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# ***IQHOLO LE AFRIKA***

## *A Centenary Celebration of the Life and Work of Barbara Tyrrell*

An exhibition from the Campbell Collections of the University of KwaZulu-Natal



Iziko South African National Gallery

16 March – 8 July 2012



Barbara Tyrrell with her caravan, *Nixie* in Swaziland, 1946. She chose the name because Nixie was a wild spirit and Tyrrell saw herself as wild, with spirit. The Zulus called it 'Maceka-ceka' which they said was the noise the caravan made when stuck.

# Foreword

Iziko Museums in collaboration with the Campbell Collections of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) proudly presents *Iqholo le Afrika: A Centenary Celebration of the Life and Work of Barbara Tyrrell*. This exhibition and re-evaluation of her work, by curators Vusi Buthelezi and Yvonne Winters of the Campbell Collections, honours veteran Durban-born artist and author Barbara Tyrrell on the occasion of her hundredth birthday.

A selection of over 150 decorative and accurate visual recordings of southern African costume from the Campbell Collections is showcased in this exhibition at the Iziko South African National Gallery. The works are annotated watercolours and field sketches that form part of an invaluable archive of 1000 works held in this collection.

In the last few decades, much work has been done to retrieve the artistic reputations of female artists whose works were perceived as craft or the product of ethnographic research rather than as art. But very little serious attention was devoted to Barbara Tyrrell and many art museums in South Africa still do not have her work in their collections.\* Things however improved when the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg purchased a selection of her work in 2008. Furthermore, in 2008 the President of South Africa affirmed Tyrrell's contribution to the heritage of South Africa by bestowing on her the Order of Ikhamanga Silver (OIS).

Because the artist is still active and independent at 100 years of age, Vusi Buthelezi felt compelled to honour her with a centenary exhibition and re-evaluation of her work. "South Africans need to learn to acknowledge artists while they are still alive," Buthelezi says with reference to the many local artists who have passed on without experiencing the reward of acknowledgment in their lifetime.

The work of Barbara Tyrrell has particular currency for young, global and design-savvy South Africans of the 21st century. Trained initially in fashion design in London, it was this aspect that was to focus her gaze on the spectacular costumes she encountered in the streets of Durban in the 1930s and 1940s. Her eye for fashion soon extended to other regions of South Africa when she made it her life's quest to seek out and record the brilliant adornment traditions of the region. In this aspect her oeuvre is unprecedented and of great value to South African visual studies. It is therefore appropriate that in the 21st century when fashion and costume are the most recent inclusions in visual culture discourse that the legacy of Barbara Tyrrell is celebrated in the South African National Gallery.

Items of adornment and costume from Iziko South African National Gallery's own African Art Collections together with examples from Iziko Social History Collections are on display to complement the strong design aspect of Tyrrell's works.

It is with delight that we accept Vusi's challenge to celebrate the accomplishments of Barbara Tyrrell in this exhibition and the unprecedented opportunity of working with our colleagues from the Campbell Collections UKZN.

\* Proud, H. *Revisions: Expanding the Narrative of South African Art* (2006: p.74)

Andrea Lewis and Carol Kaufmann  
Curators: Iziko South African National Gallery  
Cape Town, March 2012

# Introduction to the Life and Work of Barbara Tyrrell

by

Yvonne Winters, Campbell Collections, UKZN



*Banukile MaMbanjwa Mbhele –  
Portrait as a young girl in Richmond main street  
Pencil on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN*

Barbara Eleanor Harcourt Tyrrell was born in Durban on 15 March 1912. She spent her childhood at Eshowe in KwaZulu-Natal, where she cultivated her interest in Zulu culture and became fluent in the Zulu language. Tyrrell trained as an artist at the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal) during the 1930s. Later, after giving up her position as lecturer in fashion design at the Port Elizabeth Technical College, Tyrrell converted a ten-year-old Chevrolet van into a mobile home which she named 'Nixie', and set out on her first solo field trip to the Drakensberg in 1944. While painting landscapes she saw a traditionally dressed bride of the amaNgwane people of Bergville and asked to draw her. On returning home to Richmond in the Midlands, she showed the sketch to a young Bhaca woman, Banukile Mbanjwa, and was captivated by the latter's ability to identify the sitter by her beadwork and dress. This was the start of Tyrrell's career as a travelling artist, recording African indigenous attire in all its complexity, in relation to gender, age, ceremonial use and as professional status indicators, across the whole of southern Africa.

