



object type: Earplugs 95	acc no: KMS - 02 - 99 a
vernacular: iziqhaza/za/ ikhazaa	contact prints
sub-type:	
community: Zulu	
sub-group: All Msingal Shembe	location: Traditional Southern African Store
geographical location:	shelf: TS Cabinet; C06
date and place collected:	b/w: c/t: c/s:
date executed:	dimensions:
artist name, sex:	h: diam: 6,5cm
use:	w: mounted:
	d: 1,8cm
	medium: wood

purchase / donation / bequest: AAJCT

price paid:	physical description:
insurance value:	
authority:	
original collection no: 2144	
object type translation:	
catalogues:	

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vernacular: Izighazala   Ikhazaa	contact prints
sub-type:	
community: Zulu	
sub-group: All	location: [REDACTED]
geographical location: Msinga/Shembe	shelf: [REDACTED]
	b/w: c/t: c/s:
	dimensions:
date and place collected:	h: diam: 7 cm
	w: mounted:
date executed:	d: 1,7 cm
artist name, sex:	medium: wood
use:	

purchase / donation / bequest: AAJCT

price paid:	physical description:
insurance value:	
authority:	
original collection no: 2145	
object type translation:	
catalogues:	

JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY

EXHIBITIONS  
REGISTER

ARTIST:

ACCESSION NUMBER:

DATE	LOCATION
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JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY

PROVENANCE

ARTIST:

ACCESSION NUMBER:

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JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY

PROVENANCE

ARTIST:

ACCESSION NUMBER:

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# VUKASA

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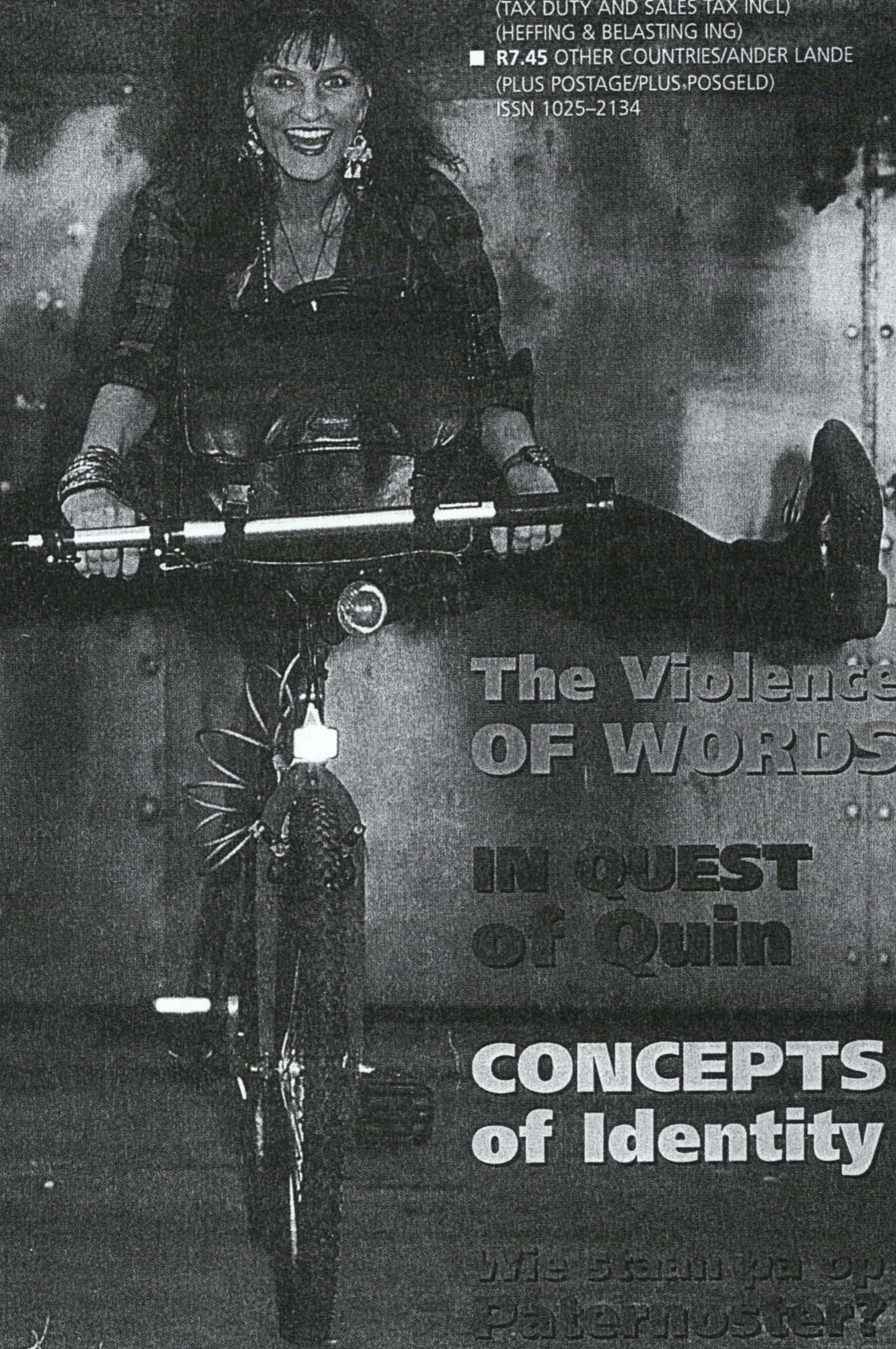
SOUL OF THE RAINBOW NATION  
SIEL VAN DIE REËNBOOGNASIE

