Many consider the beehive grass iqhugwana archetypically Zulu. Along with the shield and assegai, it is iconic in the tourism culture of “the Zulu Kingdom,” representing the maintenance of an exotic “tradition.” I argue that this is not necessarily so, as historical material shows evidence of a continual adaptation and evolution of this form. Furthermore, using the more contemporary example of the decorated buildings of Msinga, I suggest that the recent vernacular environment is a result of a postglobal Africanization, in a geographic area that, due to its circumstances, may have missed out on the globalization phenomenon completely.

South Africa’s nine provinces, home to more than 40 million people, exhibit great diversity of landscape, climate, heritage, language, and cultural affinity. Of them, however, KwaZulu-Natal, situated on the country’s eastern seaboard, is the only one named after a predominant population group. A densely populated area, ranging from high mountains to open savannah, with tropical to subtropical coastal areas, it is named after its most significant population group, the Zulu, members of the Southern Nguni who speak a Bantu language (Fig. 1).

Although the Zulu predominate in KwaZulu-Natal, the cultural profile of the province is more complex, and it is inhabited by a cosmopolitan aggregation of nationalities. For generations, the Zulu have rubbed shoulders and overlapped geographically with many people of seSotho descent, a different language group with vastly different traditions and
worldviews. KwaZulu-Natal also boasts the largest population of people of Indian descent outside the subcontinent. Among its European population, people of English and Afrikaans heritage are prominent. But there are also large groups of Germans, Poles, Norwegians, Italians, Portuguese and Greeks, often descended from missionaries and traders. In addition, new African immigrants, such as Nigerians, Malians, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans, Congolese and Malawians, most of whom are economic or political refugees, have created their own niches in local societies. This cosmopolitan hot-pot has created a plethora of influences that extend through the vernacular culture, from language to dress, architecture, craft, transport and food.

In predominantly rural regions of South Africa such influences have recently created an African globalization that has, in many ways, subverted Western influence and created a dynamic and rich environment for growth. It has also supported the national initiative of the African Renaissance, promoted by President Thabo Mbeki. Such belief in things African was reinforced by the disintegration of the Organization of African Unity, which was replaced by the African Union in 2000. In addition, the recent resurgence in international strife, particularly between the United States and the Middle Eastern countries, and the large presence of Muslim people on the African continent, has produced a more inward focus, and become necessary in the absence of international aid and support.

The present cultural resurgence in South Africa has also partly resulted from political circumstances. In the 1990s South Africa emerged from a well-known period of oppression, during which the people most directly affected were often those who occupied “traditional” and rural spaces. For the major portion of the twentieth century Apartheid mechanisms stultified growth in these areas through notions of separate development based on “Bantustans” and “townships.” In some cases this spatial system did, however, serve to entrench the notion of a common good. In particular, ideas of appropriateness and traditionality were to some extent perpetuated by association and involvement in local affairs, politics, and a familiar cultural environment.
Due in part to its longstanding dependent colonial connections with Great Britain, as well as reaction to sanctions imposed through the Apartheid years (where the unattainable was regarded as prestigious), South Africa has certainly been subject to what is widely known as “Coca-Colaization.” Such global influence has manifest itself broadly across the material-cultural spectrum—in music, dress, and building styles. But more recently, with the “opening up” of the country since the first democratic elections in 1994, there has been a counter movement to promote the African Renaissance. Within the Zulu nation this has resulted in the revival of such “traditional practices” as the First Fruits ceremony by King Goodwill Zwelethini. In the broader context of a country with perhaps the highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in the world, King Goodwill has also reinstated a virginity testing ceremony among Zulu maidens.

The ideas and observations about the living, changeable quality of Zulu vernacular architecture I present here reflect this complex interaction between global and local circumstances. My conclusions also derive from the fact I have lived the bulk of my life in KwaZulu-Natal. My research in this area, composed of both field and archival work, originally led to my Master’s dissertation in Architecture, completed in 2001. Since then I have been involved in ongoing project work and in teaching mainly Zulu-speaking students at the tertiary level. These activities, as well as being involved in Zulu heritage issues from an anthropological perspective, now form the gist of my Ph.D. research.