The exhibition comprises a selection of her earlier works from the 1940s to the 1960s,

both original field sketches done in situ and final watercolours framed with her explanatory notes. They demonstrate Tyrrell's impeccable control of line and her sensitive use of colour and design.

Tyrrell's work was admired and collected by her patron, Dr Killie Campbell. Campbell acquired the pictures as part of her holdings of rare Africana, which included manuscripts, books, photographs, artworks and ethnographic artefacts relating to the histories and cultures of South Africa. She bequeathed her collections to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, while her brother, WAC Campbell, donated the family home 'Muckleneuk' to the city of Durban as a public trust and repository for his sister's collections.



# Background and Influences

In order to more fully understand Barbara Tyrrell's costume studies it is important to know something of her background, for in many ways Tyrrell is an honorary Zulu. Her ability to depict African culture with authenticity derives from the fact that she was raised among the Zulu of KwaZulu-Natal, speaking their language. She imbibed their cultural tenets of respect (*ukuhlonipha*) for the sacred domain, especially that of the ancestors (*amadlozi*) and of those of their descendents who intercede for them, such as the elders, headmen and diviners (*izangoma*).

Tyrrell's father, who died while she was still a small child, had been an assistant magistrate and later Zulu interpreter in the Department of Native Affairs, stationed in various Natal towns and finally in Eshowe, Zululand. It was he who insisted that his children speak pure Zulu and not the 'kitchen Zulu' often used by white settlers. Barbara Tyrrell has a singularly powerful memory and recalls a Zulu dance that her father arranged for Sir Henry Rider Haggard<sup>1</sup> – 'I can recall Haggard in a dark suit, Daddy in white suit and tropical hat, us children sitting at mother's feet with dust coming up in clouds from the dancing, that was when I had this feeling of something more (in regard to the Zulu people) – it came back to me (later when drawing them) – something deeper than just this dancing - the girls totally in beads – the beads moving against their brown bodies – I was just two and a bit – I have a photographic memory and can visualize it again when I write or paint.'<sup>2</sup> Tyrrell's maternal grandfather was Frederick Fynney, interpreter and companion to the Zulu King, Cetshwayo kaMpande, when the latter visited Queen Victoria after the Anglo-Zulu War in 1882.<sup>3</sup> Fynney is the author of a rare work later reprinted as *Zululand and the Zulus: being an enlargement*



Above: Field Sketch  
Right: *Bushveld Blonde. Singceni. Swaziland*  
1949  
Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN



upon two lectures... *The rise and fall of the Zulu nation and our native tribes: their customs, superstitions and beliefs.* A maternal uncle was Justice Henri G Boshoff, Judge-President of Natal, who presided at the Zulu King Dinizulu kaCetshwayo's treason trial held in Greytown in 1909, consequent upon the Bhambatha Rebellion of 1906. These family members while certainly colonialists, were often sympathetic to, and present at pivotal times in the African struggle against imperial power, one that was to continue under the Nationalist regime, more especially as they understood the local Zulu culture, language and politics.

Yet another influence on Tyrrell was Dr Killie Campbell who was to become not only a patron but also a friend. Testimony to this is the large correspondence between the two women held in Campbell's library. Subsequent to each field trip, the two women would discuss the most recent field sketches. Tyrrell would tell Campbell which of the field sketches should be worked up into a final watercolour for her collections. In time, Tyrrell had a guest bedroom and a downstairs sitting-room assigned for her use. She met and conversed with many well known historians and researchers as well as Zulu writers, like the Dhlomo brothers, HIE and RRR.<sup>4</sup> Through Campbell's connections with The Zulu Society, Tyrrell would be commissioned to illustrate the Zulu language works published by Shuter and Shooter, Pietermaritzburg.