VOL 1 NO 2 1995

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An earful -  
ISIQHAZA

Vier ons  
werklik  
KERSFEES?



The Violence  
OF WORDS

IN QUEST  
of Quin

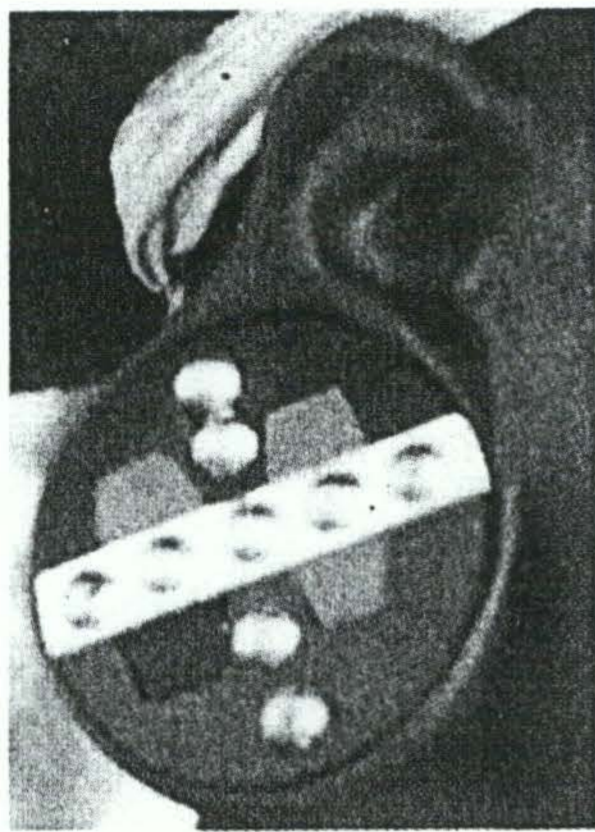
CONCEPTS  
of Identity

Wie staan pa op  
Paternoster?