THE ZULU NATION, IN BROAD PERSPECTIVE

The Zulu people provide the largest segment of South Africa’s black population, residing mostly in KwaZulu-Natal but also around the large city of Johannesburg, where employment in gold mines once provided income for many thousands of migrant workers. The social structure of the Zulu people today is hierarchical, with the head of the nation being King Goodwill Zwelethini. Subservient to King Goodwill are a legion of chiefs, known as amaKhosi, responsible for the different clan groups which historically occupied specific lands. These areas are in turn broken into wards, supervised by induna. The smallest social group is ultimately a polygamous homestead, whose heads are known as umnumzane.

Such hierarchical grouping is relatively new among the Zulu, having been instituted only in the 1820s though a series of internal conquests by King Shaka kaSenzangakhona. Prior to this the Zulu were formed as clan groups which traced their ancestry in the area back some five generations. As such, they coexisted with other clan groups, settled in family lineages, as either pastoralists keeping cattle and goats, or as agrarians growing sorghum and millet.

As a nation under the successive reigns of the Kings Dingane, Mpande, Cetswayo and Dinizulu, the Zulu people displayed the military discipline originally instilled by Shaka against the British and the Boers on a number of well-publicized and closely documented occasions. The proliferation of traders and missionaries in KwaZulu-Natal from 1823 onward also meant that a corpus of drawings, photographs, colonial records, and written documentation exists that describes the ethnographic history of the Zulu in detail.

Most significantly, such ethnographies, both recent and historic, demonstrate the important role that cattle play in Zulu life. Not only does the cattle byre, or isibaya, occupy the center of the Zulu homestead, but notional perceptions of cattle provide a focus for Zulu cognition. Evers has suggested that the cognitive and spatial role the animals play in the culture can be described as a “central cattle pattern.”

Allocated to the umnumzane, each Zulu homestead occupies a space distinct from its neighbors. The land, granted by the king, can neither be bought nor traded. Preferably on a north-facing slope, the homestead takes the form of a large stockaded circle with the isibaya at its center and the umnumzane’s hut at its zenith. One enters the homestead from below, enforcing a sense of humility. Inside, individual huts hug the perimeter wall in strict hierarchy, with the hut of the umnumzane’s mother occupying the place adjacent to his. If the umnumzane’s mother has passed away, or lives elsewhere, a ritual hut called the gogo (grandmother’s hut) will occupy this space. In descending order around both sides of the circle are then located huts belonging to each of the headman’s wives. Children sleep in groups according to age and sex cohort, youths usually occupying the hut immediately adjacent to the homestead entrance. In this scenario, a reasonably sized homestead might consist of many units, including ancillary structures such as chicken coops, beer huts, and pantries.

In the mind of the Zulu, important connections exist between these spaces and the cosmos, the earth, and the ancestors (amadlozi). As a grassland-dwelling people, Zulu huts were traditionally built in the shape of elaborate thatched beehive domes. In other areas, however, a thatched cone-on-stone-cylinder form also came into being. “Today, in light of recent political violence, famine, and high unemployment, many Zulus have moved to cities in search of work. Here they occupy huge informal settlements that have grown incrementally, placed a strain on public resources and inner-city land, and led to increasing demands for subsidized government housing. This diaspora has increased the influence of globalization among Zulus. It has also greatly influenced architecture in the rural and periurban areas, increasing the potential for manipulation of the “traditional” norms of homesteads into new indigenous vernaculars that are ephemeral, evolving, and that respond to a plethora of new materials and cosmopolitan influences.”
As mentioned at the outset, the identification of the Zulu grass dome (*iqhughqana*) as an icon of tradition and Zuluness is ultimately limited in both a temporal and physical sense. The major Zulu area of habitation was the southern littoral grasslands, and grass domes were the typical Zulu dwelling in this particular area. But the iconic nature of the form is not fully justified, and to a certain extent was reinforced by cultural parallels. The northern and southern neighbors that fall within the same broad language groups, the Swazi and Xhosa, built grass domes, though they had distinctly different characteristics. Some of the Ngoni people, further up the coast in Malawi and Tanzania, also built grass domes, as did those followers of Mzilikazi who settled at Bulawayo in Western Zimbabwe. Both groups were refugees from the Mfecane, the wars that were created by the manic militarism of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona in the 1820s, which resulted in the diaspora of people, ideas and influence that substantially altered the face of the southern tip of Africa.

In simple terms, the *iqhughqana* was built from a series of concentric half circles of lath set into the ground to form a dome of the required diameter (fig. 2). The lath was tied with grass, and then the whole was thatched from the bottom up, leaving space for a low doorway. Following a gender division of labor, the lath was cut and put into position by men, while the cutting of grass and subsequent thatching of the structure was carried out by women. A point to note here is that in general the buildings were not decorated. Zulu people decorated other aspects of their material culture such as ceramics and beadwork, both of which have achieved international recognition; but the historic record contains no mention of house decoration.

