

How Sho Madjozi brought traditional Tsonga *xibelani* into 2020

By  Leigh Andrews

27 Feb 2020

In a session that explained how she has changed the SA fashion and music game alike, proudly Tsonga performer Sho Madjozi took to the Design indaba stage as the first official speaker of the 25th edition of the conference, with a strong focus on the history and future of *xibelani* that proved why she's the ultimate inspiration.



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What a two punch combo to kick off the 25th @designindaba! Founder @ravinaidooatlarge and the CEO of South African Tourism open The Department of Audacious Projects – a call for big, creative ideas to bring change to SA through tourism (because #DesignIndaba needs to be more than “a whinge over a cappuccino”) and Sho Madjozi takes the stage with her history of *xibelani* (traditional dress), a fashion show, music and dance! Are you here this year? Tell us what you think... #shomadjozi #DI2020 #25yearsofDI

A post shared by [Computer Arts](#) (@computerartsmag) on Feb 26, 2020 at 1:51am PST

shoulders bopping and hips swinging in her now-iconic *xibelani*, the audience was captivated, laughing along from her ‘this is my personal photo album history of *xibelani* through the ages’ start to John Cena ‘chi chi chi’ end.



Shereesa Moodley 3 Oct 2019



So much so that MC Lebo Mashile's introduction pronounced Madjozi as "storyteller, important thinker of her generation and fantastic person overall. In fact, I'm not sure she's a person; she's a phenomenon!"

Roots: From hair to culture

There's truth to this statement, as Madjozi's responsible for the rainbow of purple, yellow and blue braids favoured by South African school girls on their school break.

But Madjozi went beyond hair in her talk to speak of the roots of Tsonga culture, especially the *xibelani* skirts she's creating demand for, kicking off Design Indaba's silver jubilee celebration in an explosive way.



#DI2020: Silver jubilee shines with Department of Audacious Projects launch

Leigh Andrews 26 Feb 2020



She started off by showing the trailer of the 'History of Xibelani' video she's been working on for a while now:

Culture-rich movie moves

A work in progress, it's a fascinating glimpse at daily life that showcases the importance of colour and shape in the traditional skirts, and how they've been made from all manner of materials through the ages, from grass to maize-meal bags and the now-popular wool, though there wasn't always choice involved – it was often the only clothing item owned.

She showed a picture from the 1800s, where the item resembled a cloth tied around the waist with a rope – often without a top. This was referred to as 'clothes'.



#WomensMonth: The rise and rise of Sho Madjozi

Ruth Cooper 28 Aug 2019



Madjozi's reasoning for bringing the item to the forefront of culture is thus:

“ *If we only wear it on special occasions, who are we the rest of the time?* ”

Madjozi has succeeded in bringing this traditional item to the local and even global radar, and admits she's been answering the question of why she's wearing what she's wearing for a while now.



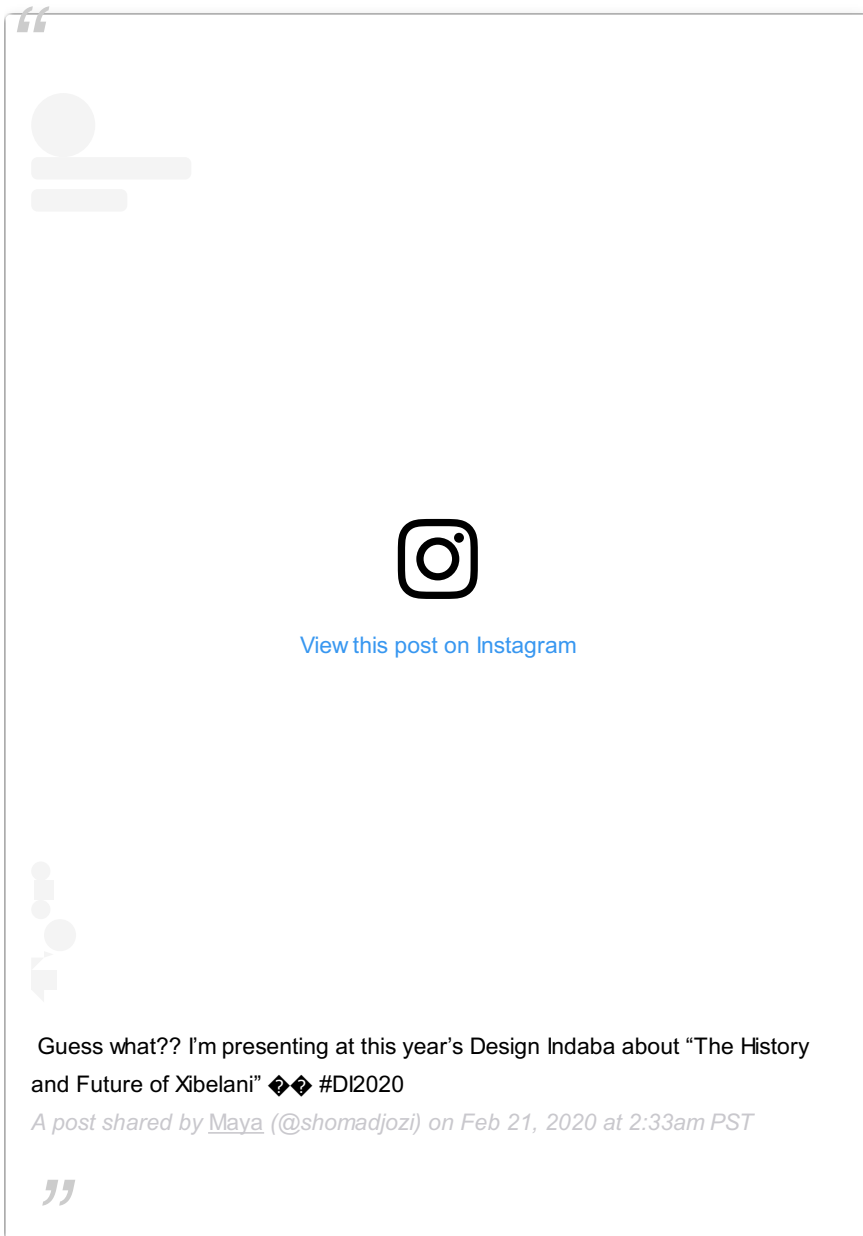
Sho Madjozi's 'John Cena' trends after hitting one million views on YouTube

