

**THE ORIGINS AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE WORK
OF JACKSON HLUNGWANI AND LUCAS SITHOLE
WITH REFERENCE TO SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE IN
A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA**



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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Gabriel M. Setiloane in his book, "African Theology, an Introduction":

"For many of us living in modern urbanised Africa, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine how life might have been on this continent before the advent of Western people and their civilization. We have become so conditioned (and brain-washed) that, even with the best education, we often look back at it with shame as 'savage', brutal and everything that is bad. We look at it with the eyes and spectacles of the Western people who have conquered us, taught us their ways and made us slaves to their thought-patterns, value systems and spirituality."¹

In my extended essay I will be dealing with Jackson Hlungwani and Lucas Sithole.

Theirs is the creative art of the marginalised, dispossessed, displaced and disadvantaged. It is an art that has endeavoured to respond to the reality of African culture and its identity which was denied the black nation, as a consequence of appropriation by European Colonialism. Colonialism disempowered blacks economically and this led to them losing an African identity. The art of Hlungwani and Sithole strove to restore and revive the lost and neglected African tradition, identity and pride.

¹ Setiloane, G.M., African Theology: An Introduction (Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1986) Page 1

Professor E.J. de Jager has asserted in his book, "Contemporary African Art in Southern Africa":

"Again I think the time has come to accept the fact that the African will not, and cannot, subscribe totally to European philosophies, unrelated to his past and experience. His philosophy must be that out of which he grew and developed, related to his unique experience and ways of seeing the world and life. This will illustrate the enormous plasticity of human nature and experience. It will not, and cannot be inferior to European philosophies, and time will show it to be a unique contribution to human intellectual experience and achievement. Those who believe that 'African philosophy' must be inferior to Western form, and unfortunately there are many Africans who subscribe to this view, cannot be biased and their evaluation is subjective. Who can call a peoples' experience inferior? What are the objective criteria for determining this? It must be real, and how can something real be judged inferior merely because it is different or unusual from the accepted, or that which is accustomed?"²

Today, South African art is undergoing its most radical change, and when looking at the art work of Hlungwani and Sithole, one should not only look at it from a Western point of view and understanding. It is also extremely important

² de Jager, E.J., Contemporary African Art in South Africa (C. Struik, Pty (Ltd), Cape Town, 1973) Page 20

to understand the sensitivity of their physical backgrounds, culture and philosophy, as art is an important tool in expressing life and ideas of their times.

Cleaver believes that when someone is judging and interpreting an art object, one should consider the following:

“The aesthetic value of an art object rests not in the object, but in the response of the observer, who may grant or deny such value to any object. Relativist views hold that value arises from an interaction between spectator and art object. According to the relativist position, there are objective standards that can be valid for the members of a particular culture, but each culture forms its own standards. When an observer judges art from a culture other than his own, he should attempt to escape the prejudices of his own culture and judge the work on the basis of the criteria of the culture that produce it. Historical perspective or cultural differences may enable the outsider to comprehend the standards of a foreign culture more objectively than would its own members.”³

2. THE ORIGINS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORK OF HLUNGWANI AND SITHOLE

“During the 1980s the work of a number of sculptors working in the northern part of the country, Gazankulu and Venda, came to the attention of

³ Cleaver, D.G., Art: An Introduction (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, U.S.A. 1985) Page 52

academic researchers and galleries. This work, given its first major public viewing on the Tributaries exhibition caused a significant stir, bringing what appeared to be a completely autonomous aesthetic, an art that was in no way mediated by forces of the white market or white teachers.” Ivor Power went on to say: “Much more important, though, was the realisation that there is an indigenous independent and vital art in South Africa and that it has been flourishing for years unheeded by and regardless of the machinations of art world in general.”⁴

Powell and other critics saw ‘this art’ from the North as refreshingly new and untainted.

Jackson Hlungwani is a self-taught artist and a son of a migrant worker. He was born in 1923 in the poverty-stricken area of Nkanyani in the Northern Transvaal. Hlungwani worked for a tea and coffee merchant in Johannesburg in 1941.