The *iqhughqana* had several other distinctive physical features. A series of posts (*isigodi*) might exist in the center for support, depending on the size of the structure. Toward the center was a fireplace, the hearth built out of mud and termite mound. Smoke from the fire was important in limiting insect activity, since infestation by woodborer beetles or termites could spell the death of a structure. In some cases, the rear of the space was reserved for *amadlozi*, the ancestors, and offerings would be placed here. Atop the structure was a grass top-knot known as *inqhongwane*. This sealed this vulnerable location against rain and was often supplemented with protective “lightning sticks.” The door, *omnyango*, was built by specialists, and consisted of a mat of interwoven withies. This could be braced shut from the outside or latched from within with a cross stick. The door was deliberately low, ensuring that people would bend their knees when entering, thus paying appropriate respect to those inside.

In terms of use, a strict spatial arrangement existed in the occupation of the dwelling. Women occupied designated places to the left of the posts depending on their role in the homestead, while men occupied similarly determined spaces on the right.

Although the Zulu people were closely documented in the past (albeit on an ad-hoc basis), little research was carried out on their dwellings. Drawings by George Angas in the 1830s, a number of descriptions, and some early photographs depict what were sometimes disheveled-looking structures, bulging at their edges for about a meter above the ground. One reason for this bulge was that such early buildings were constructed with a framework of *sekelbos*, or *dichrostachys* (a scrubby thorn), which was pliable but had little longitudinal strength. However, in the last decade of the nineteenth century a local settler brought back some seeds of the black wattle from Australia. This tree now grows prolifically and, although outlawed in many areas, is today the standard material for construction of beehive dwellings (when they are made), informal houses, and *rondawels*, the circular building with a conical roof that characterizes much residential construction in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.

Perhaps pressures of the Apartheid regime are ultimately to blame for the lack of detailed study of such buildings.
Today, Barrie Biermann and James Walton are recognized as pioneers in their documentation. Biermann once described the sophistication of their structure and the process of their construction as having the same level of complexity as a Boeing aircraft. In the mid-1970s the most groundbreaking published work on these topics was compiled by Knuffel, who noted the number of different types of grass used in the thatch and the various processes by which it was harvested to promote environmental stability.

THE MSINGA CASE

The Msinga district is a desolate tract of leftover land that lies at the confluence of three major rivers on the escarpment rising from the KwaZulu-Natal coastal belt. Surrounded by European-owned farmlands, it is an enclave of Zuluness that has prevailed in the face of political adversity. Despite the proximity of water, the local climate, geological conditions, and the fact these rivers run in deep valleys (as much as 1,000 meters below the hilltops) mean the landscape is arid, largely devoid of natural vegetation save aloe Marlothii and a variety of invasive acacia species. The level of development is similarly low, with most formal activity focused on the small towns of Tugela Ferry in the middle, Keates Drift in the south, and Pomeroy in the north. These towns provide foci for a large population of rural people who walk or catch public transport to shop there or travel onward to larger cities.

A number of factors have contributed to the underdeveloped nature of the Msinga district in contemporary times, including drought and famine and a tenacious adherence to tribal law. But perhaps the most enduring factor preventing development is Msinga’s reputation for violence, whether political, internecine, or as a manifestation of crime. In his paper “Isibuya Isidumbu, Bringing Back the Body,” Jonathon Clegg described the particular state of the Msinga culture of violence, connecting it to a traditionally performed stick fight among age-grade warriors of the Zulu nation. Historically, Msinga also suffered acutely due to the partition of Zululand in 1879, a mechanism instituted by the Colonial Government to break the might of the Zulu nation. At that time its residents were separated from the rest of the Zulu people, who lived on the other side of the Tugela and Buffalo rivers (which then geographically defined the Zululand border). Being Zulus outside of Zululand, such isolation forced Msinga residents to develop a number of cultural coping mechanisms.

Politically, Msinga came to form an historical colonial magistracy of the same name, governed from Pomeroy, a small town on the northern border. The area straddled the old wagon route between Greytown, Pietermaritzburg and Dundee, which today forms the route of regional road R66. As such, Msinga featured prominently in military and political historical anecdotes (particularly where the rivers were forded by ferries), as well as in the accounts of traders and missionaries. Proximity to water also led to development of such colonial outposts as police posts, mission stations, and a local Church of Scotland hospital based at Tugela Ferry.