## EXHIBITION



# AN EARFUL – ISIQHAZA

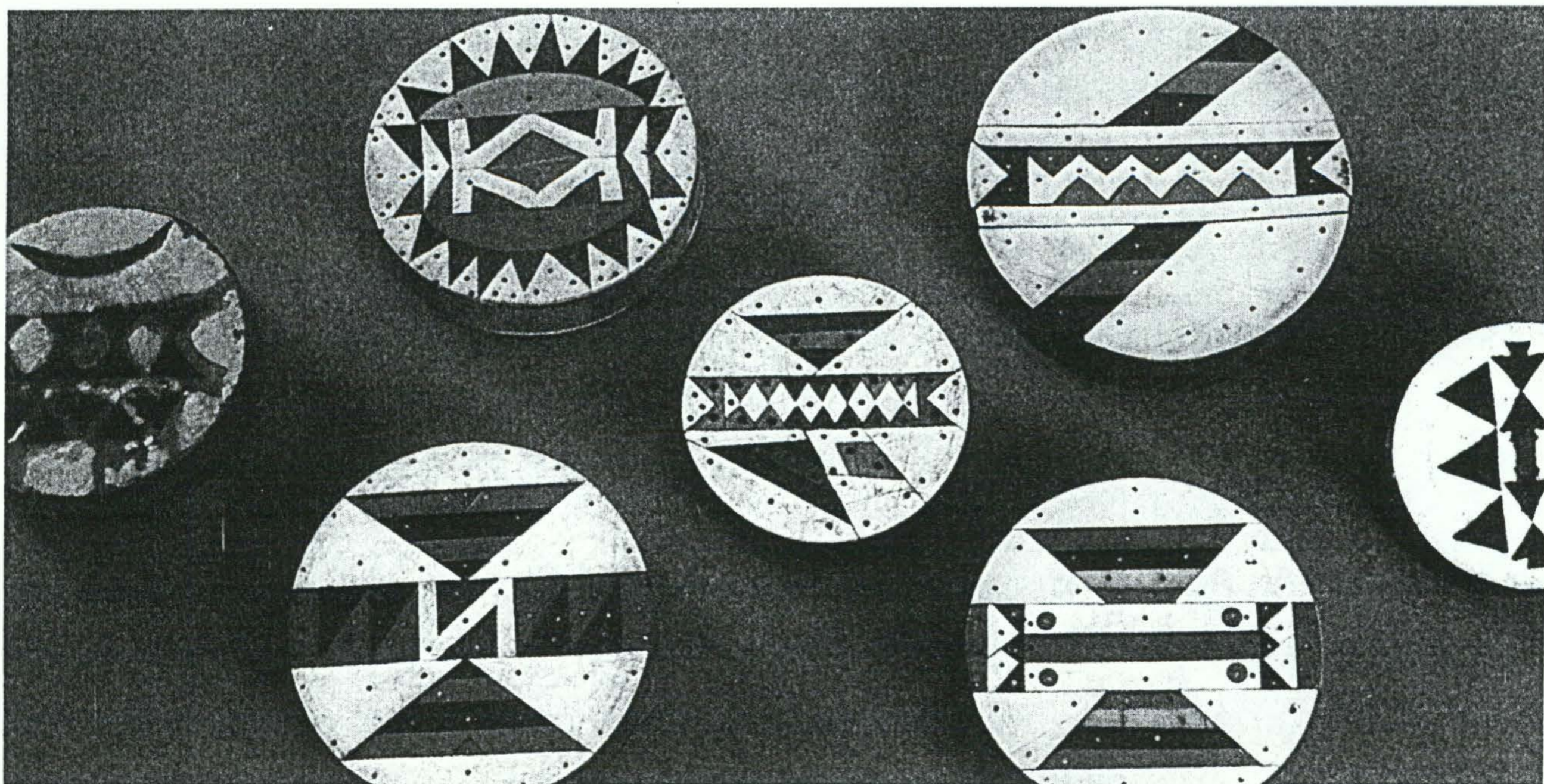
*Denise Louw*

The ritual of ear-piercing – or *qhumbuza* – marks the moment at which the Zulu child begins to ‘hear and understand’.

**W**hat is the easiest way to take art and culture to the nation? In a suitcase, of course! And that is precisely what Professor Alan Crump – Head of the Department of Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, and Committee Chairman of the Standard Bank National Arts Festival – aims to do.

The first of his ‘suitcase exhibitions’ was mounted – perhaps one should say ‘unpacked?’ – at the 1995 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in July, and it will in due course go on tour to other centres in South Africa and abroad. It comprises a collection of *isiqhaza*, or Zulu ear plugs.

Professor Crump says the term ‘ear plugs’ is frequently misunderstood, and should perhaps be changed



to 'ear lobe plugs'. For *isiqhaza* are the discs traditionally worn by Zulus in their pierced and stretched ear lobes.

The 'suitcase exhibition' attempts to provide a chronological survey of the development of the ear plugs – or rather, *isiqhaza*. For, as Crump says, 'it's probably best to use the vernacular term – which, incidentally, means "button"'.

Apparently *isiqhaza* have traditionally been made in specific areas of Kwazulu-Natal. These areas include Ulundi, and Msinga – the Tugela ferry region, which also has a rich bead-making heritage.

The practice of ear-piercing, or *qhumbuza*, was recorded by anthropologists at the turn of the century as a celebratory ritual that precedes puberty. The ritual marked the transition from childhood to adult life for both boys and girls, and was seen as symbolic of the moment at which the Zulu child begins to 'hear and understand'. And one of the myths associated with *isiqhaza*

