

Isidwaba sikaMkabayi: Gender Transgression and Power in Sheli Masondo's Costume Design for Shaka iLembe

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Abstract

This paper presents and analyses costume design in a recent popular South African television series titled *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024). The series is based on the life and times of the legendary founder of the Zulu nation, Shaka Zulu. The paper focuses on the series' costume designer, Sheli Masondo's, disruption of normative gender identities in traditional Zulu attire. Masondo's designs reconstruct the character of Mkabayi kaJama in the television series by combining *isidwaba* (a traditional female leather skirt) with *ibeshu* (a traditional male back apron) to create a sartorial language that articulates Mkabayi's political power and military authority, as it presents a transgressive femininity. The paper argues that Masondo's designs present gender ambiguity in costume design in ways that challenge essentialist notions of gender in traditional African contexts, even as they remain rooted in authentic practices in traditional Zulu material culture. Furthermore, the paper argues that Masondo's approach represents a fascinating case of costume as both historical reconstruction and feminist intervention, positioning dress as a site where gender, power, and cultural authenticity are negotiated to intersect in modern cultural practice.

Keywords: *Shaka iLembe*, historical film, Sheli Masondo, gender power and representation, Zulu *isidwaba*, gender and feminism.

1. Introduction

Shaka iLembe (Gibson et al., 2024) is a popular South African television series that launched on national television in South Africa in 2024. In this historical television series, costume designer Sheli Masondo employs costume design to strategically reimagine the historical figure of Princess Mkabayi kaJama. Princess Mkabayi kaJama is one of the central characters in the series, having played a significant part in the history of the Zulu nation.

Through her costume design for this character, Masondo creates a visual narrative of gender transgression and political power that challenges a normative understanding of Zulu traditional attire. Mkabayi was the aunt and advisor to the legendary King Shaka. She occupies a significant position in Zulu history as a woman who wielded considerable political influence in a predominantly patriarchal society. Masondo's costume design for this character offers a critical site in which to explore dress as communicator in complex intersections of gender, authority, and cultural identity. Central to Masondo's design approach is the transgressive use of the *isidwaba*, a traditionally female garment, in combination with *ibeshu* and *isinene*, garments conventionally worn by Zulu men. The strategic combination of gendered dress codes creates a visual language that simultaneously honours historical precedent as it articulates contemporary conversations about gender fluidity and women's power. Through costume design, Masondo constructs Mkabayi not as a mere historical figure but as a symbol of gender complexity within a Zulu cultural framework in ways that challenge the viewer to reconsider rigid binary constructions of masculine and feminine identities.

In this paper, we examine how Masondo's costume design functions as a historical interpretation and cultural intervention, demonstrating that costume in historical drama is not only decorative but can also operate as a symbolic system that reflects and constructs meanings around gender, power, and identity. Our analysis draws on selected episodes from *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024) that feature the character of Mkabayi. This is accompanied by designer testimony obtained through personal interviews with Sheli Masondo. Further data are drawn from publicly available interviews, including "Threads of Majesty: Unveiling the Artistry of Costume Design for *Shaka iLembe*" (FAME Week Africa, 2023) and "Meet Sheli Masondo, costume designer and stylist on *Shaka iLembe*" (The Manor, 2023). The study combines qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009), critical visual methodology (Rose, 2016), narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), and studies in material culture (Prown, 1982) to reveal how Masondo's work aligns with broader scholarly and cultural conversations around gender representation in historical film. This includes the politics of costume design and the capacity of visual media to reimagine historical narratives for contemporary audiences.

2. The Nature and Scope of Historical Film in South Africa

As the colonial power that dominated nearly the whole of Southern Africa, except Namibia and Mozambique, Great Britain played a prominent role in the development of the region's film history. Parsons (2018) has written about key British and American

stakeholders who shaped and influenced the film industry in Southern Africa. Parsons (2018) critiqued the marginal role played by Black Africans in early film, where they predominantly served only as minor actors in foreign-produced films.

Historical film in Southern Africa has spawned a considerable body of academic literature (Jack, 2015; Parsons, 2018; Ritter, 1955; Tomaselli, 1990, 2003; Tomaselli et al., 1989; Tomaselli & Shepperson, 2002). Jack (2015) defined historical film as a genre that combines “*storytelling, for entertainment, historical evidence, and verisimilitude ... creating historical interpretations for public consumption*” (p. 2). Jack (2015) also lauded historical film when saying: “*When the popularity and immediacy of film combines with history’s ability to explain how things came to be, millions of people can have their understanding of the past and present influenced by historical films*” (p. 1). Therefore, if, as observed by Thelen (as cited in Jack, 2015), “*the challenge of history is to recover the past and introduce it to the present*” (p. 1), historical film can serve as a valuable source for understanding both the past and the present.