Today, Msinga is densely populated, home to a population of around 16,000 people, who are relatively evenly spread across the area, despite the intense changes in gradient. Most people live below the poverty line, with, in many cases, the menfolk working as migrant laborers in the cities. From 1880 onward, this was one of the main areas from which Zulu laborers were drawn to work in the gold mines in Johannesburg. This resulted in a culture of male absenteeism, with men returning to their homes annually during the Christmas break. This situation continued until the 1980s, when there was a large-scale closure of the mines. Today, HIV/AIDS and the unnaturally high death rate as a result of factional fighting have slowed population growth in the area, although it remains high considering the dearth of public facilities. Among these, the Church of Scotland Hospital acts as the secondary health-care facility, once people have visited badly staffed local clinics. Each tribal district also has a courthouse complex and sports arena. However, many schools provide only the basics of education and are understaffed.

Apart from this seeming adversity, this district is particularly noted for its craft and art production. Nesta Nala, an internationally exhibited potter, came from here. Msinga beadwork is also renowned and distinctive, usually worn on special days, when the full gamut of traditional dress is displayed. The isidwaba, the married woman’s cowhide skirt, is worn as a matter of course, although the isicolo, her head-dress, is more ceremonial. I mention this because there are few areas remaining in the Zulu nation where traditional dress is worn every day. Such clothing is an indicator of the innate conservatism of the people in Msinga. Not only do older people dress in this manner, but many young, newly-wed girls also wear isidwaba.

THE EXTRAORDINARY DEVELOPMENT OF THE MSINGA AREA AND ITS PAINTED WALL DECORATIONS

Despite the difficult social and economic conditions of the area, the homesteads of Msinga are unique in the Zulu context in that many are decorated. Indeed, they appear to subscribe to a decorative tradition that includes painted door surrounds, dado bands, and shadow lines at the eaves. Many would liken the decoration to the colorful and well-known work of the Ndebele people north of Johannesburg. But the Msinga Zulu decorations are unlike the Ndebele in its subject matter, its color choices, and general composition.

In the past, people of this area lived largely in beehive huts, or iqughwana. As described earlier, their construction was a gendered activity: the wattle frame was cut and constructed by men of the household, while the thatch was cut
and placed by the women. Their arrangement within the umuzi, or homestead, also reflected hierarchy and gender.

Today, the buildings are largely in the cone-on-cylinder rondavel style. The thatched roof will normally have an apical cap which is either traditionally made of woven grass or manufactured from a variety of materials such as galvanized steel or cement. Often, a motorcar tire will be placed on the apex, acting as a lightning conductor. Sometimes an enterprising metal worker will fashion an apical cap that has a crowing cockerel or a knight on a charger. Wall openings apart from the single door are very rare, as in this traditional society windows are perceived as inappropriate by elders.

The layout of the homestead centers in typical fashion on a central cattle byre. Rules of hierarchical layout are observed in the positioning of huts for the headman, his mother, his wives, and children of various ages and sexes. However, due to the topography and the impossibility of building on steep slopes, the homestead may sit on a series of excavated terraces. The formal entrance remains at the lower end of the complex, near the cattle byre. This is still where one may shout “nqo nqo” to announce one’s arrival.

Inconsistencies may exist in this prescribed layout in some homesteads. Some homesteads also display a variety of decorative elements on different huts, showing the development of styles over time. On the other hand, there are many homesteads that are not decorated. A brief “wind-screen” survey indicates this practice is mostly characteristic of the kwaMthembu and kwaMchunu areas, two of the six tribal districts.

Much of the decorative work appears to be carried out in the weeks leading up to Christmas. One is tempted to hypothesize that it has some connection with the return of the absent menfolk from the cities during the builders holiday which begins on December 16 each year. It may also be linked to the seasonal round of activities related to the production of houses, according to which specific times of year are devoted to the cutting/acquisition of the poles, application of mud and plaster, building of the frame, and cutting, drying and laying of the thatched roof.

In my original research, carried out between 2000 and 2001, I identified at least six separate forms of decoration. Type 1 is characteristic of functional buildings such as kitchens and generally involves the monochromatic painting of mud plaster. The application of mud and color is reminiscent of Sotho building practice, where only the dado (lower walls) and packed panels on each side of the door are painted (FIG.3). This practice is one of the areas of cultural overlap between Zulus and the Sotho-speaking Hlubi people of the area.