“Hlungwani lost his finger and his job in an industrial accident. He was upset at not receiving compensation after being maimed while performing a skilled job at unskilled wages; he did not, however, seem to mind losing his job, reasoning that any machine that started with a finger could easily end up demanding an arm. So I came home, work for myself and make my soul better.”⁵

⁴ Sack, S., The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988) (Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg 1988) Page 27

⁵ Younge, G., Art of the South African Townships (Thames and Hudson, London, 1988) Page 85

Hlungwani at that time was doing a job that he was not trained for; he was thus placed in the hazardous situation of doing a job that he was not fully equipped for. However, Hlungwani did his best to try and satisfy the avarice of his capitalist boss while at the same time putting his life at risk and ended up losing part of his finger.

After he had lost his finger, he realised that his boss was not concerned about the safety of his employees, since the workers were not protected by the labour laws in South Africa. It should be remembered that training for Hlungwani would have meant an increase in his salary, a policy that would have meant less profit for the plantation.

Hlungwani never received compensation for his lost finger. In frustrated anger he eventually left his place of employment and went back to his land of birth, the poverty-stricken area of "Mbhokota in the Northern Transvaal."

It was while in the 'Gazankulu area' that he found and received God. He was ordained as an African Zionist Church priest in 1946 and slowly found his way into the heart of the poor, oppressed and underprivileged souls of 'Gazankulu' in the Northern Province. He believed that everyone should find comfort, assurance, refuge and lasting future in heavenly God. However, apart from his religious belief he was also strongly attached to ancestral worship and was not turned away from his roots, beliefs and African culture. Hlungwani is today a community leader, a Zionist priest, prophet, rainmaker, diviner, craftman and artist. He founded his own church 'Yesu Galelia, One Apostol in Siyona, Alfa and Omega'. His first exposure emerged when he exhibited together with rural artists from the Northern Transvaal in the 'Tributaries' exhibition in 1984.

The Tributaries was an exhibition organised by BMW (South Africa) art advisor, Ricky Burnett. The exhibition recognised many artists who were working outside

the formal and mainstream art in this country. These artists from the Northern Transvaal included, Jackson Hlungwani, Johannes Maswanganyi, Noria Mabasa, Dr. Phuthuna Seoka. They live largely in the rural areas and they are black and have little formal education.

3. JACKSON HLUNGWANI - THE PHILOSOPHER

Hlungwani believes that he heard the word from God in 1978 while he was at Mashamba district near Louis Trichardt. The 'word' instructed him to go back to his father's village of Mbhokota in 'Gazankulu'. This incident occurred during troubled times in his life, times that made him take refuge in the church. The church became for him the only stable place for his soul, which in turn let him to become a devout Christian, a teacher, a priest and someone who would go about spreading the word of God in which his preaching included both heavenly (The supreme God) and the earthly worship of the ancestors.

Burnette says:

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"Jackson Hlungwani belongs to what you'd describe as the peasant class, a group of people only marginally involved in contemporary South African developments. Yet when you listen to him speak and then couple that with his sculptures you realise you are in the presence of the most sophisticated artistic mind in the country. You realise you are in the presence of a profound man."⁶

⁶ Leshoai, L., Breathing life into sculpture: I do it first for God and then my people, says Hlungwani (City Press, 3 December 1989) Page 16

In African culture there is a strong respect for the dead. They are our ancestors. We believe that even though they might be dead, they are constantly with us, and that their spirits are among us, living with us. The ancestors are always concerned with individuals and their families. They are conceived of as the living dead, even though they are long thought to be dead. Since their spirits will always be with us, their wishes should be carried out as requested, for if they are not, one will be cursed. They balance the understanding of the African conception of God and the gods.

The ancestors are therefore our higher spiritual beings who play an intermediary role between the people and God. This philosophy is founded on the idea that people themselves are weak and need to exhibit great humility before God for they cannot confront him directly. The ancestors are therefore used as helpers when approaching God, but it must be remembered they never replaced God.

Hlungwani was once employed by a building contractor at the Levubu irrigation scheme near Louis Trichardt in the Northern Transvaal. It was while working for this contractor that he contracted an ulcer, the cause of which Hlungwani has attributed to a satanic assault on both his legs. He believes that satanic arrows were shot at both legs, one of which healed while the other became painful and eventually gangrenous. It was at this stage that Hlungwani saw a vision of Christ and reached his prophetic consciousness.