With a population of more than 16 million, the Zulu nation is arguably Southern Africa’s most populous ethnic group. The history and culture of the Zulu nation are etched into the annals of the history of Southern Africa through the expansionist military exploits of its historical founding father, King Shaka Zulu. Consequently, the story of Shaka Zulu has spawned several feature films and television series based on his life and times to become a defining feature of historical film in Southern Africa. As Jansen van Vuuren (2022) rightly observed in a review of historical film from Southern Africa: “*Something that immediately drew my attention was the prominence of ‘Zulu’ in film titles, in the absence of other South[ern] African Black cultures and ethnic groupings in these titles*” (p. 83). It is clear, then, that early filmmakers in Southern Africa had a particular fascination with the Zulu nation. Tomaselli (2006) borrowed Peter Davis’ term *Zooluology* (ABC BookWorld, 2013) to define that fascination, which he also viewed as “*the taming and domesticating of the Zulu*” (Tomaselli, 2006, p. 134). Similarly, Parsons (2018) referred to it (that early fascination) as the process of “*reducing all Black Africans to the exotic taxonomy of the Zulu.*” As a result, Jansen van Vuuren (2022) observes that if the nature and scope of film history in Southern Africa is anything to go by, the Zulu nation remains the most recognisable Black ethnic group among international audiences due to historical foreign-funded filmic and television series such as *Zulu*, the mini-series *Shaka Zulu*, and *Shaka Zulu: The Citadel*.

As Tomaselli and Shepperson (2002) also rightly observed, no other African people captured the Western imagination more powerfully than the AmaZulu in the imperial age post-1870. Sadly, like other Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment approaches to the non-West by Europe, this fascination was constituted by a blend of admiration and repulsion. At the time of the release of *Shaka Zulu* (1987) in South Africa, Tomaselli (2003) observed that the series offered no challenge to the apartheid regime’s ideology that tribe equalled nationhood. This policy had forcibly imposed geographical entities which, after 1948, separated Black tribes from white South Africa into the so-called Bantustans or homelands. The series was broadcast in English on the country’s white television channel and in Zulu on the two Black channels, which were then aimed at the urban Black population living in white apartheid South Africa.

As in other parts of the world, film and historical film from Southern Africa have played a prominent role to entertain, reflect, and inform popular perspectives on history. In line with Jansen van Vuuren's (2022) observation about the preponderance of Zulu culture in film history in Southern Africa above, some of the titles that define the nature and scope of historical film from Southern Africa include *Sports of the Zulus* (1898), *A Zulu's Devotion* (1916), *A Zulu Drama* (1916), and *Zulutown* (1917). Later titles include *Zulu* (1964), *Zulu Dawn* (1979), *Shaka Zulu* (1987), and *Shaka iLembe* (2024), the latter being the focus of the current study.

Inasmuch as the filmic genre is first and foremost a commercial endeavour that tries to attract viewers, *"films often tell history from only one perspective, contain scenes, themes and characters that appeal to the broadest possible audience, and minimize or negate uncomfortable realities, offering an air of triumphalism"* (Jack, 2015, p. 3). Keyan Tomaselli (2003), who has written extensively on historical film from Southern Africa, corroborated this point when making the key observation that the distributors of some of these early historical films about the Zulu did so from a position *"of fascination of Western audiences with the Dark Continent"* (p. 91). Therefore, to the extent that these early historical films were marketed abroad, this marketing opportunity was thus exploited within the prevailing negative white Western colonial myths about Africa, which had developed from the seventeenth century onwards (Kiernan, 1995, as cited in Tomaselli, 2003). In a broader perspective, Tomaselli and Shepperson (2002) argued that filmmakers do not always possess the right methodological skills to marry cinematography with history, and the result is that the *"historical television drama will consistently distort the discourse of history in various ways to satisfy the requirements of dramatic discourse"*. It can be argued, then, that in its principal nature and focus, historical film from Southern Africa is certainly shot through with images that valorise indigenous people in some rather negative ways. In this paper, we argue that *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024) significantly tries to undo this orientation.

Unlike some of the filmmakers of yesteryear, filmmakers today do not function only as storytellers about the past. The recent production of the South African television series *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024), which we analyse in this paper, is a veritable example of how historical film can serve as a form of cultural rehabilitation and a way to negate outdated stereotyped images of Africa, as we seek to demonstrate through costume analysis.

Looked at in this way, historical films can serve as re-interpretations of the past or, what Toplin has termed *"poetic speculations"*, which communicate broader truths, providing alternative avenues for making meaning out of history. As film theorist Rasmus Falbe-Hansen wrote, *"the historical film should not be seen as a substitute for written history, nor simply as an illustration of written history, but as a supplement and an extension which adds depth to traditional written history"* (Jack, 2015, p. 5).

It is against the foregoing history on the nature and scope of film history in South Africa that we argue that historical films such as *Shaka iLembe* need not be prejudiced and pejorative. Rather, the finest historical film can also intersect with, comment upon,

and contribute to the discourse of history from which it emerges and about which it speaks. More importantly, it can also present designs and narratives that portray a radical understanding of received history, as we find in *Shaka iLembe*. By studying the work of contemporary filmmakers, we can better understand dramatic feature films and history as we begin to recognise what this visual medium can add to our knowledge of and feelings for individuals, groups, moments, movements, situations, and events of the past (Davis, 2002).