Figure 3. Type 1 Hlubi style building showing the open, packed eaves and painted, plastered walls. Photo by author, 2000.

This simple application appears to have been refined in the Type 2 examples, a style prevalent in buildings constructed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This style was noted by Frescura and Hartley, and was referred to by the former as consisting of “chevrons,” basic geometric painted patterns flanking the door (FIG.4). This style has long since died out, and other “later” styles are not documented photographically nor in written form at this time.

The Type 2 chevron style appears to have been superseded by Type 3, known colloquially as isimodeni, literally “modern.” Isimodeni painting is characterized by the banded paintings that flank the doors, architecturally reflecting the banded coloring systems of the beadwork of the same name. The bands consist of carefully regimented proportions, color

Figure 4. Diagrammatic representation of the basic elements of the isimodeni Msinga building. 1) Isicolo sigarondi-apical cap. 2) Thatched roof. 3) Wattle purlins. 4) Wattle/gum rafters. 5) Plastered wall. 6) Structural post/gum 7) External stoep. 8) Painted dado. 9) Plastered decorative band. 10) Open/plastered & painted eave shadow detail. Drawing by author.
Type 4 is also characterized by a breakaway in color choices from the conservative and regimented isimodeni black, white, red and green, to maize, brown, bay blue, carmine and black. Generally, the wall colors are chosen by the women of the homestead, who also execute the designs. One lady whose homestead formed part of the survey, had molded the plaster using a teaspoon as a plastering tool. However, following the economic slump in the big cities, men trained in the building trade have also assumed some of this work, and will contract themselves to individuals, despite the traditional perception that the application of decoration was “women’s work.”

Today, a new development in the “decoration of the whole” principle has taken Type 4 to new heights. Figurative patterning depicting birds, palm trees, and lacy geometric patterns, characterizes Type 5. Such huts are generally built by contractors to specific criteria, and are usually painted and plastered by a contractor as well. Type 5 has extended the range of colors further, with brown and olive green now being common. Again, the whole house is used as a backdrop for creativity.

**Figure 5.** Example of isimodeni style (Type 3) building. Photo by author, 2000.

**Figure 6.** A woman in commonly worn traditional dress in the entrance of a Type 4 building. Photo by author, 2000.
A common characteristic of both Types 4 and 5 is the raised plaster relief which forms a basis for painted designs. The technique generally means that a painter/plasterer inscribes a particular decoration that will last the lifetime of the building. Overpainting or alteration has not been observed.

The last type I observed in my research is more understated, and does not really fit into an evolutionary timeline, as the other examples do. Type 6 collects a variety of simple plastered buildings together, where a single color background has figurative motifs to each side of the door. Other types of simple decoration do exist, but not in sufficient numbers to justify categorization as a style. Where Type 6 lies in any temporal scale is unsure, its existence at this point is worthy of mention. Reticence to discuss it by informants could arise either out of lack of knowledge or another more esoteric reason.

The characteristics of all the types are shown in the accompanying table (FIG. 7).

### THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE DECORATED BUILDINGS

Within homesteads the extent of variation in design types can be great. Such variation is a strong marker that there has been a breaking free from the bounds of accepted tribal norms, however, allowing expression of personal philosophy. As I wrote in 2003:

*A homestead with an isicolo sikarondi (apical cap) purchased in Johannesburg and typical of an informal street-side market wares depicting a knight on a charger on the apex of the roof could not be more incongruous in its remote African valley context, yet it works as part of the eclectic decorative language of the homestead whilst enriching the total perception of the man and his status in the community.*