Hlungwani refers to the 'New Jerusalem' as the men's church. It is the site overlooking Mbhokota village in 'Gazankulu' in the Northern Transvaal. The new Jerusalem is built of semi circular stone walls without mortar, which sometimes are three metres high. It is a new country, the place which Hlungwani built from the instructions of God. It is a stone sanctuary on the hillside where his sculptures were part of the environment. Most of the sculptures were only

removed for a retrospective exhibition in 1989. Today most of them have been to galleries or sold (Johannesburg Art Gallery).

Elliot Makhaya from the Sowetan newspaper described Hlungwani's work as the: "Art from New Jerusalem"⁷, while in the newspaper City Press he claimed "God told me to do this" pointing at the crucifix. Hlungwani believes in Jesus Christ who was born among the Jews. He praises his name and tells the people about Him, as a powerful supernatural being. He believes in God, who created the universe and everything that lives in it, and that He also created men and women and that He is very protective of them. He believes that Christ made his will known to the people through the Ten Commandments which are laid down in the Old Testament. He believes the Ten Commandments advise men how to behave towards God, the Almighty and towards one another. This for him was the great new concept, i.e. God is 'Just' and the only way to please Him is by obeying his commandments. Hlungwani also believes Jesus accepted the laws of the Old Testament, but that to observe these laws alone is not enough; one needs also to love God. God is filled with kindness and has everlasting love even for those who break his laws, so we need to be kind and forgiving to others just as He is to us. The testimony to all this, is that His only son gave His life for us in the new Testament, and that to his followers, Jesus was the son of God and the saviour, whose coming to earth had been predicted in the Old Testament. This then was the God which Hlungwani was to follow. He believes that those who place their trust in Christ will rise after death and will live forever in Paradise, and that God offers this hope not only to the Jews, but to all races and nations of the world, both Black and White, rich and poor alike.

Hlungwani sees himself as a sculptor and religious leader. He thinks of his sculptures as a God-given-task and his sculptures are made to teach people about his beliefs and God. This explains why the followers of Christ, just like

⁷ Makhaya, E., Art from New Jerusalem (Sowetan newspaper, 3 November 1989) Page 29

Hlungwani, are so eager to spread his gospel everywhere just as Jesus' disciples did after His death, reaching out to different parts of the world, and teaching about His power. Hlungwani's art is therefore based on Biblical themes because he believes that God asked him to make all his creatures (sculptures). This can be seen in his sculptural works of art such as Cain, Abel, Eve, Crucifixes (Fig. 2) and Jonah's Fish (Fig. 4). Many of his ideas are indeed influenced by the Bible.

The Weekly Mail wrote:

“Jackson Hlungwani is a man driven by the prophet motive. He serves God, not Mammon, and his sculptures bear testimony to his spiritual vision.”

Hlungwani married poverty, he literally carries the wounds of Christ and is able to carry out the gospel of Christ to the poorest of the poor in Gazankulu in the Northern Transvaal in South Africa. His brotherly kindness as a priest and dynamic leadership draws to him thousands of followers. He is therefore a highly respected religious figure and his literal acceptance of poverty is an important source of his art.

3.1 GOD'S LEG WITH EGGS - Jackson Hlungwani (Fig. 1)

Hlungwani is believed to have seen Christ. He saw Christ while he was asleep; Christ appeared to him in a vision. He was at Nkanyana district near Louis Trichardt in the Northern Transvaal. The word asked him to look at the sky. Then he saw the sun. It was three o'clock in the morning when Christ appeared to him. Christ was accompanied by two men, one held Hlungwani by his arm, while the other touched his head. Christ told Hlungwani that he would be cured of his sickness.



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FIG. 1 GOD'S LEG WITH EGGS (017), Jackson Hlungwani 1984, Mbvangazi wood, 430 x 290 x 150 cm, Private Collection, Catalogue by curator Ricky Burnett: The Communication Department BMW (South Africa) Johannesburg 1989, Page 16

It should be remembered that this incident happened when Hlungwani's life was troubled. His legs were swollen and one of them was gangrenous. Hlungwani had taken refuge in the church, as it was the only stable place for his soul.