Tyrrell made field trips to the following indigenous peoples of southern Africa:<sup>5</sup> the North Nguni comprising the Zulu, Cele and Bhaca of KwaZulu-Natal the Swazi of Swaziland and the related Drakensberg located Ngwane; the South or Cape Nguni of the Eastern Cape (the former Transkei and Ciskei), inclusive of the Mfengu/Fingo (Bhaca immigrants), Xhosa, Xesibe and Mpondo; Nguni-Sotho mixed cultures like the Ndebele and Ntwane from Mpumalanga and Limpopo (formerly Transvaal and later KwaNdebele); the Nguni-Tsonga mixed Shangaan from Limpopo (formerly Transvaal and later Gazankhulu); the Sotho cultures of the interior of South Africa, including the South Sotho or Basuto from Lesotho (formerly Basutoland); the Bathlokwa from Nqutu in KwaZulu-Natal (called Hlubi by Tyrrell in memory of their founding chief Hlubi Molefe. These must not be confused with the Hlubi of the Drakensberg, Transkei and Lesotho); the North Sotho, Pedi or Sekukuni from Mpumalanga (formerly Transvaal and later Lebowa); unrelated Tembe Tsonga from northern KwaZulu-Natal; the Venda and Lovedu from Limpopo (formerly Transvaal or Vandaland), the San (or Bushmen) and Herero of Namibia (formerly South West Africa) and the Valley Tsonga and Karanga (Barotse and Lozi) of Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia).



Ndebele Bride. Middelburg, Tvl  
1950  
Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN

This lengthy listing of cultures is based upon that of the early generation of anthropologists: NJ van Warmelo's *A Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of South Africa* and most notably Isaac Schapera's 1946 publication *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa: an Ethnological Survey*.<sup>6</sup> These surveys became standard texts and would no doubt have influenced Tyrrell's mentor, the photographer Alfred Duggan-Cronin's seven volume series published between 1928 and 1954, *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa: Reproductions of Photographic Studies*. Duggan-Cronin was an amateur photographer and store clerk on the De Beer's Consolidated Diamond Mines in Kimberley. Having been requested to supply photographs for home, Duggan-



'First Born' Xhosa type. Peddie Area

1948

Watercolour on paper

Campbell Collections, UKZN



Cronin became fascinated by the dress and custom of these miners from traditional African societies. He supplemented his images by visits to the men's rural homelands to photograph them. This became Tyrrell's own *modus operandi*. In preparation for her field trips Campbell would make available her library of the travel accounts of early artists such as Thomas Baines, Samuel Daniell and George French Angas.

When considering Tyrrell and her approach to her models or sitters, one would fit her more closely within the role of ethnographic artist-recorder and liken her to another early such in John William Burchell, who published two volumes entitled, *Travels in the interior of southern Africa* in 1822 and 1824. The similarities are in regard to Burchell's commentary, relating to his illustrations, which like Tyrrell's labels, possess an immediacy and authenticity that can only derive from observation. In regard to his motive for sketching,



he claims 'Every additional sketch was, I considered, a triumph over oblivion, and a powerful assistant to recollection' while his genuine appreciation for his sitter's personhood comes through in his comment on the occasion of drawing a Khoisan chief. 'After making the bargain to give him a large piece of tobacco, he stood patiently and still, till I had finished my drawing.' After describing the chief's dress in 'scientific' detail, Burchell concludes, 'The countenance and manners of this chief were expressive of a good-natured quiet disposition.'<sup>7</sup>

Above right: Field Sketch  
Above: Kweta. Fingo Type. Peddie, Ciskei.  
1948  
Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN

# The Artist's Working Method

Barbara Tyrrell's first drawing of a traditionalist was that of her favourite informant and friend, Banukile Mbanjwa while still a young girl of fifteen, sketched in Richmond, KwaZulu-Natal around 1935. This sketch is in pencil with shading of lights and darks to form Banukile's youthful face. However, all of Tyrrell's subsequent field sketches are in line, some of the earlier ones in a soft pencil that has rubbed, until she found that an HB pencil was more suited to sketching while on the move. The linear style was a technique she took up because she only had a few minutes to do her basic sketch, while adding notations with her own shorthand clarifications as to colour, shape, pattern and/or bead size. She would conclude with observations, answers to queries of age or status, posture and names (some written by her sitters themselves). To obtain a natural