***Shaka iLembe's* Mkabayi as a Historical Figure**

In this paper, we analyse the costume design elements and character of Mkabayi as presented in the South African television series *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024). In both the history of the Zulu nation and the television series, the life of Mkabayi is an inspiring and motivating story. In the historical character of Mkabayi, we are presented with a woman who defied gender norms to lead the Zulu kingdom through sheer bravery and determination in the face of challenges and hard times. Historically, Mkabayi was the first woman to lead the Zulu nation (S. Masondo, personal communication, May 5, 2025). As Masango (2021) similarly observed, at that time, it was unheard of for a woman to lead. By accepting the responsibility to lead the Zulu nation, Mkabayi demonstrated that women can be brave and strong enough to lead when called upon to do so. According to Shamase (2014), Mkabayi oversaw both political and domestic matters in the Zulu kingdom, making her a leader in ways that bear a striking comparison with global female leaders in the modern era (Redmond, Gutke et al., 2017).



Figure 1: Dawn Thandeka King plays Mkabayi kaJama, a princess, politician, and kingmaker of the Zulu during the 19th century (Dlamini-Myeni, 2025)

In *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024), Mkabayi is presented as a caring and affectionate leader of the Zulu nation. She protects her subjects from incompetent males by removing all kings unfit to lead. Towards the end of her reign, Mkabayi orchestrated an attack on the invading Boers to regain Zulu territory that had been seized by the early Boer settlers (Masango, 2021). Mkabayi also demonstrated a strong character and astounding resilience, spending more time in leadership than Senzangakhona (Shaka's father) and Shaka and Dingane combined. Her longevity proves that her tenure was not accidental but built on strategy, allowing her to last as leader for a long time. Looked at from a gender perspective, Masuku (2009) offered a significant viewpoint of Mkabayi by referring to her attributes as those normally associated with men, thereby negating the historical stereotype of women as obedient and servile to their menfolk. Masuku (2009) further observed that Mkabayi was a brave and quick-thinking woman who was prepared to take risks. Her life and times played out in a highly patriarchal, male-dominated, and ruthless environment, where her choices were constantly questioned with pessimism because of her gender. Consequently, Mkabayi resorted to stratagem, plotting, and connivance to surmount the challenge of gender in leadership and to secure her position as a female ruler of an empire as big as the Zulu nation. It is precisely Mkabayi's apparently gender-transgressive leadership attributes as portrayed through Sheli Masondo's costume design in *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024) that we analyse in this paper.

3. Gender and Media Representation

Gender and the media representation of women have attracted a lot of fascinating writing during the last few decades (Ajayi-Soyinka, 1997; Bartky, 1990; Hooks, 1992; Mulvey, 1975; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Most of the writings on gender and media representation have been a result of the rise in feminist discourses and studies in post-coloniality. While women have been generally and negatively valorised in literature and media portrayal in many parts of the world (Bahri, 2003; Bartky, 1990; Hooks, 1992; Lazarus, 2004; McDonough, 2006; Mulvey, 1975; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997), feminist critics have observed how women have been generally excluded from the realm of the subject in both the West and other parts of the world. In worse scenarios, women have been objectified and valorised as sex objects and as physically and intellectually weak and inferior to their male counterparts (Bartky, 1990; Hooks, 1992; Mulvey, 1975)

In Africa, the negatively gendered literary and media representation of women has been particularly insidious. As Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) and Ajayi-Soyinka (1997) poignantly observed, the trope of motherhood seems to have been the predominant framework that identifies women in literary and media representation. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) attributed this to the close link between motherhood and a basic understanding of the lives of women within many socio-cultural contexts in Africa. In this negative valorisation of women through media representation, writers and producers have been roundly criticised for equating women with Mother Earth, with the continent of Africa, and with an essentialist and eternal sense of beauty. Furthermore, women have been assigned the passive role of eternal nurturer and custodian of the creative/regenerative processes. In this regard, Ali Mazrui (1986) referred to African

women as the custodians of “a dual fertility”, that is, as tillers of the land (agriculture) and givers of birth (the womb). Put differently, African men have assigned to women a submissive essentialist identity of the beautiful, the nurturing, and the marginal. Most male writing and media representations have presented women as peripheral to the human (read “male”) experience.

In this paper, we argue that identity must and can be constantly constructed and reconstructed through the visual arts within the context of other identities, always shifting according to context. Therefore, fixed identities must be de-stabilised, and when they are destabilised, unequal and fixed relations of gender and power hierarchies are also dismantled and disorganised. We posit that the makers of *Shaka iLembe* deploy costume design as a strategy to alter ideologies by changing the attitudes of those who are exposed to the representations. Because literary and media images rely on representation to communicate specific ideologies, when historical and fictional figures are portrayed in mediated platforms such as television, there is a significant effect on those who consume the mediated representations. In such instances, media representation becomes a function of ideology. When viewers and consumers encounter mediated images of people who look, act, and experience life as they do, consumers often feel validated. However, media representation can be double-edged, depending on the images propagated. When the images are positive, they inspire, and when the images are negative, they can limit, undermine, and diminish the self-esteem of individuals or groups. Tomaselli (2003) observes that the latter is the case when media representation favours dominant groups, such as we find in the nature and scope of early historical film from South Africa.

