

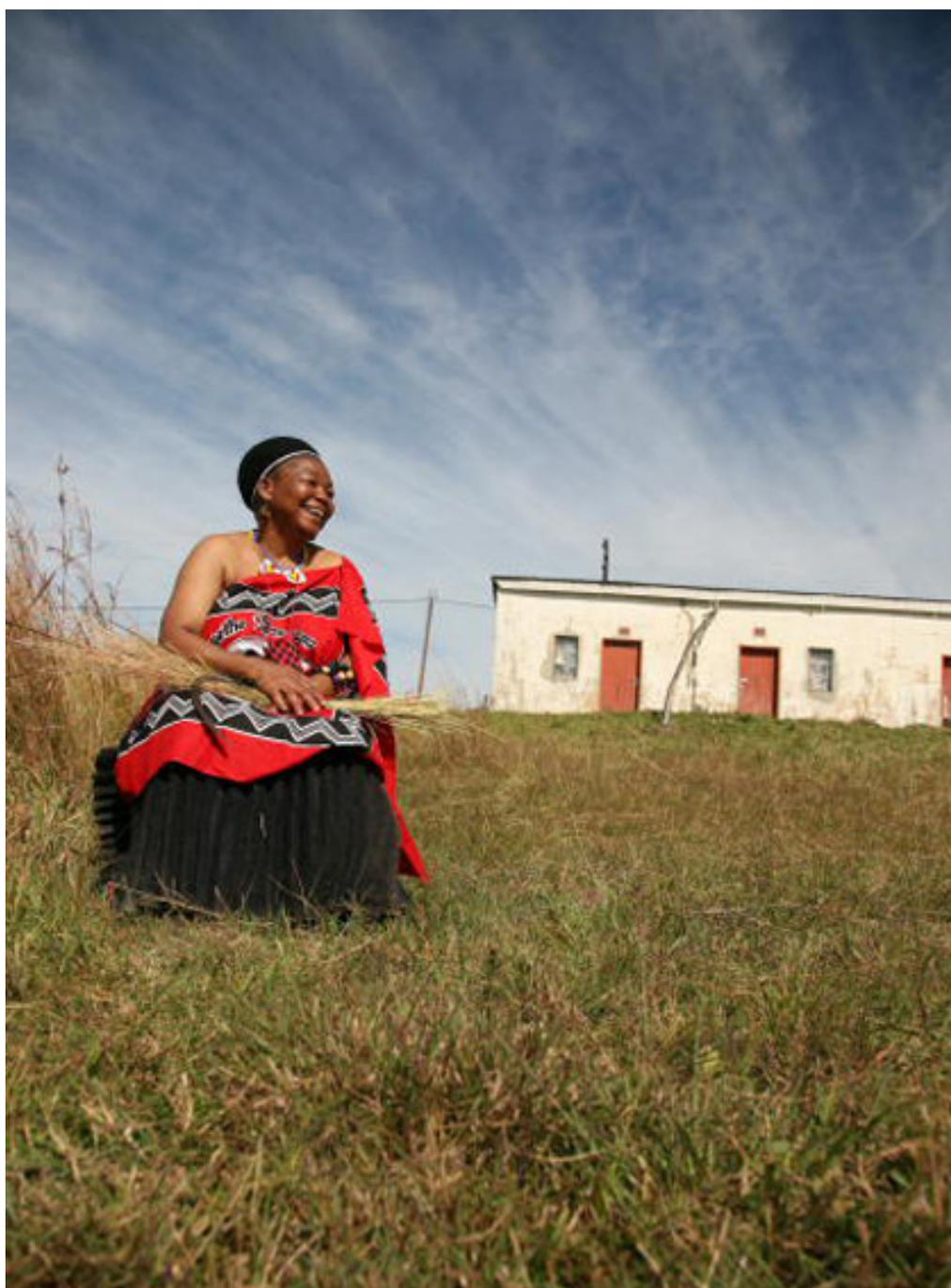
how we feel

Wednesday, February 9, 2011

Daughters: My Strength comes from Birth

In the first chapter of an ongoing series revealing the threads that unite women from all corners of the African continent, we travel to Swaziland to meet five indomitable spirits. Expert weaver, Ellinah Nxumalo, is involved hands-on in every stage of the creative process, and in passing on her skills to uplift other women in the wider community...