pose, correct for the sitter's cultural context, Tyrrell would usually request the sitter to take the pose he or she had when first seen, and then call out '*Ima* (stop/stand)' when it was attained. In this, the person's expression and gesture was as important to the final as was any of their costume. In African thinking, certain persons, particularly men or diviners of consequence are thought to be possessed of a certain 'moral weight' or *isithunzi* (*seriti* in Sotho). Costume will add to this 'moral weight' and as such the costume invariably dignifies a person. Such belief places costume into the domain of the sacred, for it is also considered that the ancestors or *amadlozi* confer this quality on their living descendants. Tyrrell has, while apparently dealing with mere costume, succeeded in depicting each person she has sketched as an individual person who is yet appropriate as to cultural prescribed age, sex, status and expression, inclusive of this elusive quality of 'moral weight'.

Tyrrell would take her field sketches home to Richmond in KwaZulu-Natal to complete selected ones as watercolours, supplying text labels as to person, costume or any other observation of occasion. It is perhaps particularly in the field sketches that one has the opportunity to validate some of these observations as well as to see those sketches that were never worked into final watercolours. Sometimes one will find a sketch with a paintbrush mark or daub – these were to record the exact colour of costume or complexion of the sitter. A comment should also be made regarding the often phonetic or earlier mode of writing Zulu, before the standardization of spelling; it invariably shows in the absence of 'h's'. This also, in the use of terminology



Kweta Boy. Xhosa Type. Peddie.  
1948  
Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN

of earlier eras, like 'witchdoctor' for *isangoma*/diviner, a time when these indigenous professionals' main function was to discern witches.<sup>8</sup>

Tyrrell has mentioned that when she drew her subjects from life, she did not like anyone to watch her drawing and says she would even, 'back-up against a bush, so as prevent this.'<sup>9</sup> Arguably, because the drawings are done in the field, they surpass her finished watercolours in terms of having an immediacy and enjoyment in the very act of drawing as her pencil point follows that of the subject's muscle and movement, proving her an excellent draftsman.

Her original field sketches are perhaps the only reference to actual persons who once lived and went about their lives at a certain time and place, and can be appreciated as a national historical heritage of great value. Tyrrell, even at the age of 93 could recall in detail every sitter and the occasion and circumstances of her drawing him or her. For instance, regarding the work titled *Bushveld Blond. Singeni. Swaziland*, 1949 she said:



Male Witchdoctor. Xhosa type. Peddie, Ciskei.  
1948  
Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN

"One of the Swazi girls who I saw at a trading store....near Mbabane I think it was. I was struck by her beauty and asked if she would pose for me; she agreed. I went to get my drawing equipment but when I returned the girl was nowhere in sight....I asked the storekeeper, a small little European man...and he said nothing, merely indicating with his eyes to behind the counter at his feet and then giving a warning look at the group of handsome warriors that had entered. Afterwards, once the men had left, I learnt that they were the king's impi (army) and could arrange to abduct any beautiful girl for their king...that was Sobuza II..."<sup>10</sup>



Shangaan diviner – male, seated in full regalia  
Pencil on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN

# A Re-Evaluation of Barbara Tyrrell's Work in the 21st Century

by

Vusi Buthelezi, Campbell Collections, UKZN

In re-evaluating Barbara Tyrrell's work certain issues must be acknowledged; the first is her being from colonial non-African settler stock, which leads to queries around 'the European gaze' and whether she objectifies or makes 'other' her African sitter. Secondly, what ethics did she follow in her field trips and approach to her models? Lastly there are issues of the peoples of southern Africa being divided into their various 'tribal' groups.

Answers to the first issue are countered with that noted of her background and style, for she shared in African Respect (*Ukukhlonipha*) custom and spoke IsiZulu, which in itself deals with ethics of approach, for