Representation is by nature ideological. It functions to reinforce or dispute identities. Given the preponderance of men and Westerners as writers and publishers of mediated images of Africa, it is often the case that gendered female characters are negatively valorised and misrepresented. For this reason, media representations of gender have come under scrutiny for perpetuating stereotypical images of the female gender, which often negatively valorise women as weak and subordinate. Examples abound of fictional African media that depict women as witches and forces of evil. In some narratives that are set in modern urban spaces, women are depicted as prostitutes, while rural women who submit to patriarchal values are portrayed as acceptable. Women who challenge these norms are branded as rebels and villains, and their positive portrayals are limited to descriptions of physical beauty rather than meaningful engagement in societal spheres. In contrast, men are consistently represented as brave, bold, and strong. In both fiction and history, men occupy leadership roles, serving as saviours and carriers of historical and communal destiny. Masculinity is exalted and routinely equated with success and power, while femininity is generally valorised in negative ways. In our argument, the portrayal of Mkabayi in *Shaka iLembe* is an example of transgressive femininity that challenges essentialist notions of gender in traditional African contexts, even as it remains rooted in authentic practices in traditional Zulu material culture.

Traditional Dress of Zulu Women

Nkumane (2001) identified a cultural rebirth in traditional Zulu dress. According to Nkumane (2001), despite the widespread adoption of Western modes and styles of dress among the contemporary Zulu nation, the Zulu woman is still a cultural being steeped in traditional Zulu patterns of dress. Traditional female attire still forms the bedrock of Zulu women's identity. When Zulu women adorn traditional Zulu dress in contemporary settings, the practice symbolises the re-evaluation of a Zulu worldview in a positive manner that seeks to assert the women's enduring African identity.



Figure 2: Phindile Gwala in Zulu Imvunulo traditional attire during South Africa's Heritage Day celebrations, 2019 (ClipKulture, 2019)

In a study on historical costume among the Zulu, Kennedy (1978, p. 7) confirmed that descriptions of traditional dress in early written accounts suggest that the most important elements of Zulu dress in the early 19th century were animal skins, feathers, and organic fibre. Ornaments were often made of seed, grass, animal fur, and sometimes shells. By the mid-19th century, when white settlers began to penetrate Zululand in large numbers, glass beads became plentiful, and they were often used in place of local substances. Beads became easily and more readily available and became an important adornment among the Zulu. Beadwork is a conspicuous element of traditional Zulu women's attire. We use the term *woman* generically as an umbrella term to refer to the female sex. Kuper (1973) defined *dress* as "*part of the total structure of personal appearance which includes hairstyles, ornaments, masks, decorations and mutilations*".

The *isidwaba* or skirt is central to female gender identity among the Zulu. It is a distinctive leather kilt worn around the waist, which plays a central role in marking thresholds and transitions in a Zulu woman's life. An *iqhikiza*, or young woman who is ready to fall in love, wears a very short *isidwaba* made from the hide of a warthog or a goatskin. This is worn beneath her loin dress as a sign of respect to her prospective partner's family, although this is often replaced by a short towel today. As a woman progresses to *inkehli* status (an engaged woman who is about to marry), the *isidwaba* extends to knee-length and is stitched together to create pleats that hold the skirt

firmly in place, even in strong wind or when walking fast. The pleated *isidwaba* is the most distinctive element of a married woman's traditional dress and is fashioned by a specialist who meticulously rubs it with fat, blackens it with charcoal, and perfumes it with powder made from pleasant-smelling tree branches and leaves. This blackened goatskin or ox-hide skirt is worn beneath various loin dresses and aprons throughout the different stages in a woman's life. The *isidwaba* remains largely unchanged throughout all the different stages from young womanhood through to marriage and into old age. It serves as a constant marker of feminine identity and respectability in Zulu culture. The *isidwaba* is usually offered as a gift by the father of the bride-to-be, and she wears it on her wedding day. The Zulu believe that it also plays a critical role that affords the wearer ancestral protection from her newfound ancestors (Nkumane, 2001).



Figure 3: Isidwaba – Zulu marriage skirt for women: Phansi Museum Eshowe
(Google Arts and Culture, n.d.)

It is the re-interpretation of this essentially gendered item of female adornment in *Shaka iLembe* that forms the basis of our interest in gender transgression in historical film, as we outline below.