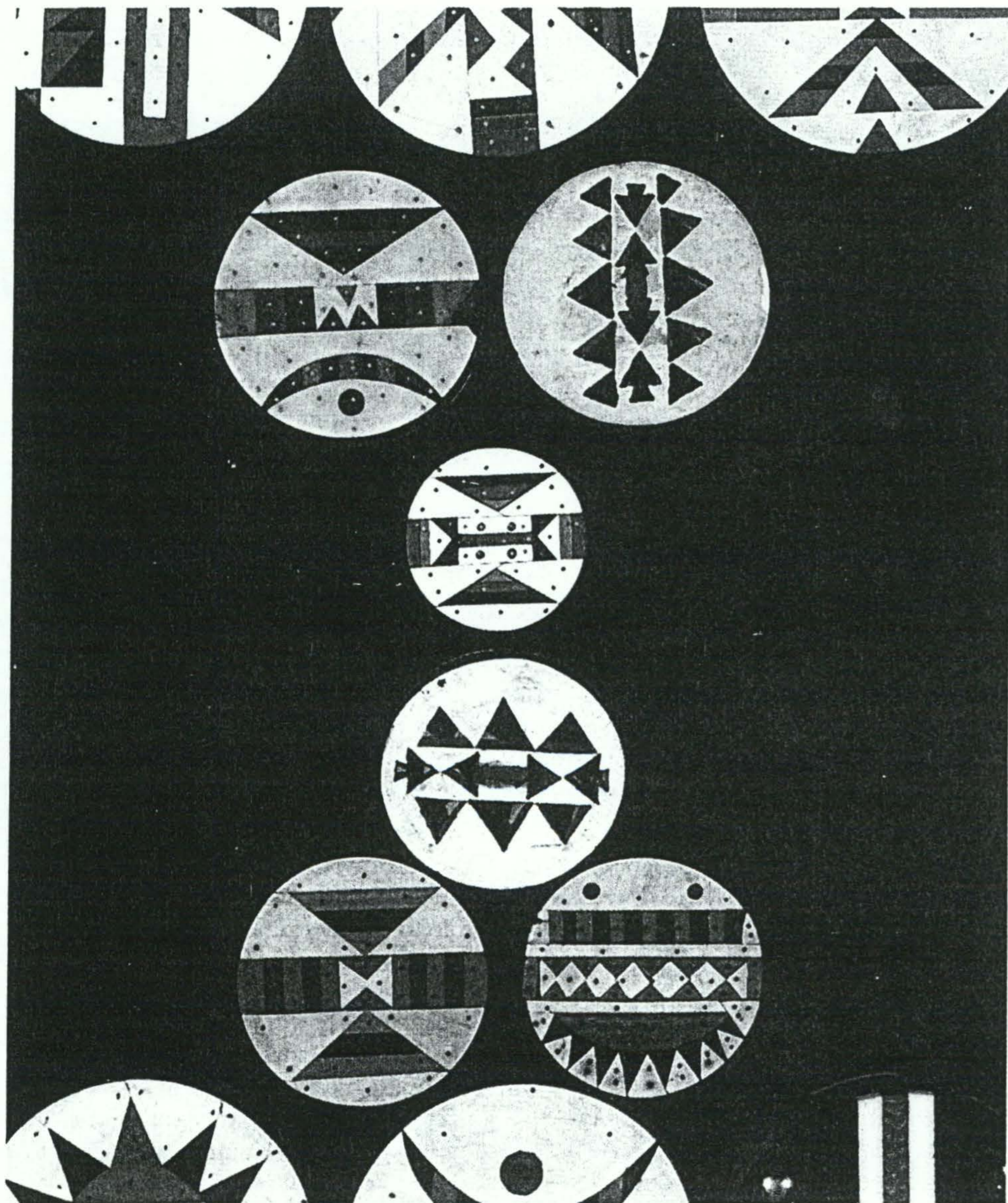
suggests that the opening up of the ear lobes permits the spirits, or the ancestors, to be heard more clearly.

Crump points out that the *isiqhaza* originally worn by young people post-puberty would thereafter be worn intermittently for special parties or ceremonial occasions throughout their lives. Karen Harber, Assistant Curator at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Gallery, has found that they may also act as 'a simple fashion statement, worn for fun, and for decorative purposes'.

*Qhumbuza* is apparently still practised in some Zulu communities. But the ceremony no longer carries the same imperative or the same degree of significance.

In *qhumbuza* the ear lobes of the pubescent young person were pierced with an awl, a bone needle, safety pins or thorns. The puncture was distended by the insertion of small pieces of reed. And the size of the inserted reed was gradually increased until the hole in the ear lobe was large enough for the ear plugs to be inserted.

Earplugs featured opposite and below from the Standard Bank Collection of African Art housed at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Photographer: Jean Brundrit.



Professor Crump says the 'suitcase exhibition' traces the development of *isiqhaza* 'from simple, circular, unadorned wooden discs through the stage where the craftsman starts carving holes into the disc, or adding decorative chevron designs and – in the 1920s – applying enamel paint.'

The next developmental stage represented in the exhibition introduces what are known as the 'classical' ear plugs. These are *isiqhaza* with 'polyethylene plastic cut very carefully into patterns. The pieces are pinned in place with gramophone needles.'