Shereesa Moodley 23 Aug 2019



The first time she appeared in public as her Sho Madjozi persona she was wearing one, and she admits there was already a lot of hullabaloo at the time. But the *xibelani* is a way to accentuate the figure, which has been the way of female fashion forever.

What interests Madjozi in this regard is the public vs private nature of the garment, and what it means for women navigating patriarchy today.



the *xibelani*'s evolution through the years.

Hidden shapes, layered fashion

She also featured the *dovani*, usually only worn in the house as an undergarment to the *xibelani* to help create the shape. It's rare to find images of this as they are not worn in public.

Madjozi included a male 'ramp model' to show that drag was also quite normal in Tsonga culture.



The influence of drag

Brett Rogers 2 Jul 2019



Xibelani made of sacks could be quite bulky, but the form of *xibelani* that most serves as a status symbol is the dignified beaded *tinguvu*, around since the early 1900s and still seen as a symbol of wealth and status.

These are usually made from dark, woven cloth adorned with white beads that make them both heavy and expensive. A prized possession, these are gifted on wedding days or for initiation, as they are very time-consuming and expensive to make.

On being loud, taking up space and democracy

The wool *xibelani* are loud, taking up space and democracy as they emerged after the end of apartheid. These are lighter to wear, cheaper to make and the most iconic form of *xibelani* to Madjozi as this is the era she grew up in – some were so big they had to be carried on top of the car to the ceremony!



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From then, fashion moved from the wool *xibelani* to the one most recognised today, the *xilemba*. This is the *xibelani* of today.

Usually bought ready-made, these easily contain 10m of material, pleated together and needing to be unraveled when washed, “as no washing line is long enough”.

Xilemba are preferred for the street bash competitions popular in Johannesburg townships and a village version that moves around Limpopo.



An African thunderstorm¹

Ndeye Diagne, Kantar 8 Jan 2020



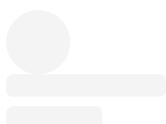
And this is the context in which Sho Madjozi emerges: A young person who has taken on this ancient clothing item and uses it in her art.

“ *It's not an African idea to cover up the body, but the *xilemba* says, 'I have the right to dress colourfully and lightly, without losing my tradition.'* ”

Past and present well-explained, Madjozi said “Culture has always evolved, to stay alive.” She envisions the future of the *xilemba* as part of a carnival festival, putting Limpopo on the map. We shouldn't aim to museum-ify traditional items: We should always be open to change, in keeping culture alive.

Madjozi ended her session with a live performance of ‘John Cena’, which had the early-morning crowd on its feet. “Chi chi chi, Sho Madjozi!”

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CHI! CHI! CHI! CHI! @shomadjozi's bringing her vibe to #DI2020, so book now to hear the #BET award-winning muso. Click on the link in our bio. Bring your friends and colleagues to witness one of South Africa's youngest and most influential artists take to the Design Indaba stage. #DesignIndaba #25yearsofDI #shomadjozi #limpopochampionsleague #rap #music #live #investinyourself

A post shared by Design Indaba (@designindaba) on Feb 21, 2020 at 2:44am PST

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ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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