Costume, Gender, and Power in *Shaka iLembe*

Reid (2018) observed that the ideological manipulation of representations is an old practice. In her words:

"Representations... have always been imbued and impregnated with rich ideological meanings and utilised as the disseminators of ideologies of all kinds... a detailed deconstruction of a representation can be examined for its ideological content, giving us insight into not only the people who made it, but also the people who received it." (Reid, 2018, p. 206)

As filmic representation, Sheli Masondo's approach to the *isidwaba* in *Shaka iLembe* demonstrates a deep commitment to historical authenticity while using the garment as a visual language for the re-interpretation of gender, status, and power in historical film. Masondo combines three key components of isiZulu costume, namely, the *isidwaba*, the *ibheshu*, and the *isinene*. The *ibheshu* and the *isinene* are traditional Zulu garments worn by men as *imvunulo* (traditional attire) during ceremonies, weddings, and other traditional gatherings. The two garments are crafted from animal hides such as calfskin, cowhide, and springbok hide, and they are worn in combination as a

complete traditional Zulu outfit. The *ibheshu* is a rear-side apron that hangs from the waist to cover the buttocks. Young men typically wear knee-length versions of the *ibheshu*, while older men use longer, ankle-length styles. The *isinene* is worn in front as an apron to cover the groin. It consists of several strips of hide tied around the waist. The two garments hold deep cultural significance, symbolising Zulu heritage and identity. They are commonly worn by grooms during *umabo* (traditional wedding) ceremonies. Historically, the *ibheshu* also served as an indicator of a man's status or his rank in battle. These garments are often complemented by other traditional accessories, including the *imbatha* (neck skin), *amashoba* (tail bands worn on the arms and legs), and *umqhele* (headband). When worn together, these items complete the ceremonial dress that connects contemporary Zulu men to their ancestral traditions (Shamase, 2014). A published interview with Sheli Masondo titled "Threads of Majesty: Unveiling the Artistry of Costume Design for *Shaka iLembe*" reveals how Masondo manipulates and uses costume design to articulate gender dynamics and power relations within the filmic narrative (FAME Week Africa, 2023). Her design choices demonstrate how costume became a visual expression of female agency and gender transgression.

Table 1: List of costume items that transgress normative femininity in the costume of Mkabayi in *Shaka iLembe*

Masondo's costume for Mkabayi in <i>Shaka iLembe</i>	
The costume is a deliberate departure from conventional female regalia. As a figure who commanded military campaigns and governed strategic affairs during the reign of Shaka, Mkabayi occupied a position that transcended ordinary womanhood, as reflected in her costume. The costume concept draws from the visual language of royalty and military authority, signalling that this is a woman who led, not merely accompanied. Each element carries layered meaning, collectively constructing a figure of sovereign femininity that defies easy categorisation.	
	Knitted hair resembling isicholo
	Ubuhlalu – Beaded crown
	Uphaphe - Zulu Royal Feather
	Amacici - earrings
	Royal Ingwe neckpiece
	Ibhayi la mahlombe – Shawl or cloak
	Ibhayi le sfuba/ibele – Shawl or cloak
	Iwisa - Knobkerrie
	Isinene (Front part of ibeshu)
	Isidwaba skirt
	Ubuhlalu - Beading

Costume element	Zulu term	Significance in Mkabayi's costume
Knitted hair resembling a crown	Isicholo	Styled to evoke the iconic flared crown worn by married Zulu women. It anchors Mkabayi within traditional Zulu womanhood as it simultaneously elevates her beyond it.
Beaded crown	Ubuhlalu	Intricate headwork functions as a complex system of signification communicating social standing, identity, and fidelity to ancestral tradition.
Royal feather	Uphapha	Red feathers from the purple-crested turaco, reserved exclusively for royalty and high-ranking individuals, situate Mkabayi at the apex of the Zulu state.
Beaded necklace with leopard skin	Ubuhlalu be Ingwe	Incorporating leopard skin, claws, or teeth, the <i>ingwe</i> is a totem of nobility and moral authority. To wear it is to publicly denote sovereignty.
Earrings	Amacici	Extends Mkabayi's authority into the spiritual realm, signifying an enduring relationship with the ancestors (<i>amadlozi</i>), affirming her power as ancestrally sanctioned.
Shoulder cloak	Ibhayi la mahlombe	Traditionally worn as feminine decorum and modesty. When draped across Mkabayi's shoulders, it symbolises dignity and the mantle of command.
Bust shawl	Ibhayi le sfuba/ibele	Traditionally worn as feminine decorum and modesty. When draped around Mkabayi's bust, it symbolises dignity and self-respect.
Front apron	Isinene	Conventionally a man's garment, its deliberate placement on Mkabayi's body enacts the gender transgression central to this paper's argument.
Knobkerrie	Iwisa	A weapon of warfare rather than ceremony. Its presence asserts military identity and physical authority.
Leather skirt	Isidwaba	Ordinarily signals betrothal or marriage. Reclaimed here by Masondo as a statement of dignity, seniority, and royal belonging.
Ankle beadwork	Ubuhlalu	Rounded beads communicating fertility, accumulated wealth, and the maturity of womanhood, affirming Mkabayi as a woman of substance and authority.