After Hlungwani had seen God he was told that he would never die again. Hlungwani also promised God that he would serve Him for the rest of his life. He was also assured in his vision that he would see God in person. (In his vision) he saw the legs of God (Fig. 1). The legs were floating in space. They were colourless. They were neither black nor white. They were like the clouds in the sky. They had snow. The snow was like the seed of the world. Christ told him that he was seeing God. He could not see the face of God. He could only see Him up to His knees. God went past Hlungwani, and disappeared into heaven. Hlungwani was worried that God did not say goodbye to him. He disappeared into heaven without saying a word to him.

Hlungwani himself believes that he was born at the same time as Jesus Christ. He is also called 'Xidonkana' i.e. a Shangaan name for a donkey foal or a star colt. He believes that he is the donkey that carried Christ when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He also believes that he carried Christ on his back. He also believes that he is the one who carried the cross on which Christ was crucified. 'Xidonkana' is also the humble animal that carried Mary the Virgin to Bethlehem and later to Egypt away from Herod. Christ was born in Bethlehem. Hlungwani says he (Hlungwani) was born in Nazareth. Hlungwani believes that he is the chosen one. He is the liberator. Alfa and Omega. The beginning and the end. The new country. He is chosen to build the house of God. He believes that God will come back after a thousand years. He also claims to be in possession of a book from God; 'this' book has pictures. Hlungwani cannot allow anyone to see 'this' book. When I pleaded with him in an interview to allow me to see the book, he told me repeatedly that if I see the book I will die. This is the book that influenced him in his artistic career. He says that he learnt wood