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### Comparative Structural Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTION</th>
<th>ROOF PITCH</th>
<th>WINDOW</th>
<th>STEPS</th>
<th>DOOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>frame and infill</td>
<td>greater than 20°</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td>usually stable type, SA pine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>frame and infill</td>
<td>greater than 20°</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td>usually stable type, SA pine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circa 1975</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>frame and infill</td>
<td>greater than 20°</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td>usually stable type, SA pine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circa 1985</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>or decorated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>frame and infill or concrete block</td>
<td>often less than 20°</td>
<td>none; blind or painted steel</td>
<td>simple or decorated</td>
<td>usually standard hardwood (meranti) with additional SA pine; stable lower half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circa 1999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>concrete block</td>
<td>often less than 20°</td>
<td>none; blind or painted steel</td>
<td>simple or decorated</td>
<td>usually standard hardwood with additional SA pine; stable lower half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circa 2000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE 6</td>
<td>frame and infill or concrete block</td>
<td>greater than 20°</td>
<td>no specific standard</td>
<td>no specific standard</td>
<td>standard hardwood or stable type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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### Comparative Decorative Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>PLASTER</th>
<th>ANNULAR SHOULDER</th>
<th>DADO</th>
<th>APRON</th>
<th>DECORATIVE TRADITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>none, excluding the dado</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>plastered and painted</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td>simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>plastered and painted</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circa 1975</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>yes, to door head height</td>
<td>open</td>
<td>painted</td>
<td>simple or decorated</td>
<td>more complex forms in standard patterns on sides of doors only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circa 1985</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>relief, full</td>
<td>painted</td>
<td>relief plastered and painted</td>
<td>simple or decorated</td>
<td>whole building painted with geometric patterns at openings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circa 2000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 7.** Charts showing differences between the decorative types as described.
As part of the recent development of a decorative tradition there has been a clear evolution of types and styles. In terms of wall painting, the more recent break from the early geometric influence of beadwork to something more expressive has created a unique evolutionary path for contemporary indigenous vernacular design in South Africa. In addition, the integration of plaster, paint and materials, all of which have a monetary value in a poor community, shows a conviction and commitment. Once the relief plasterwork is executed, the design is final, and variation can only happen in the choice of paint colors applied after the fact. At the same time, the biodegradable nature of the buildings means that the lifespan of the decoration is tied to the lifespan of the building. And given the high incidence of pest infestation and the rapid natural decay of materials in a humid climate, this is comparatively brief. There is not much of a maintenance ethic to support repair.

Despite such temporal limitations, the intricate details of the plastered designs are informed by a holistic approach to residential design. Factors such as the choice of door, how the entrance threshold is tackled, and the ways a homestead may be sited on an extreme physical gradient all reveal conceptual richness. With varying degrees of success, the building in its landscape is seen as single design problem, involving wall decoration, choice of door and windows, symmetrical positioning, the integration of ventilator bricks, and how decorative elements interact with necessary elements such as steps.

Perhaps as a result of the complexity of the task, decorative contractors have recently emerged who execute the designs in plaster and paint to the whims of the wife of the homestead. This shift in building practice from the women of the homestead to contractors is notable, although not much information has been gleaned about it. Such a level of specialization reflects both the perceived need in the community for such buildings and the need to establish a limit to variety within a set of basic design types. Mr. Sithole, a local decorator, admits to the existence of “catalogue” for the Type 5 buildings, and choices are made from this. He was reticent to elucidate on this catalogue, however.

The integrity of artistic conviction among the builders and painters of Msinga is high. One finds that individuals make decisions based on what they perceive to be correct, despite approaches that may have been used at neighboring houses. During the experimentation process with new styles and material, this is particularly obvious. Thus, some designs emerge from specific, tried-and-tested approaches, while others result from creative experimentation. The isicolo atop the roof provides a good example. The standard manner of finishing off the ikhugwana was with a grass top-knot known as ingongwangana. But with the mutation in form and structural material from beehive dome to cone and cylinder, this apical resolution had to be rethought. Should builders stay with the conservative and original solution, or change it both for the sake of efficiency and aesthetics, and to embrace current fashion?

In this and similar instances, tradition and the indigenous knowledge system that taught and perpetuated the construction of the beehive hut for generations has been challenged, leading to the variety of approaches to rural shelter today. The high level of artistic conviction has sped up the possibilities for local assimilation, adaptation and innovation. Such change is not restricted to construction materials, but is embodied in new and varied approaches to the possibilities of paint and sculptural elaboration.

Today, the opinion of Msinga residents as to the constituents of a proper house is varied. Often, builders have learned the urban formal building code working in the cities. This is then combined with the traditional needs and aesthetic interpretations of the homesteader. Part of this shift of influence has involved the availability of local building contractors since the closing of the mines on the Witwatersrand. But the high proportion of constantly returning men who work in urban areas may also be a factor. Often the result is a literal copying or integration of elements of “proper” buildings, such as ventilation units (airbricks). But many of these attributes taken from houses subscribing to the regulations of 1960s suburbia appear in merely symbolic form.

In this regard, one source told me that houses are painted and built to be similar to those in the cities. The imitation of perceived grandeur, taught by an imported set of values and cultures, however, does not necessarily extend through the catalogue of appropriate building forms or materials. It is noteworthy, for example, that the comfort with which the plasterer Mr. Sithole’s family regards thatch is totally different from the attitude of urban Zulus. Certainly, the people in Msinga realize its shortcomings. But their view is clearly different from that of city dwellers, who live in formal or informal housing, and who see thatch as both impractical and old-fashioned.