in any African society the elders would not allow an outsider to enter tabooed and sacred domains, and in Tyrrell's recording of ceremonies, it is the coming-out dances she records, not the rites or teachings. In a recent interview she confirmed that an elderly Zulu man taught her that a visitor approaches the main gate of a homestead (*umuzi*) and waits to be addressed and greeted, no matter how long this may take, before stating reasons for visiting.<sup>11</sup> To Tyrrell, her sitters or models were people, not merely objects for the 'European gaze', for they are named, often in their own handwriting and Tyrrell notes details of their circumstantial and cultural context, something only obtainable by building a rapport, no matter the duration thereof. Tyrrell's approach is more of a personal acknowledgement, as in the Zulu greeting 'Sawubona (I see you)', than what is conjured by the concept of 'gaze'. Tyrrell would request of an African model's companion if he or she would ask the person's permission to draw their admired dress. Understanding the communal nature of African culture, in which no individual wished to be singled out to provoke jealousy, the artist emphasized it was the ethnic costume she wished to record for posterity and she would always offer a token payment for time and permission. On one of her heavily annotated field sketches of a young Sotho man are the words 'Thank you my mother'; the explanation given was that these were the young man's words of thanks for the payment.<sup>12</sup> Tyrrell says she would not



Initiation Finery, Ndebele Girl. Middelburg, Tvl.  
1951

Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN



"Liweluwelu" Mongu area. Barotseland.  
1954

Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN

pursue a request for someone to pose if they refused or were reluctant, always respecting their free agency, this because she knew that Africans were often aghast at the brash arrogance of neo-colonial Europeans.<sup>13</sup>

In regard to the division of the African into 'tribal groups', it is not that most people do still identify themselves as ethnic that is queried by those who are politically conscious, but the 'assault' of the Nationalist apartheid system having 'hijacked' the rural homes into 'homelands' or 'Bantustans' and ignored the realities of urbanization of the black population in the interests of keeping 'white-supremacy' in place.<sup>14</sup> It must be noted that Tyrrell paid the price for this; the reception of her work was adversely affected in this era, particularly the late 1960s to the 1970s; the then University of Natal (now UKZN) when taking over Dr Killie Campbell's collections removed the works to folders titled 'Tribal Studies' while emphasizing holdings of Cape Dutch in regard to furnishings, silver and crockery.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately the University reclaimed its place within liberal South African politics to later become a leader in African scholarship post-1994.

While Tyrrell did record changing dress and beadwork styles and influenced Campbell Collections to acquire examples as early as the late 1970s, she also stated that the awareness of this modernization was one motivation for her 'furious' pace of recording. This meant that Tyrrell sought out dress that she felt was more 'true' to older cultural types; however she acknowledged the dynamic and continuous nature of this process, and in fact much of the dress she sketched displayed borrowings from 19th century missionary influences.<sup>16</sup>

The works on exhibition have been grouped according to the social roles and corresponding dress by which southern African cultural groups distinguished themselves, and which Barbara Tyrrell observed and recorded.

## Age Group

Over a period of several decades Barbara Tyrrell documented the clothing and accoutrements worn by all age groups of different cultural groups living in Zululand, Pondoland, Swaziland and KwaNdebele for, traditionally, they are distinguished according to their age groups through their dress codes. Tyrrell interpreted pictorially the attire of girls, boys, married women and men, in their successive roles and social positions: a girl-child dresses differently from a girl who has recently reached puberty, as does a senior girl who has permission to be courted, a betrothed girl, a bride or young married woman, a matron who has borne children and a widow. Many groups mark puberty with the rite of passage of initiation: for girls these are, in particular, associated with the Venda *Domba* school and the Bale school of the South Sotho, while Xhosa and Mfengu boys are known for their *abakhwetha* circumcision schools. The purpose of all such schools is to teach young people about cultural and gender expectations, and to give external recognition to the change of status of the initiate.





Man's hat. Leribe. Basutoland  
1953  
Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN



Initiation Costume. Idutywa. Transkei  
1948  
Watercolour on paper  
Campbell Collections, UKZN

## Gender

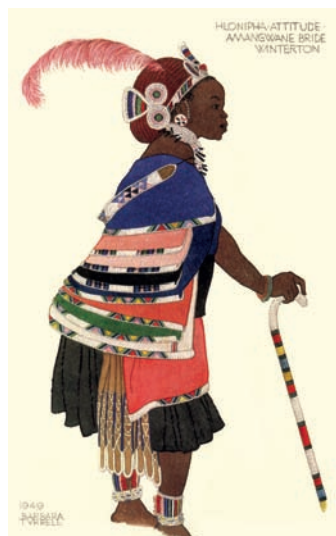
An important aspect of the cultures depicted in this exhibition is the traditional separation of the sexes in relation to the division of labour, men being involved in politics, pastoralist activities, hunting and warriorhood, and women with child-bearing and rearing, agriculture and hospitality. The behaviour of each gender is regulated by the observance of strict rules requiring respect and 'avoidance' in dealings with each other on a daily basis. Courting, marriage ceremonies and negotiations are the concern of the respective kin and are also subject to regulatory ritual, where roles are invariably reflected in the external markers of costume and beadwork.