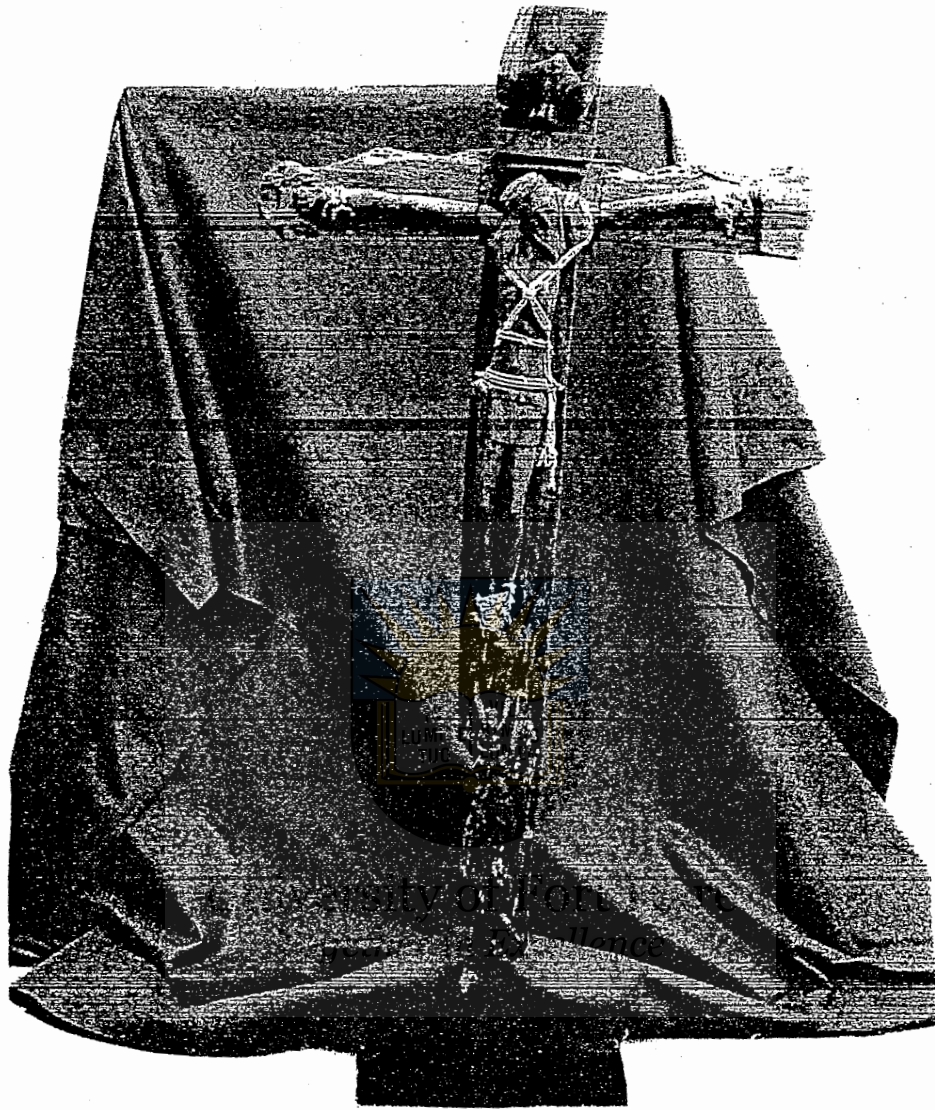


FIG. 2 CRUCIFIX (ii) (002), Jackson Hlungwani 1982, Mbhesu wood 1150 x 620 cm, Private Collection, Catalogue by curator Ricky Burnett: The Communication Department, BMW (South Africa) Johannesburg, 1989, Page 20

carving in heaven, with God as his instructor. 'He was apprenticed under the great Master, God Himself'.

Hlungwani believes in heavenly and ancestral worship. He is a man whose daily life is lived in day-to-day contact with the unseen i.e the ancestors. We can broadly say that Hlungwani is what we can term an African theologian i.e. he believes in a theology based on the Christian faith which is constantly being moulded by an African perception. It is therefore a theology based on biblical faith, which is always speaking to the Soul of Africa, but expressed in categories modified by the philosophy of the Africans. Hlungwani in his art and philosophy expresses this synthesis as few have done. He is truly an indigenous intellectual African philosopher and a man who has given art a new aesthetic value. Hlungwani shares his loyalty between his New Jerusalem and his Canaan, between God and the gods, the Father and fathers.

3.2 CRUCIFIXION - Jackson Hlungwani (Fig. 2)

For the African people salvation will come when they worship and identify Christ in their own African way not an imposed European way. When one looks at Hlungwani's crucifixion (Fig. 2) we see a Christ whom the disadvantaged can identify with, not the (traditional European) Christ. He is not high up in heaven, but rather closer and accessible to the disadvantaged people. Here is a Christ that does not belong to Europe for Europeans. He is not made from silver and gold, but rather from the dust of the earth. Traditional Western aesthetics are lost in this image as it moves into an African image.

Central to Christianity is the evangelism of the word of God to every human being on earth, and when the European missionaries first came to Africa they brought their images and their crucifixes. This of course gave the impression that :

“to the Black people of Africa, it was clear that the Christian God was a white man.”⁸

In about 1956, Father Edward Kinch, the American missionary of the Servite Order, put a representation of a Black Christ and Madona carved by a Dutch artist, into the church in Ingwavuma in Natal. He was asked by the congregation to remove it from the church as they felt:

“it was a white Christ they had been taught about.”⁹

Brother Andy Motsko, an American Servite working at Hlabisa in Natal, also had a similar problem when an American benefactor of the Catholic mission requested a carving from Africa:

“I told Bernard to make an African Christ, not a European, and he looked at our statue and said: ‘but that is white, it is not African.’ Bernard’s unwillingness to give African features to his figures was undoubtedly due to his understanding of the Christian Faith as taught by the missionaries. His faith had been nurtured with images of a white, European Christ and Madona (Fig. 3).”¹⁰

Brother Andy noticed that people given a chance would always prefer a traditional European representation of Christ as opposed to African.

⁸ Cormick, D., Bernard Gcwensa and Ruben Xulu: Christian Artist of Natal (Academica, J.C. van Schaik (Pty) Ltd, Pretoria, 1993) Page 8

⁹ Cormick, D., Bernard Gcwensa and Ruben Xulu: Christian Artist of Natal (Academica, J.C. van Schaik (Pty) Ltd, Pretoria, 1993) Page 8

¹⁰ Cormick, D., Bernard Gcwensa and Ruben Xulu: Christian Artist of Natal (Academica, J.C. van Schaik (Pty) Ltd, Pretoria, 1993) Page 8

A Zulu Catholic priest that had known both Bernard and Ruben reportedly told:

“a story about a crucifix that Bernard had carved, probably in the late 1970s. The crucifix had never been mounted on any wall because ‘the people did not like it; they found it too frightening; it was too realistic’. The children had nicknamed it ‘amaDolodolo’ meaning ‘the knees’. The crucifix was at the time apparently lying underneath a white sheet (which presumably did not alleviate the fear of the people) in one of the Catholic presbyteries of Empangeni. The priest admitted that he did not like the crucifix either, as he felt it looked like a corpse and the knees seemed wrong. Nevertheless, he recognised that it was a fine piece of carving.”¹¹

Today, however, Africans have changed drastically due to African Theology and Philosophy. They are no longer prepared to live according to a ‘European/white man’s’ perspective or to accept the traditional European definition of humanity. They are conscious of their indigenous roots, and though they also believe in Christianity and God, in their minds there is a constant state of revolt against Western Christianity and its ideology. African Theology now enhances the Africans with a new home, a new spiritual identity and a reality to life itself. It helps them to realise that they are also human beings and have the right to be creative as artists, and above all, the right to rediscover themselves and their lost identity.

¹¹ Cormick, D., Bernard Gcwensa and Ruben Xulu: Christian Artist of Natal (Academica, J.C. van Schaik (Pty) Ltd, Pretoria, 1993) Page 8

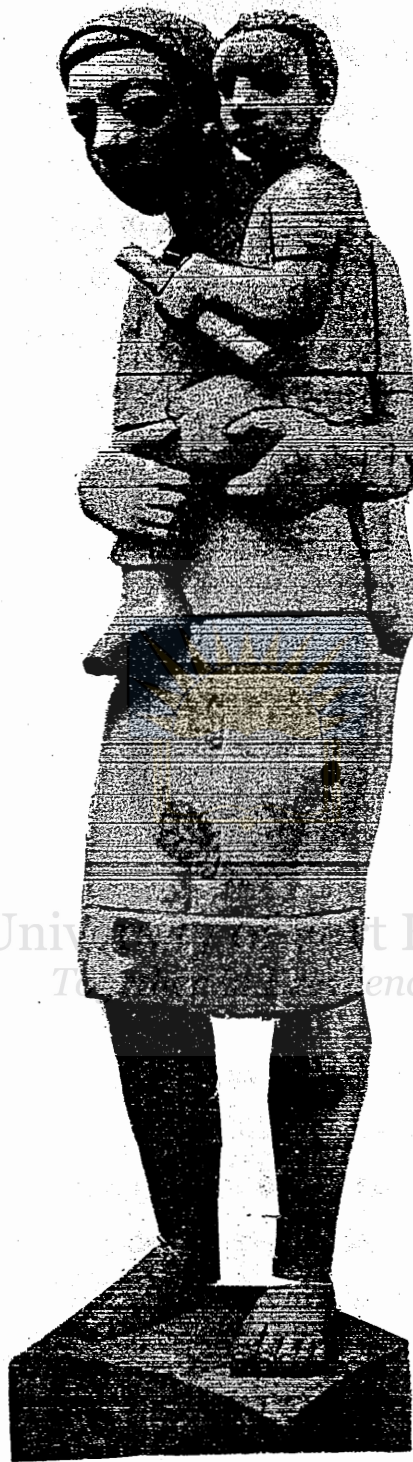


FIG. 3 MARY THE YOUNG MOTHER (322), Ruben Xulu, Poplar wood, Bernard Gcwensa and Ruben Xulu: Christian artists of Natal by Dina Cormick, Academica, J.L. Van Schaik (Pty) Ltd, Pretoria, 1993, Page 9. The sculpture was destroyed by fire at St Joseph Presbytery, Seven Oaks, in July 1987.

When one looks at Hlungwani's Crucifixion (Fig. 2) it is Christ who was brought before Pilate, the chief priests, leaders, and the people. When the crowd saw Him, they cried out loud and said that He must be crucified. He was then taken away with two other criminals to a place called Golgotha, the place where He was crucified (together with two other criminals). He was forced to drink wine that was mixed with a drug, but Christ declined it. They divided His clothes among themselves. The Jewish leaders said that He had saved others and that He should save Himself if He was truly the Messiah whom God had chosen.

