

POSITIVELY POSITIVE.

Monkeybiz Bead Artist Mamodise Modise on loving life, positivity, and monkey business in the new South Africa.



"Molo. Unjani?"

Hello. How are you?

It's Market Day at the Monkeybiz Bead Project and three women from Khayelitsha have just arrived at the Carrol Boyes Functional Art Building in Cape Town. As the mini-bus taxi that carried them for the forty-five minute drive from their homes in the township to the city centre pulls away in the grey winter drizzle, the women pause to look up at the large three-storey brick and stainless steel building. Glancing back at their heavy parcels, the three artists exchange knowing looks, and brace themselves for the six flights of stairs to the Monkeybiz headquarters on the top floor.



As they climb the stairs, the three artists pull behind them bulky bundles brimming over with brightly coloured beaded elephants, pigs, cattle, and dollies. The contents of these parcels represent the fruits of two weeks of intensive artistic labour gathered from a small community of artists, who form part of a much larger Monkeybiz bead artist network.

Not only are these three women deeply gifted artists, Mamodise Modise ("Mankosi" as she's known to all at Monkeybiz), Zukiswe Lamla, and Nolutshando Thwaku also share a knack for creative community development. Mankosi is a Monkeybiz veteran of sorts. Serving as an art educator and community leader, Mankosi facilitates regular bead art workshops in Khayelitsha, where she patiently instructs newcomers in the art of beading and continues to inspire fellow veteran bead artists with her enthusiasm and collection of witticisms. Twice a month, she visits the homes of nearly 35 women to collect artwork for Market Day, which she then transports to Cape Town.



Market Day at Monkeybiz brings Mankosi and other community arts leaders together, where they have an opportunity to share the news of the day. Stories of one artist's new brick house and a daughter's university plans

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contribute to a constant buzz of excitement in the office. At the end of the day, the artists will return to their homes, beads, cotton, and bank deposit slips in hand, where they will provide feedback and continued beadwork instruction to cultivate the artistic talent within their communities.

Since its founding in 2000, the Monkeybiz Bead Project, a non-profit, women's poverty alleviation initiative, has transformed these communities through an innovative and highly successful programme of economic development through the arts. Providing job skills and business training, beads, cotton, and a stable source of income for more than 450 artists from some of the most economically under-resourced areas around Cape Town, Monkeybiz embraces the spirit of *ubuntu* – sharing with one another in a common spirit of humanity – in the new South Africa.

"Molo. Molo. Unjaniwena!?" Mamodise Modise, out of breath, reaches the top of the stairs.

Hello. Hello!? How are all of you?

"Unjani?" she repeats, lugging behind her two large white and blue bags. A bright blue scarf and grey checked jacket cover her rail-thin frame.

"D....?," my voice trails off.

"Ndiphilele." Mankosi's mouth breaks into a toothy smile.

I am well.

"N-di-phi-le-le." Mankosi, ever patient and slightly amused at my linguistic ineptitude, emphasizes each syllable. Every other week we enjoy this routine, exchanging our respective greetings in broken English and broken Xhosa.

"In-Dee-fee-lee-lay?" I venture.

Mankosi and her companions chuckle at my Middle American-accented Xhosa as they unpack their bags.

Pink and green springboks (or "bokkies" as they are affectionately called), black and white checkered penguins, and short, tall, and fat dollies soon fill the large table in the Monkeybiz showroom. Elizabeth *continued*



Maarman, Monkeybiz bookkeeper-cum-beadwork appraiser, sits at one end of the table, carefully examining each artwork. Mankosi, Zukiswe, and Noluthando sit near Elizabeth, inspecting each artwork for hanging threads and bent legs before handing them to her. Monkeybiz pays each artist according to the merit of her work; this incentives-based payment system motivates continual improvement and innovation within the community of bead artists.

After the final doll is accounted for, the five of us breathe a sigh of relief before Sakumzi Makaula ("Saki"), the always-ebullient token male in an office full of women, runs in to tell us that the taxi driver has arrived. As the three artists collect their belongings, they meet the bright red taxi at the corner of Shortmarket and Rose streets.

The following day, Mankosi returns to the city centre to attend a counselling session at the Monkeybiz Wellness



K LOVE - 2005

Clinic. A bright mustard-coloured building with a spattering of red monkeys on its front houses the clinic and the Monkeybiz retail store, which are located in Rose Street within a short walk of the head office.

Before she makes her way to the Clinic, Mankosi stops in the office to meet briefly with me and Nondumiso Sjovu, Carrol Boyes Sales Assistant, who will serve as our translator for an interview.

KGL: If possible, could you talk a little bit about what your life was like before you got involved with Monkeybiz? What did you do for employment?

MM: Before I joined Monkeybiz, I was a child minder. But then people started asking me to make little beaded pins, and I did that. Soon I was discovered by Eunice [XXXX] because I could actually do beadwork. That's when I joined Monkeybiz. I...realised soon after that that my life changed dramatically. Barbara [Jackson, one of three Monkeybiz Directors] became my mentor - she became like a mom to me and I started helping other people to work with the beads. And, it was very amazing, and it changed my life.

KGL: Could you talk a little bit about how being part of the Monkeybiz community has been important to you?

MM: At the Wellness Clinic, we are disclosing about having HIV and how we reacted when we first found out that we have the virus. And we are also helping each other to be able to tell our immediate families about having the virus because many of the ladies are scared to talk about it. But then we are helping each other through it.

KGL: Can you talk a little bit about how being part of that [Wellness Clinic] community has helped you?

MM: Since joining the Wellness Clinic, I learned things that I was not aware of. For example, I knew that I had the virus and I didn't care. But not anymore. When I joined the Clinic, I got some important information about it and now I was even able to tell my children that I have the virus...The clinic has done a lot for me in terms of understanding how the virus works. And I know that I have to continue to be myself, do whatever I have to do, love the people, and love myself, and not be afraid.

KGL: To go on a different tangent..., can we talk a little bit more about your leadership in the community and how you've helped other people become involved in Monkeybiz?

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MM: When I started doing the beads with Monkeybiz, people asked questions about Monkeybiz. And I told them they needed to go to the Project Office, where they would be taught how to do the beads if they didn't know. And people went there, and when they got there, they found that the same person that was going to be the trainer was me. And I taught them how to do the beads. When they arrived, some people didn't know anything, but then I carefully did it with them, and was patient with them until a person was 100% or perfect. And then that person carries on. And then that person can do something on her own.



KGL: *What makes you smile? What do you love about life?*

MM: What makes me smile is the fact that I am living with the children of my brother and my sister, who have passed away. They are helping me in whatever I am doing to try to earn a living. Being with them and being at home is harmony for me because I don't have kids of my own. They all passed away. Taking care of these kids makes life beautiful.



KGL: *And just a final question...Can you talk about a little bit about what the transition to democracy has meant for you and South Africa, and how life has changed after democracy?*

MM: With the transition into democracy, I feel that now things have really changed from what they were, because now we can be under one roof – black and white...It's not like before where you couldn't go there because you are black – 'this is only the place for the white people'...It's 'everybody sit around one table.' And if you are going to have a meal, you are going to have a meal together. So that alone says a lot about the change. ♡



Nondumiso Sjovu, of Carrol Boyes Functional Art, translated the interview. Kristin Greer Love served as a volunteer intern with the Monkeybiz Bead Project. The University of Chicago Human Rights Program in the United States funded her 2005 internship.

K LOVE - 2005