Photographs: Pippa Hetherington | **Words:** Kim Chaloner



On a chilly morning in late May, the sky an overwhelming, brilliant blue, we pulled up to the bustling fruit and vegetable stalls, laden with fresh produce, on the road towards Swaziland's Ngwenya/ Oshoek borderpost into neighbouring South Africa. We were due to meet weaver and businesswoman, Ellinah Nxumalo, owner and proprietor of Kusile Expert Weavers. 'Ask them at the market,' she'd instructed when we'd asked for her address. 'They'll tell you where to find me.' Seconds later we were wondering down an uneven, dusty lane behind the petrol station, a little unsure of where we were headed. There, sitting legs-outstretched on a dry, grassy verge alongside her modest one-roomed shop, we found Ellinah. After having spent the morning hand-cutting nearby sisal using a rusty, well-worn sickle, she sat and rested awhile, gazing out over the neighbouring mountain range, resplendent in her traditional dress of a bright shawl embellished with the face of Swazi King and figurehead, King Mswati III; finished off with a crocheted black cap and ornamental jewellery, all locally made. While showing us her arresting array of woven mohair tapestry wall-hangings, sisal mats, curtains and bags – all representing the daily life and traditions of the people of this land-locked Kingdom – she reflected on a life dedicated to improving her own prospects, and, generously, those of others too...

My strength comes from birth. I was the last born. My grandmother used to tell me the stories of old times. She said to my mother, 'This one is going to be troublesome.' I asked my grandmother to teach me how to knit. But, before I could learn from her, she died. So I went to school and there I learnt how to knit. My teacher asked me to knit her a jersey. She said to five of us children: 'I will buy you five pockets of wool.'

I only have a Standard Two education. I sent myself to school. There was no support system, no help from my older brother, no food. I looked for work to pay my school fees, and to buy expensive books and uniforms. I did tasks in the school holidays – babysitting and working in a hotel. At the same time I had to care for my mother and my brother's children.



'If I did something wrong, I was always aware of the consequences, although that didn't stop me from wanting to be naughty,' says champion of local 'Today I encourage my daughters, "Be a Queen of your own. Value yourself, you have to value yourself, keep on doing it,"' says Swazi weaver Ellinah Nxumalo.

After my mother died I was banished because I was not married. I have seven children – two boys and five girls – and 10 grandchildren.

In 1977 I started doing weaving work at a local factory, where I spent seven years. We factory workers were sent to Lesotho to exchange skills and knowledge with the Basotho. After that I spent two more years working for another Swazi weaving company. But I wanted to start my own business. I'd take mohair scraps down to the river to wash, and then I'd weave them. I needed a market. So, in March 1987 I began selling the finished product to local shops. I met a South African man who had offices in Swaziland and South Africa. He took some samples back with him, and my market grew. I went with him once to South Africa to visit the shops at the Carlton Centre. I was so scared by the moving steps!

Today, I'm well-known in America for my fine tapestries. America is my biggest market. They buy to support me. There, a woman by the name of Amelia Fitzjones-Broderick displays my work and distributes my pamphlets.

I've had the opportunity to attend business seminars. In 1997, some Zimbabweans came to help the local people. In 2000, I attended the SADC Women in Business seminar in Namibia, and that same year I approached a Zimbabwean centre to promote our products there, to establish a trading house. Today, I'm the voice of the local crafters, artists must have a say. My community really needs me. I only look forward. Not everything I do is for me. I've been commissioned to train the group. In 2008, I received an Entrepreneur of the Year award for my creative, unique enterprise. I was sponsored a trip to Sante Fe.

I rent these premises, and I live nearby. I needed a permanent place of my own. The lady chief gave me this land on behalf of the Swazi people. The constitution here says that women must be given land, even if they have no husband or sons. It is beautiful land. The chief said that something must be started. Now I am training other women in the area.

As an artist I've always had in my mind that I wished to do things on my own. I wanted to teach myself, and others, how to create. Other women were not so happy with me. They didn't want me to be self-employed, they put me down. It has been painful, I have been persecuted. But still, I teach other women so that they can earn a living. I've visited primary schools – the children are keen to learn how to do things for themselves. My daughters work at a ceramic fine art training centre in Ezulweni. Now my one child is busy teaching her own daughter skills – she likes to collect dolls.

I realised I was no longer a girl when I sent my firstborn to school. It was very difficult as there was no father to help. At the same time I had to send my brother's children to school and continue caring for my mother.

When I first fell in love, the promises he gave me of making a home...he put them in my mind when I was just 22 years old. But in the end we didn't marry. He went away when the child went to school. 'God will help you,' my mother said to me. 'All of His powers will come to you.' I was mistaken to believe that he'd marry me. Women are strong and the country is standing because of them. I don't wish I was a man.

If you are a woman you are strong. A man cannot do anything to you. Although even if you have a lot of money you will suffer because he will spend it all. In my life I have been so sick. The first thing you must do is look after yourself. Women are the breadwinners.

One day I saw a skirt label that said, 'Be yourself'. Today I encourage my children, 'Be a Queen of your own. Value yourself, you have to value yourself, keep on doing it.'