One of the criminals then insulted Him and said: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us". The other criminal rebuked him and said: "Don't you fear God? Our punishment is right, because we deserve it for what we have done, but He has done no wrong. Then he asked Jesus to remember him when He was in Paradise. Jesus answered: "I promise you that today, you will be placed in Paradise with me."

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Hlungwani moves between Israel and Africa. He sees:

" a perfectly intergrated order of things, based on his firm belief in the creator God of Genesis. The artist lives in close communion at the same time with the Ancestor of the ancestors the Messiah of Hebrews, the Lord of the early Church, and the Healer of contemporary believers. He does not see any discontinuity between past and present salvation."¹²

A sign was placed above Jesus's head, saying that He was the King of the Jews. Later that day at 12 o'clock midday, the sun stopped shining and the whole world

¹² Schneider, T.R., Jekiseni Hlungwani Xagani (Catalogue Published by Communication Department BMW (SA) (Pty) Ltd, Johannesburg 1989) Page 9

became dark. The period of darkness is believed to have lasted for three hours. Christ then cried out loud and said: "Father, in your hand I place my spirit". Then He died.

The army officers who had seen what had happened, praised the Lord and then believed that Christ was truly the Son of God. The curtains that were hanging in the temple tore apart from top to bottom. At three o'clock that day Christ cried out loud and said: "Eloi, Eloi lema Sabactham" which means "My God! my God! why did you abandon me?". The same state of despair could be said about Hlungwani's crucifixion but Hlungwani's crucifixion was not sculptured in Europe, neither does it bear the rich marble finish of Michaelangelo nor the golden finish of Byzantine art. The subject is Western, but the approach is African. This is because his crucifix comes from a totally different art background and environment. He has approached the subject from his 'rural Tsonga background', an approach that not only looked into African philosophy but was also deeply concerned about the socio-political situation in South Africa.

Crucifying, it must be remembered, was traditionally used as a form of punishment, an execution for criminals who came from the lower ranks of the society, people who were poor and oppressed. It was the worst form of punishment, lower than hanging. Perhaps these facts explain why Hlungwani sculptured the subject matter, crucifixion, several times, and why he literally identified himself with it. He wanted to be the man who carried the cross of Christ. He is a humble down-to-earth man, born among the poorest of the poor of Gazankulu and he identifies himself with them. He is their leader, priest, teacher and healer. Hlungwani's crucifixion does not identify itself with the wealthy and the rich of this world. His Christ would find divine sympathy with the disadvantaged of this world. It is the Christ of the oppressed masses of Africa.

Hlungwani's crucifix bears the testimony of someone who was nailed to the cross, like a criminal he was condemned to death by his fellow country-men. He was scourged with a leather thong whip. This was used to weaken the victim and hasten him to death. He was also made to carry his cross to the scene of torture and death. When reaching the death scene he was stripped naked, and made to lie on the ground with the cross under his shoulders. His hands and feet were then tied and nailed to the cross before it was placed in an upright position. The crucified Christ was then left to die of hunger, pain and exhaustion and sometime death would also be hastened by breaking the victim's legs. This was one of the most painful and degrading form of punishment. A spear was thrust into Christ's body to make sure that He was completely dead. Then the body was removed and laid to rest before the Sabbath day.

Hlungwani's crucifix manifests agony, sorrow, suffering and anguish. Above his head is a dove which is the symbol of divine spirit in Christian art. The Holy Spirit was described by St John the Baptist as descending from heaven like a dove and represent the Holy Spirit in God. The bearded Christ is roughly carved. His head tilted to one side and tied with old ropes on the hands, legs, waist and across the chest. Hlungwani teaches us that the values admired in the so-called traditional Western masters can also be present in the marginal rural artists and that non-Western art is not just tribal art but individual creative work. Aggrey Klaaste the editor of Sowetan newspaper believes that:

"This is especially true for South Africa and large parts of the world, where dogmatic and fixed views of the world are part of the accepted conventional wisdom, where to step out of the accepted ambit of beliefs, is to become an outsider or even irrelevant. Hlungwani reminds us of our essential humanity which is both unique and dynamic. He teaches us

that his revelation is a personal experience. He displays that perception in me that we are, in a way images, of the divine conceptualisation of the world.”¹³

3.3 JONAH'S FISH - Jackson Hlungwani (Fig. 4)

The fish is a great water creature and it is the creature that swallowed Jonah.