A real house in the eyes of many Msinga residents is not a two-roomed “cottage,” as with many other emerging economic groups around the world. The Msinga people do use two-roomed dwellings occasionally. It does, for example, serve as the bachelor’s quarters in some homesteads. But bachelors are perceived as more worldly-wise, and they have more claim to a rectangular building since they are on the brink of joining the absentee male population.

POSTGLOBALIZATION: THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

The phenomenon of globalization is very much alive in the South African context, particularly through ideals of modernization submitted by the government in its Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP). Such subscription to Western ideals in terms of what housing should be is often a way to placate recently moneyed cultures as well as the sometimes locally inappropriate demands of donor agencies. However, the influence of Western societies has also been strengthened through television access, education, non-
governmental organizational networks, and human-rights activities, particularly since the atrocities of the last few decades under the Apartheid government. In addition, since the country has a relatively strong economy within an African context, it has become a draw for other Africans, providing work, security and education, and adding things African to global influences on popular forms of material culture.

However, much of the uniqueness of Msinga as a cultural case is that the area has largely ignored the influences of the globalized Western world. In its isolation, it has quietly forged ahead, creating a new and fresh vernacular using influences both internal and external that respond directly to the local environment. In this case, the needs of “now” are being addressed. But the mercurial, nonstatic nature of these buildings cannot be underestimated, and given the fragile nature of their organic structure, their design has change quickly over time.

The buildings are a uniquely regional response to a variety of different influences that cover the spiritual, cultural and material realms. Their adherence to the definition of vernacular is combined with the traditional nature of the society and the method of transference of knowledge, creating an “indigenous vernacular.” The reality of Africanization on the subcontinent, and the oft-forced encouragement of an African Renaissance at a national level is modestly and unconsciously represented in these Msinga examples, where people have used their own aesthetic and cultural toolkits to create something new.

As a final note, it is important to point out the error of statutory or forced methods of preserving such building types. Part of the charm and essence of such indigenous vernacular architecture is its temporary nature. Its preservation would likewise imply that its creators should remain content in such an environment forever. In the way that notions of Zuluness have evolved over the last two centuries, so have their dwellings.

I suggest that the case for preservation of a temporarily stunted and historically assumed vernacular is both inappropriate and short-sighted. The ephemeral nature of these environments is much of what gives them their appeal, and as such, the buildings and the homesteads should be documented, and left to change, alter and evolve.

REFERENCE NOTES

Much of this particular research was completed while I was working as an architect for Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali. I would like to dedicate this report to the memory of Dieter Reusch, who was shot dead in Tugela Ferry in July 2003 where he had been carrying out anthropological research for over a decade.

1. The asega is a short stabbing spear made famous in the days of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona.
2. In this work I rely on the definition of the vernacular developed by Paul Oliver: “Vernacular architecture comprises the dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources they are customarily owner or community built utilising traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them.” P. Oliver, The Dictionary of Vernacular Architecture of the World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.xxiii.
3. In this case, the language spoken is isiZulu.
4. Afrikaans is a polyglot language spoken by people claiming early Dutch and Huguenot descent, comprised of words from Dutch, German, Malay and Zulu/Xhosa. One of South Africa’s eleven official languages, it was that of the National Party that supported and initiated Apartheid.
5. The concept of an African Renaissance, supported by a publication of the same name, arose out of a conference held in 1998. It originally emanated from an address President Thabo Mbeki made to the Corporate Council on Africa in the United States. During these remarks, he noted that “Those who have eyes to see, let them see. The African Renaissance is upon us.” M. Makgoba, ed., African Renaissance (Cape Town: Mafube Publishing, 1999).
7. Apartheid was a series of Acts of Parliament promulgated nationally from 1913 onward which served to promote the good of the nationals of European descent, and suppress indigenous peoples belonging to a variety of different nationalities and language groups, as well as people of Indian descent who had arrived in the country as indentured laborers from 1869 onward.
8. Tradition is here accepted to refer to custom, manner, form or idea carried through generations through practice or orality. Such traditionality is open to interpretation and change through time and space.
9. In building form, this can be seen, for instance, in the spread of the “American Flat.” As described by Harber, this is an articulated building where a single room, or a pair of adjoining rooms, has been added to with incongruent roof forms. R. Harber, “The American Flat in Africa,” SA Architect (March 1998), pp.37–40.
10. A hereditary title theoretically dating back to King Shaka, who formed the Zulu nation through military prowess in the 1820s.
11. Named after the progenitor, Zulu, whose name meant “the heavens.” Thus, amaZulu means “people of the heavens.”
12. The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 was particularly well documented. So were a variety of skirmishes between the Boers (descendants of the Dutch settlers at the Cape of Good Hope) and the Zulus from 1838 onward.
Photographic and drawn documentation largely shows the domical grass  