Judith Butler's foundational concept of gender performativity, which states that gender is not fixed but rather socially constructed and constituted through "*the stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, 1990, p. 33), is central to the discussion. For Butler, gender is not something one "is" but something one "does". It is performed in response to social expectations and does not emerge from an inner essence. Masondo's design choices for Mkabayi, as listed in Table 1 above, are not merely decorative. They are a deliberately performed transgressive femininity that destabilises traditional patriarchy and colonial binaries. This aligns with Grieve's (2021) argument that clothing can function as an assertion of identity in ways that unsettle colonialist hierarchies. It also aligns with Bruzzi's (1997) seminal work in costume studies, where he positions cinematic clothing not as a passive accessory but as an active system through which gender, power, and cultural identity are contested and constructed.

Masondo's reimagination of the *isidwaba* functions as a visual site of gender negotiation, asserting female authority in a historical narrative that has often rendered women as peripheral.

In a context where Black African women have not assumed a prominent role in filmmaking in ways that raise questions about who controls authentic representation in African cinema, Masondo's design is highly significant (Cham, 2004; Tcheuyap, 2014). Masondo's work intervenes in this space by creating a visual image of Mkabayi that refuses homogenised or Westernised representations. Masondo participates in what Barnabas and Jansen van Vuuren (2020) described as the use of historical film to reposition women as a symbol of nation and heritage. This resonates with an understanding of cinematic visual culture that says the image is never ideologically neutral. Rather, it is, as Rosenstone (2002) argued, always a particular kind of historical telling. Our analysis of Masondo's costume for Mkabayi thus functions simultaneously as gender theory made visible and as a contribution to costume studies in African cinema.

To create the costume for *Shaka iLembe*, Masondo embarked on a meticulous research process, traveling to Zululand in search of women who still practise traditional beadwork. She also visited local museums to photograph historical patterns and worked with elderly craftspeople who preserve traditional techniques in working with animal fur and feathers. In the interview, Masondo reveals how traditional Zulu attire was constructed with painstaking accuracy. Masondo describes how the film's beadwork was created "one bead at a time" in specific patterns that matched the original Zulu aesthetic of the 19th century. Masondo collaborated with Hlonipha Mokoena, a renowned Zulu cultural archivist, to ensure that the costume designs stayed on "historically valid grounds" even as they avoided stereotyped "tribal" representations. The designs created what Mokoena termed "minimalist opulence" or a sophisticated African aesthetic that showcases complexity through carefully selected detail. Therefore, Sheli Masondo used the *isidwaba* to create visual imagery that audiences could understand intuitively.

We argue that the television series *Shaka iLembe* uses costume design to frame Mkabayi as a "Pan-African shero" whose story displays elements of power and resilience within a historically patriarchal context. In coming up with the costume design in *Shaka iLembe*, Masondo makes a significant revelation, which we believe afforded her the licence to reimagine Mkabayi's costume for the series. Masondo indicates that there is no direct reference to what the historical character Mkabayi looked like. Therefore, a unilateral decision was made regarding how Mkabayi would eventually look. In our argument, this absence-as-presence enabled the creation of a gender-transgressive sartorial identity, which could illuminate how powerful women like Mkabayi could be resuscitated from systematic historical erasure into contemporary visual archives. In other words, the "representational void" that existed prior to the television series paradoxically granted a contemporary designer interpretive freedom to create a recuperated and gender-liberatory image of a female historical character. This is achieved through Sheli Masondo's deliberate decision to dress Mkabayi in

ibheshu, which is traditionally a male item of dress, together with a cloak made from cowhide sporting “real” cow horns. This represents a radical act of costuming that visualises gender transgression through sartorial coding. The *ibheshu*, with which Masondo dresses Mkabayi, transforms an item of male military regalia into a symbol of female political authority in ways that suggest that the power and authority that was wielded by Mkabayi during her reign required her to expropriate masculine symbols on her own terms, even as she maintained her primary identity as a woman by wearing the *isidwaba*. Therefore, Sheli Masondo positions Mkabayi’s costume design not simply as historical reconstruction but rather as creative historiography, producing a new visual archive that recuperates erased powerful women by imagining how their power might have been expressed through material culture. Masondo’s design acknowledges that all representations of historical women like Mkabayi are necessarily interpretive, even as it suggests that contemporary feminist reimaginings can be more “authentic” than traditional patriarchal archives, which originally erased the agency of powerful historical women.

Our characterisation of the gender-transgressive element in Mkabayi’s costume design in *Shaka iLembe* is corroborated by numerous posts on contemporary social media platforms. Masondo’s costume design for Mkabayi has inspired animated debates on TikTok where future costume designers are encouraged to “retell the story of Shaka Zulu with new information and a fresh perspective”. This demonstrates how costume design can function as a historical feminist intervention to recreate cultural memory in ways that challenge colonialist and traditional patriarchal erasure. This is not least because, as a traditional item of costume, the *isidwaba* is worn exclusively by married women. Therefore, a reimagination of this garment in ways that transgress gender norms is a powerful statement about female agency, such as found in *Shaka iLembe*. Sheli Masondo explains how her design of the *isidwaba* in *Shaka iLembe* by using smaller and multiple panels is a significant departure from the style of the 18th century, when larger panels were used. Viewed metaphorically, the use of smaller and multiple panels – unlike the larger and fewer panels of the past – demonstrates how the *isidwaba* is adapted in ways that maintain its essential identity even as it is re-interpreted. This is comparable to how women’s roles have evolved within patriarchal structures while retaining their basic cultural significance. Furthermore, Masondo’s deeply emotional and spiritual connection in her recreation of the *isidwaba* in *Shaka iLembe* transforms costume design into an act of ancestral communion and feminist reclamation. This is considering Mkabayi’s historical role as a powerful woman who navigated and transgressed the gender norms of her time to lead the Zulu nation. Therefore, the *isidwaba* that she wears in *Shaka iLembe* is crafted with a peculiar intentionality and skill to become not a symbol of female domestic confinement but rather evidence of female intellect and authority.