## Social Status

Tyrrell made a point of observing the distinctive costume that marked the social status her sitters occupied within their societies. People of different social standing adhered to different dress codes. This can be seen especially in the regalia of married women and men, chiefs, headmen, diviners or *izangoma* (*amagqhirha* in isiXhosa) and herbalists (*izinyanga*).

## Rituals and ceremonies

Although an 'outsider' to the cultural groups she depicted, from an early age Tyrrell attended ceremonies and social events in Zululand, and could differentiate between costume for dancing and war regalia, or attire for other ritual occasions such as weddings. She became close to Zulu and Bhaca diviners (*izangoma*), traditional religious practitioners who intercede between the living and the ancestors. She recorded the ritual ceremonial costumes of a diversity of cultures: the dress of *abakhwetha* (male circumcision school initiates of the Eastern Province), the *Domba* or Venda girls' initiations, the *Incwala* or 'first fruits' ceremony of the Swazi led by the king, and many other rituals of the peoples of southern Africa.



Hlonipha Attitude. Amangwane Bride. Winterton.

1949

Watercolour on paper

Campbell Collections, UKZN



“Sivoto Nene”. Married Woman. Inanda.

1945

Watercolour

Campbell Collections, UKZN

## Endnotes

1. Sir Henry Rider Haggard [1856-1925] was a British novelist of the Victorian-Edwardian eras. Known for *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887), the latter said to have been based upon Mojadjji the Lovedu Rain Queen.
2. Winters, Y. and Dube J.N., 2001. *Interviews with Barbara Tyrrell*, Muizenberg.
3. Tyrrell, B. 1996. *Barbara Tyrrell: Her African Quest*. Muizenberg, Lindlife. Pg. 197
4. See Cele, M. 2010. 'H.I.E. Dloomo's brilliance as a writer, dramatist, poet and politician knew no bounds: A Reappraisal.' In *The Journal of Natal and Zululand history*. Vol. 28. Pgs. 53-59.
5. Note that there have been a number of spellings over the years, many of the Natal-Nguni should have the plural 'Ama...' prefixed when using the African form, while written without it in the English generic form used by Tyrrell. Also some would be written variously, as for instance Fingo or Mfengu for the Cape-Nguni of the Eastern Cape.
6. The standard classification of the times was that of the University of the Witwatersrand anthropologist Isaac Schapera's (1905-2003) *The Bantu-speaking tribes of South Africa: an ethnological survey*. (Cape Town, Maskew Millar, 1946). This text was consulted until replaced by the updated work by his successor David Hammond-Tooke in 1976.
7. Burchell, W. J. 1924 (reprint). *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*. London, Longman, Hurst and Co. Pg. 214
8. The divining of witches was outlawed in the 19th century and African customary law altered to conform to dominant Roman-Dutch law in this instance.
9. Winters, Y. and Dube J.N., 2001. *Interviews with Barbara Tyrrell*, Muizenberg.
10. Winters, Y. and Mchunu M., 2004. *Interview with Barbara Tyrrell*, Scottburgh.
11. Winters, Y. and Buthelezi V., 2011. *Interviews with Barbara Tyrrell*, Fish Hoek.
12. Williams, B. 2001. *Series of video interviews with Barbara Tyrrell*, Lesotho CD.
13. Winters, Y. and Dube J.N., 2001. *Interviews with Barbara Tyrrell*, Muizenberg.
14. Huddleston, T. 1974 (Ed.). *Naught for your Comfort*, Fontana Books.
15. This period coincided with Owen Horward's period in office from 1965-1970. Subsequently he was Minister of Finance in the Nationalist Government. (See <http://www.essa.org.za>)
16. One can think of the well-known Herero of Namibia's women's dress which is a locally adapted version of a Victorian dress.

# Acknowledgements



Photography by Arthur Bowland, c. 1940s.  
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