equhwa. However, archaeological evidence shows hearths and some stone-wallling. See, for example, K. Mack, T. Maggs, and D. Oswald, “Homesteads in Two Rural Zulu  

Communities: An Ethnoarchaeological Investigation,” Natal Museum Journal of  

Humanities, 1991. Pietermaritzburg, pp.79–129. Quite when the cone-on-cylinder rondavel came into being, or whether it existed in this region concurrently, is difficult to prove, and is a matter of debate.  

In the last ten years, rapid urbanization has brought a cross-pollination of ideas and influences, which has sometimes taken the form of First World materials being subsumed into the  

grit of a cognitively transformed rural dwelling. This may manifest itself, for example, in a beehive hut frame of wattle withies being covered by white roofing plastic.  

This is also often referred to as an indlu in texts by Biermann and Claude. See, for example, B. Biermann, “Indlu, the Domed Dwelling of the Zulu,” in P. Oliver, ed.,  


indlu refers to a hut, the equhwa refers specifically to a beehive dwelling. See C. Doke, D. McMalcolm, J. Sikakana, and B. Vilikazi, English Zulu Dictionary  

(Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999), p.541. Discussion with Zulu-speaking people always results in the beehive being identified as the equhwa.  

The use of the cone-on-cylinder form in less grassed areas exists, although its influence and spread is difficult to prove. The  

definition of the Zulu nation as a group of lineages that were assimilated after 1820 also means that a variety of building forms thus turn out to be definably Zulu.  


(Graz: Akademische Druck, 1975) — are decorated by strands of grass rope in geometric forms added to the final thatch.


It is known, however, that King Dingane decorated the posts of his hut with elaborate beadwork. Also see W. Lord and T. Baines, Shifts and Expedents of Camp Life: Travel and Exploration (Johannesburg: Africana Reprint Library, 1975).  


See, for example, Biermann, “Indlu, the Domed Dwelling of the Zulu”; and “Family Life and Community Structure: Its Effect on Housing Forms,” in M. Lazenby, ed.,  


On plant life, see D. Edwards, A Plant Ecological Survey of the Tugela River Basin (Pietermaritzburg: Town and Regional Planning Commission, 1967). On soil  

structures, see J. Van Der Eyk, C. Mavricar, and J. De Villiers, Soils of The Tugela Basin, Natal Province (Pietermaritzburg: Town and Regional Planning Commission, 1969).  


Among other things, this divided the might of the Zulu king Cetshwayo, limiting his ability to commit acts of war against the British colonial government. Such power had resulted in the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, and, in particular, the battles of Isandlwana and Rorkes Drift, both of which took place relatively close by.

Marijuana is grown extensively in this area as a cash crop. Although illegal, it provides a means of survival where poverty is paramount. There was much documentation of police raids on the “dagga” fields during the Apartheid years, as this formed an excuse for invasion. See also A. Van Zuydam-Reynolds, “Illicit Trade.”Indicator SA, Vol. 7 No. 2 (1990), pp.68–69.


36. Mack, Maggs, and Oswald, “Homesteads in Two Rural Zulu Communities,” pp.79–129.


39. These problems of resolution have been addressed in a variety of ways that vary from the interpretation of the traditional top-knot to the wonderfully anomalous knight on a charger. For example, they are aware of its incendiary properties as a result of arson and lightning strikes. They are also painfully aware of its cost: of finding, cutting and conveying it; or buying it, somehow, locally. The notion of “cottage” in this case also implies a single front door and two flanking windows, often the pattern used in the construction of the iminjondolo (shack), and also the pattern for many of the less salubrious Reconstruction and Development Mass Housing programs since 1994.

40. In a number of instances, statutory departments such as Tourism KwaZulu-Natal have been tempted to preserve these structures and life to promote tourism through gentrification. In addition, places exists in the Provincial Heritage Act No. 10 of 1997, where these structures are to be protected.