Meanwhile, the gender-transgressive dimension that is showcased through costume in *Shaka iLembe* is itself exhibited in Sheli Masondo’s very own sartorial presentation in the interview titled “Threads of Majesty: Unveiling the Artistry of Costume Design for *Shaka iLembe*” (FAME Week Africa, 2023). During the interview, she wore the *imbata*, a costume piece made from leopard skin. The *imbata* is exclusively worn by

members of the Zulu royal family. Only the king and his wives can wear the leopard skin. By donning this exclusive item of dress, we believe Sheli Masondo transgresses certain cultural expectations in ways that she also inflects in her costume designs for *Shaka iLembe*. Her personal appearance in the video interview introduces interesting questions about gender, power, and sartorial transgression. On the other hand, the fact that both king and queen consort in Zulu culture share access to that exclusive garment suggests a visual language of power that transcends simple gender binaries in ways that position royal women as co-bearers of power rather than being the mere surrogates of male authority. If Mkabayi, who was a powerful woman in Zulu history, wore or modified the *isidwaba* and other royal garments in ways that transgressed conventional gender expectations, Masondo's meticulous reconstruction of these garments makes these transgressions visually available to contemporary audiences. In this way, the *isidwaba* emerges not simply as an item of female dress but as a sophisticated sartorial sign through which power, status, and female agency are negotiated to assert authority in spaces typically reserved for men.

Masondo's detailed account of her apprenticeship with elderly women at Nongoma in Kwa-Zulu Natal reveals the *isidwaba* as more than just material culture. It functions as a gendered practice and a system of knowledge transmission that is held and perpetuated exclusively by women and on their own terms, as we see through its re-interpretation in *Shaka iLembe*. Masondo's interview illuminates how the *isidwaba* operates within a specialised economy of female expertise where knowledge is learned "tacitly" in homesteads rather than through formal instruction. This gendered knowledge system is crucial for understanding how figures like Mkabayi wielded power. Furthermore, Masondo's revelation that the *isidwaba* cannot be processed in tanneries but must be home-crafted, with fat "scraped" rather than fully removed to maintain suppleness, demonstrates how women's domestic labour produced technically sophisticated garments that required intimate material knowledge unavailable to men or to industrial processes. When Masondo states that she had to "bring all of that skill back to our studios" and "build a relationship [with producers] and get them to trust you enough to sit with them and take you through the process" (S. Masondo, personal communication, May 5, 2025), she acknowledges that this knowledge belongs to women and cannot be extracted without their consent, a form of knowledge control that grants women power even within patriarchal structures.

Masondo's interpretation of Mkabayi's character emphasises boldness and fierceness, qualities that threatened patriarchal order precisely because they emanated from a woman's body. As Masondo states, the costume needed to communicate Mkabayi's exceptionalism and her refusal to be contained by conventional female roles. The addition of *ibeshu*, a garment associated with warriors and hunters, visually codes Mkabayi's participation and control in a traditionally masculine sphere. This approach resonates with Salo's (2018) analysis of how African women leaders historically deployed dress as political messaging. Dress functioned as armour, intimidation, and the assertion of authority.

By dressing Mkabayi with the *ibeshu*, which is traditionally meant for males, Masondo transforms Mkabayi's body into a warrior's body, signalling her strategic military mind and willingness to engage in brutal political manoeuvring. Mulvey's (1975) concept of the *male gaze*, where women exist as objects of masculine visual pleasure, is disrupted by Mkabayi's costume. The *ibeshu* functions as a visual disruption, interrupting expectations of feminine presentation. Viewers cannot consume Mkabayi's image through conventional frameworks of feminine beauty and sexuality. Instead, the costume demands recognition of her not just as a woman but as a political agent and a strategic thinker. This aligns with Hooks' (1992) *oppositional gaze*, where Black women refuse objectification by asserting their subjectivity through self-presentation. Masondo's costume design gives Mkabayi an oppositional gaze that resists patriarchal containment.

Significantly, the production of Mkabayi's gender-transgressive costume required collaboration across gendered artisan specialisations. As Masondo notes: "*the mama that does the isidwaba is not the same mama that does the isinene. There is a man that does the isinene. There is a different man that does idlogolo*" (S. Masondo, personal communication, May 5, 2025). This gendered division of craft labour creates an ironic parallel: to dress Mkabayi in gender-transgressive costume required transgressing artisan boundaries, bringing male and female craftspeople into collaborative production but on terms circumscribed by the female designer. The costume itself became a product of gendered negotiation, created through the combined knowledge of men and women working beyond their traditional specialisations.