'At least, that is what we understand from information obtained from the Killie Campbell Museum in Durban,' Crump adds. 'But much research still needs to be done on *isiqhaza*.'

Over the years fashions in *isiqhaza* have, of course, changed. At the turn of the century the ear plugs consisted of circular, slightly conical buttons on a stem made of wood, horn, bone, or baked clay. Some men wore small snuff boxes,



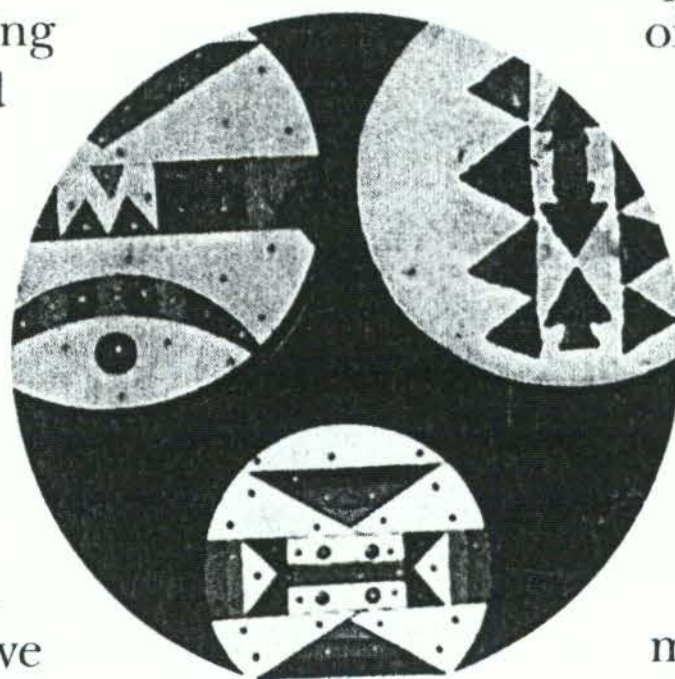
made from polished horn, in their ears. And some 20th century photographs show reed-like *isiqhaza*, beaded earrings, or the use of one ear plug only.

Where designs are carved into wooden *isiqhaza*, geometrical figures such as circles and triangles predominate, and sun or moon signs are popular. Interestingly enough, the rising-sun sign found on some *isiqhaza* is thought to have been derived from a similar sign which acted as the logo on a well-known brand of stoep-polish of the day (Sunrise Stoep Polish).

'African culture has through the centuries been able to absorb images from everyday life, and translate them into its own rich tradition,' Professor Crump observes. 'This phenomenon,' he adds, 'can also be seen in artefacts made from other materials – whether plastic, wire or beads.'

The availability of materials – ranging from paint to inlays of tiny coloured pieces carefully cut from bright toothbrush handles or combs – has to a large extent determined changes in style. But colours appear to be relatively standard: red, white, green, black, blue, and orange.

'These colours are seen in the tribal beadwork as well,' Crump points out. 'There appears to be a kind of decorative



identity associated with certain areas – the colours and shapes used in the decorations are often indicative of area, status, or tribal affiliation.'

Consequently *isiqhaza* are highly individual. Crump says that, although many are similar in some respects, he has never come across two sets of ear plugs that were identical. And this, of course, makes them fascinating items to collect.

'Many of the great ethnic art objects of 19th century South Africa are no longer in this country,' Crump laments. 'It is our duty either to try to retrieve some of them from abroad – which is difficult and expensive – or to encourage people in this country to start collecting.'

He acknowledges that *isiqhaza* are difficult to find, that they are becoming more expensive, and that prices are likely to escalate as a result of the 'suitcase exhibition'. Nevertheless, he feels that private collections may be quite small, and need not be prohibitively expensive.

Most of the artefacts in the *isiqhaza* 'suitcase exhibition' are from the Standard Bank African Art Collection, which Crump informs me 'is jointly owned by the Bank and the University of the Witwatersrand'.

Their African Art Collection has been in existence for some 20 years. Crump himself started the *isiqhaza* section of the Collection on behalf of the Standard Bank about 15 years ago.

The South African Museum in Cape Town, and the Johannesburg Art Gallery also have collections of Zulu ear plugs. And some interesting examples of the artefacts are in private collections.

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The chronologically most recent *isiqhaza* in the 'suitcase exhibition' are what Professor Crump describes as 'clip-ons'. Karen Harber has found that such modern 'clip-on' *isiqhaza* are sold by several traders at the Mai Mai market in Johannesburg.

Crump explains that 'the "clip-ons" consist of two discs joined together with rubber' (or leather). They can be worn or removed as desired, and obviate the necessity for permanently stretching the ear lobes. This offers a decided advantage at a time when, for political reasons, it may be deemed undesirable to parade tribal affiliations publicly.

