xhosa (pp. 411-414) and English translation (pp. 261-266).

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 263-64. [check if all these quotes from these pp.]

³⁴ See, for example, Lamla, 'Present-Day Diviners', p. 192.

rejected or failed to propitiate the spirits³⁵. 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.³⁶

Much of this appears to mesh with the accounts of the artists. One modeller, 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 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 models³⁷. 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.³⁸ This figure appears to be an echo of the old fish-woman who inducts the *amagqirha*.

Tembani Xwembe make a clear distinction bet '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 evil-doers. 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 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* is 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

³⁵ Hirst, 'The Healer's Art', p. 269.

³⁶ Conversation Seán Morrow/Manton Hirst, Amathole Museum, King William's Town, 19 September 1997.

³⁷ Interview Nwabisa Vokwana/Zithobile Mona, Hogsback, 12 October 1997.

³⁸ *Ibid.* Long hair characterises the river people. See, for instance, C.C. Olivier, 'Die Religie van die Gcaleka', University of South Africa MA (1979), p. 16.

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 them³⁹.

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 buying 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.⁴⁰

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

Though an artist such as Tembani Xwembe is clear that he is creating river-creatures, overall it appears that the modellers 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 be influences from Khoi or even European imagery. With more certainty, we may say that the modellers 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

³⁹ Interview NV/MM.

⁴⁰ Interview NV/MM.

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.