Working without visual evidence of Mkabayi's actual appearance, Masondo engaged in what can be termed feminist historical reconstruction, imagining how a woman of Mkabayi's power and ambition might have dressed herself. This speculative process draws on Trouillot's (1995) concept of "silences in history", where marginalised figures must be reconstructed from fragmentary evidence and informed imagination. Masondo's approach involved "*tracking back to the late 18th century*" by examining 19th-century design and "*dissecting it and pulling back on the design*" (S. Masondo, personal communication, May 5, 2025). We view this archaeological methodology as a form of feminist practice that was applied to the reconstruction of the appearance of a historically powerful woman. This aligns with the definition of representation as the practice of making something appear true, whether it is true or not, so much so that representation can make truth out of something that is not true at all (Summers, 1996, as cited in Reid, 2018).

Whereas the "multi-layered consultative process" involving producers, creative directors, cultural advisors, and the South African Film and Publication Board (SAFPB, 2019) to achieve cultural authenticity implies institutional gatekeeping, the fact that Mkabayi's transgressive gender presentation design survived this scrutiny suggests shifting cultural attitudes towards women's power and media representation. Incidentally, this institutional oversight also recalls the question raised by Spivak (1988) when she asks: "Who speaks for whom?" Male cultural advisors

reviewing a female character's gender-transgressive costume may have reproduced patriarchal authority under the guise of cultural preservation.

Masondo's costume design establishes a visual precedent for representing powerful African women beyond limiting binaries of submissive femininity, on the one hand, and masculine authority, on the other. The combination of *isidwaba-ibheshu* creates a sartorial category that is unapologetically feminine as it is strategically masculine in ways that contribute to a broader decolonial feminist project of recovering African women's historical agency (Tamale, 2020) using the filmic medium. We believe Masondo's designs provide future costume designers and cultural historians with a reference point to reimagine powerful Zulu women in ways that honour cultural authenticity even as they resist the constraints of patriarchy. We also view Mkabayi's *isidwaba* as constitutive of what Taylor (2003) referred to as "repertoire", meaning an embodied cultural memory that is conjured to life through performed material culture rather than written archives. When media representation challenges and reimagines identities through performance, performance evolves into a way of comprehending how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world. In this way, the presentation of performance as a way of creation and being as opposed to the long-held notion of performance as entertainment brings forth a movement that articulates the phenomenon of performance in its multiple manifestations (Madison & Hamera, 2006). Therefore, each viewing of *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024) transmits knowledge about gendered power relations, the erased authority of historical women, as well as limitless possibilities for sartorial gender transgression within African cultural frameworks.

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented and analysed costume design in a recent popular television series titled *Shaka iLembe* that premiered in South Africa in 2024. *Shaka iLembe* is one of several different series based on the life and times of the legendary King Shaka Zulu, the founder of the Zulu nation. We have focused on the series' costume designer Sheli Masondo's disruption of normative gender identities in traditional Zulu attire to foreground gendered female agency for the consumption of a contemporary television audience. We have presented and analysed Masondo's designs, arguing that Masondo reconstructs the character of Mkabayi kaJama in the television series by combining *isidwaba* (a traditional female leather skirt) with *ibheshu* (a traditional male back apron) to create a sartorial language that articulates Mkabayi's political power and military authority, as it presents a transgressive femininity.

Because of the fascinating history of historical film in South Africa, we placed and approached our analysis within the broader framework of the salient nature and scope of South African film history, especially insofar as it relates to pejorative portrayals of the Zulu nation, which we believe *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024) seeks to circumvent. Therefore, we contextualised the character of Mkabayi as she appears in the series in terms of the role that she played in the history of the Zulu nation. We presented the portrayal of Mkabayi in *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024) as an example of a transgressive femininity through media representation that challenges essentialist

notions of gender in traditional African contexts, even as it remains rooted in authentic practices in traditional Zulu material culture. Masondo's costume design can be viewed as a visual precedent for representing powerful African women from the present and the past in ways that go beyond the traditionally limiting binaries of submissive femininity, on the one hand, and masculine authority, on the other. In line with discourses on the seemingly ambiguous relationship between representation and the real, we view this deliberately transgressive representation of Mkabayi through costume design as an example of representation as a carrier of ideology (Reid, 2018). Therefore, the combination of *isidwaba* and *ibheshu* in *Shaka iLembe* creates a sartorial category that is unapologetically feminine as it is strategically masculine in ways that contribute to a broader feminist project to recover African women's historical agency. This is achieved using the filmic medium.

Finally, the paper has argued that Masondo's approach represents an interesting case of costume as both historical reconstruction and feminist intervention. It positioned dress as a site where gender, power, and cultural authenticity are negotiated within modern cultural practice, especially when this takes place in popular filmic media such as the recent television series *Shaka iLembe* (Gibson et al., 2024).

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