'For various reasons, the use of *isiqhaza* is decreasing,' Professor Crump notes, 'particularly with the move to an urban environment, where traditions are lost. That is why,' he stresses, 'it's so important to bring these "suitcase exhibitions" to the people – to make them aware of, or to remind them of, what is passing.'

# VUKA SA

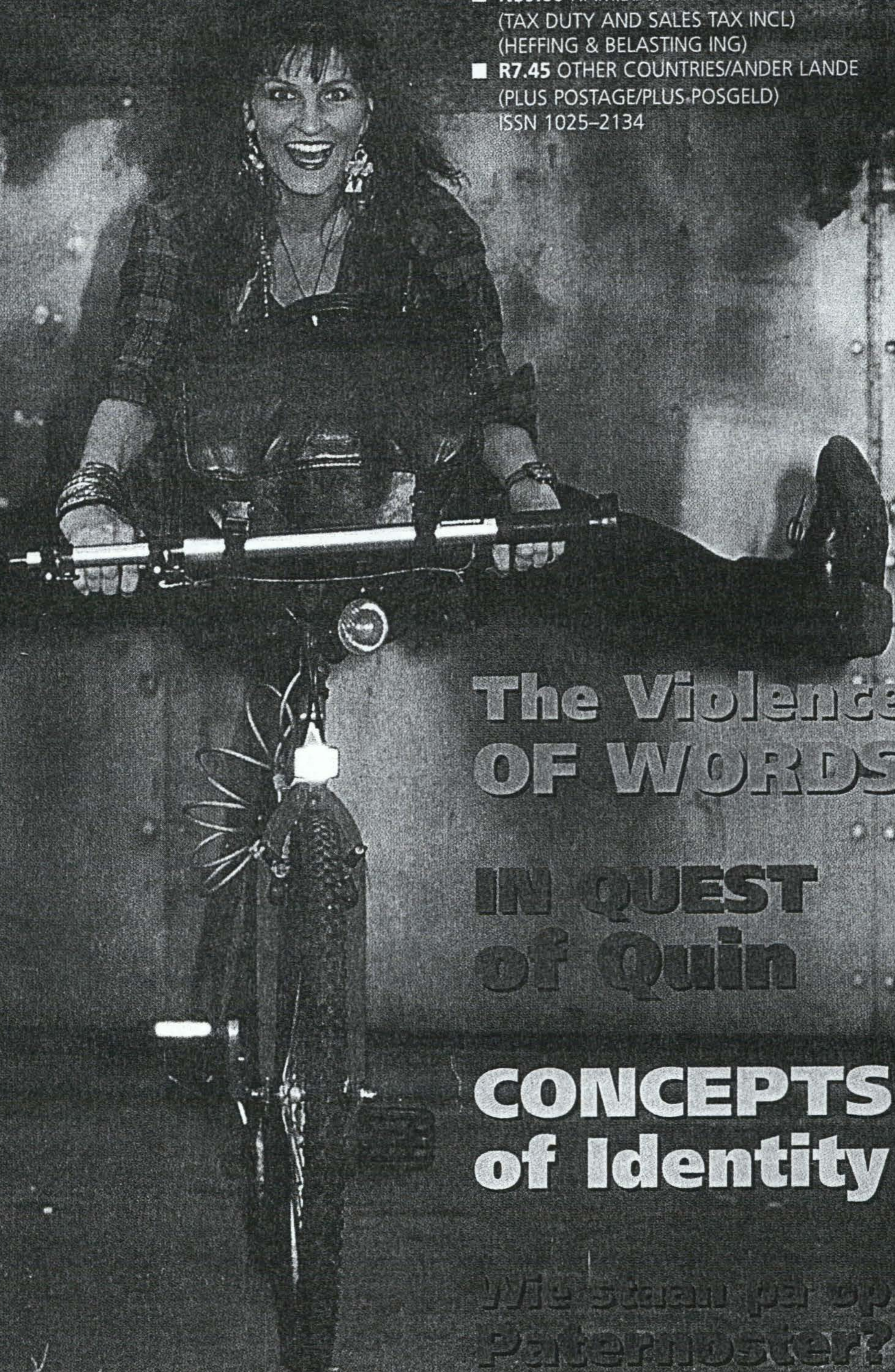
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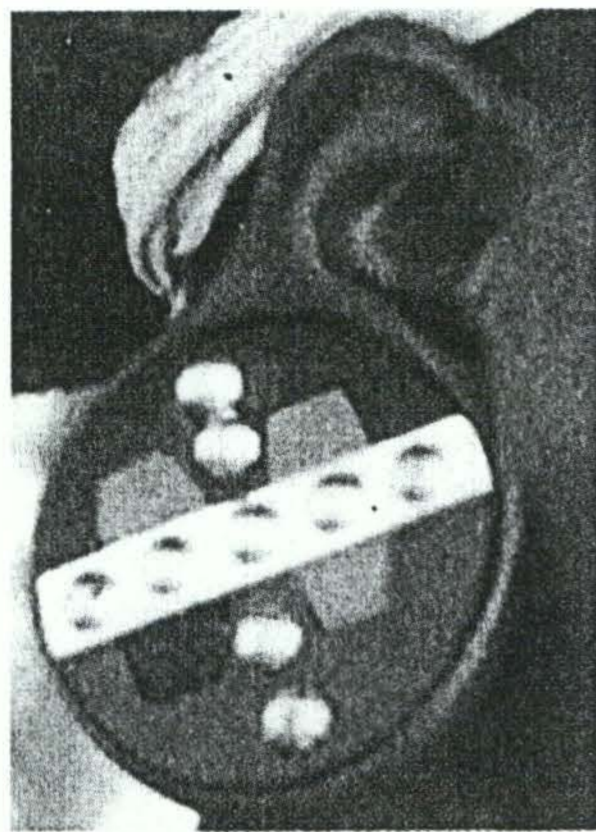
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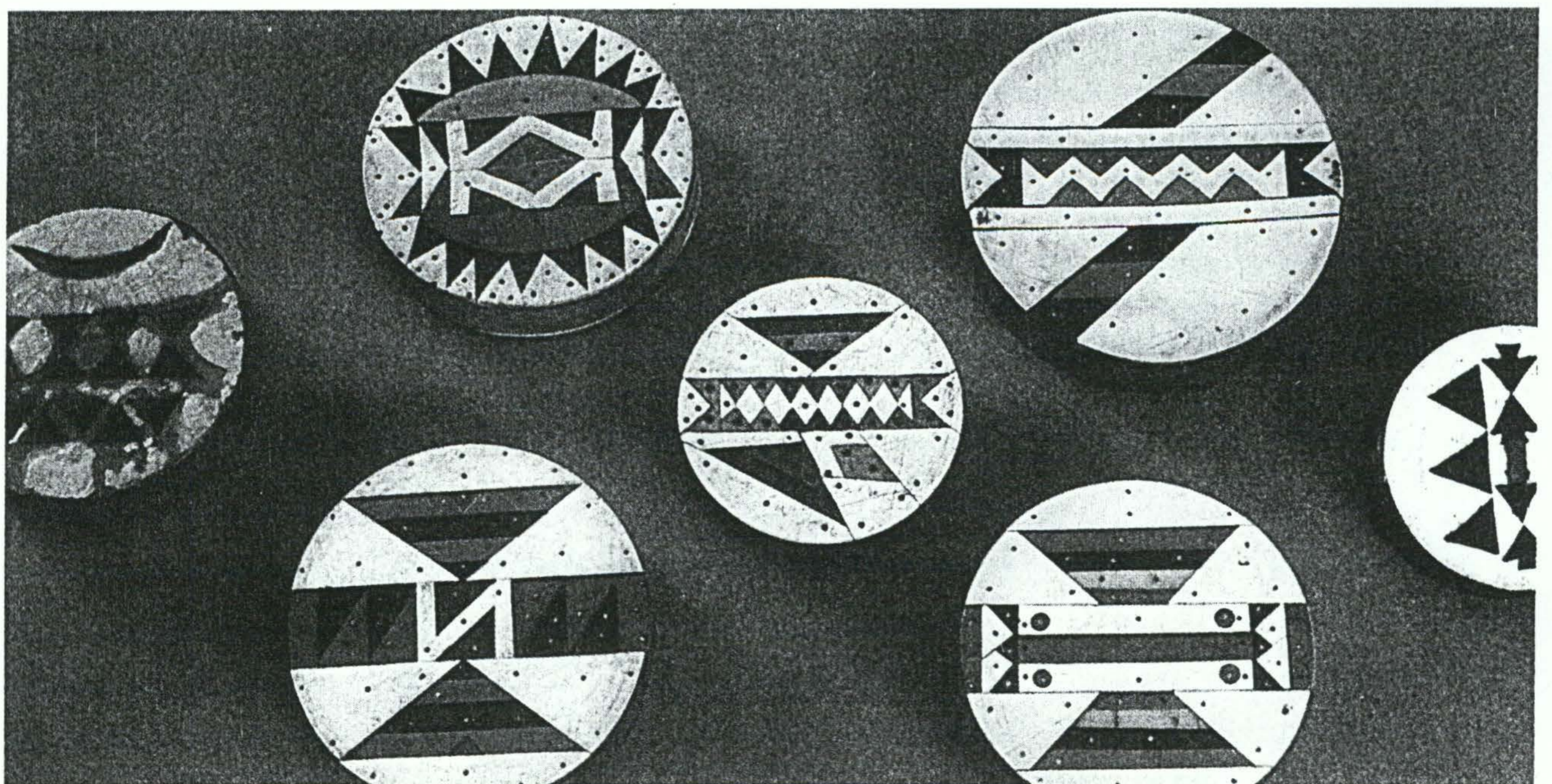
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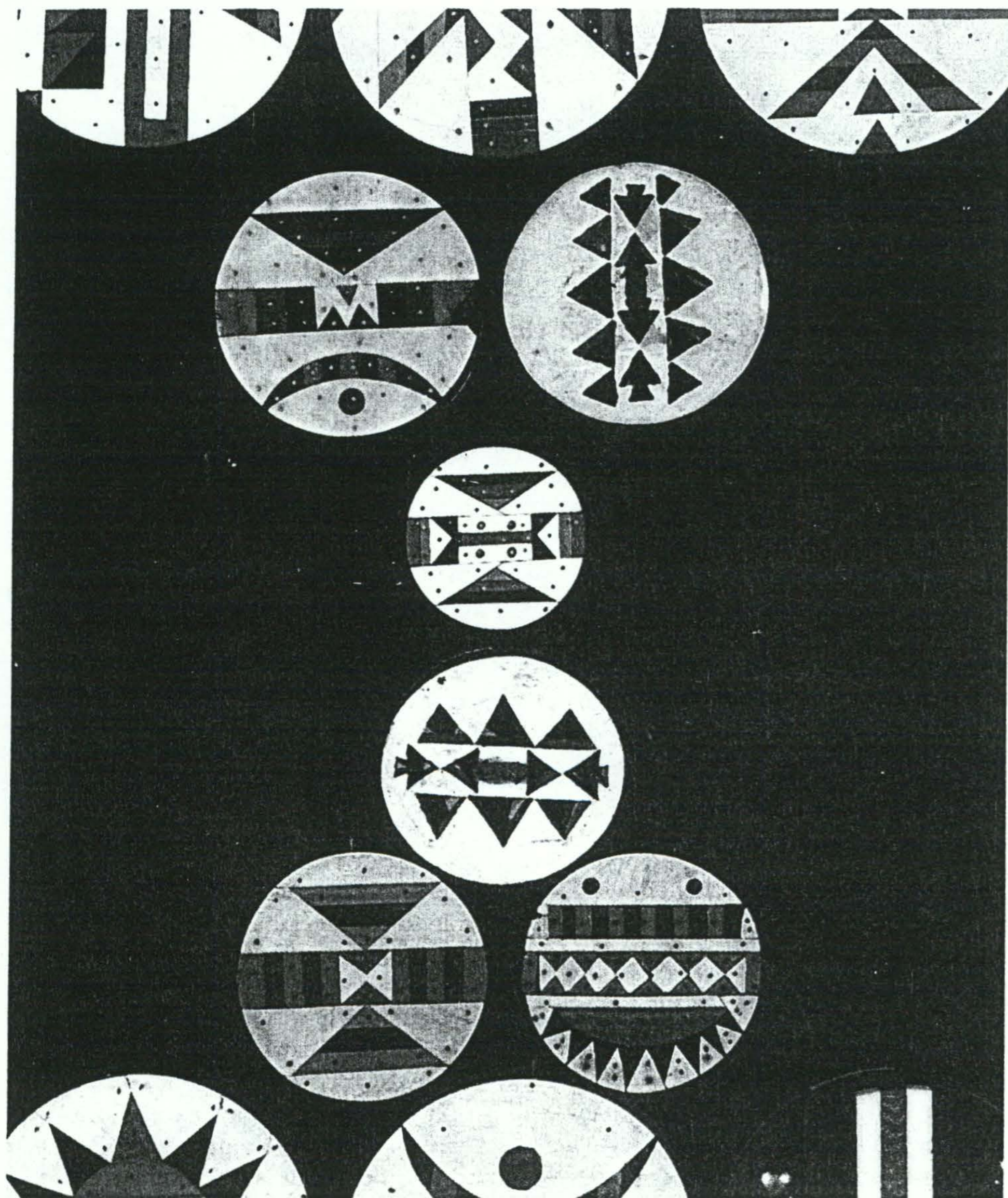
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