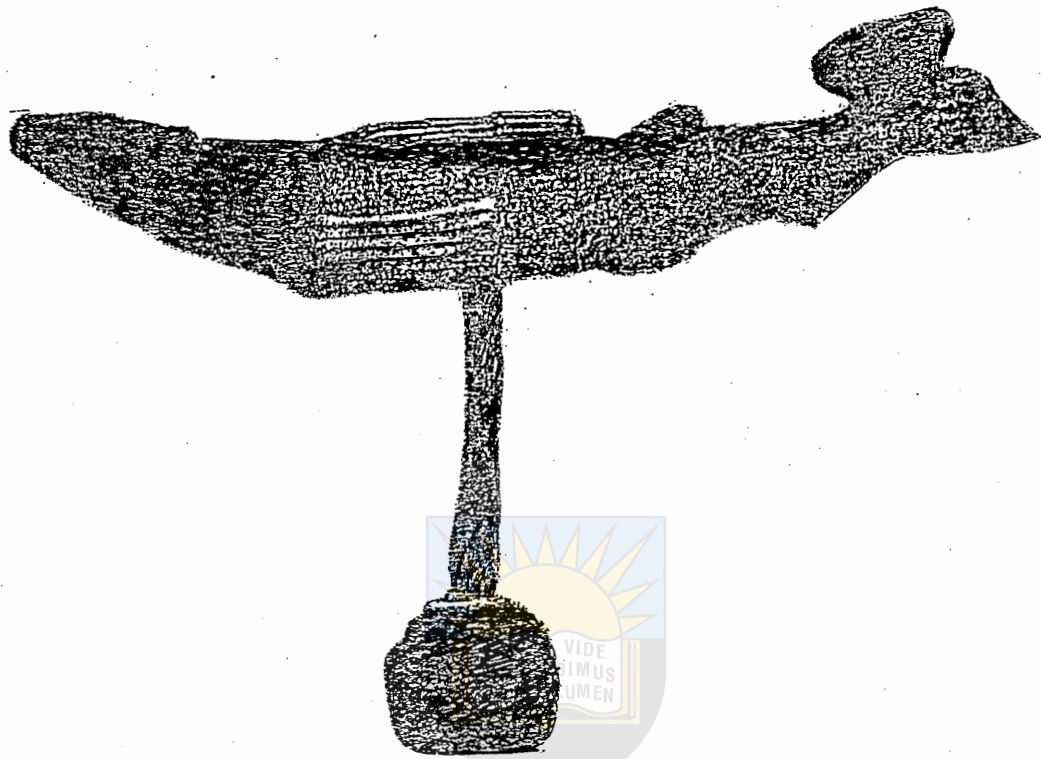
“Fish are the most popular of all Hlungwani’s images. Fish are part of his environment, they inhabit the local spruit and Hlungwani will often identify the kinds of fish he carves. Incidentally the Tsongas were known for their fish traps. Fish are part of the visual vocabulary used in the northern Transvaal to decorate utensils and clothing.”¹⁴

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Hlungwani was also a fisher of man, and one of the great followers of Christ. His mission was to save life, and to make his people repent and follow Christ. He was concerned about the evil and violence found in this world, just as God was concerned about the people of Nineveh’s violence when they sinned against Him and abandoned Him. The story of Nineveh tells how the Lord God wanted the people to repent, so He sent Jonah to them, but because Jonah was stubborn and rebellious, he decided to do things his own way. He decided to go against the word of God, and instead of going to Nineveh, he went in the opposite direction. Jonah thought that he was fleeing from the Lord, but forgot that God is everywhere. He took a ship to Tarshish, but on his journey he experienced a

¹³ Klaaste, A., Jekiseni Hlungwani Xagani (Catalogue Published by Communication Department, BMW (SA) (Pty) Ltd, Johannesburg) Page 26

¹⁴ Becker, R., Jekiseni Hlungwani Xagani (Catalogue Published by Communication Department BMW (SA) (Pty) Johannesburg) Page 20



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FIG. 4 JONAH'S FISH Jackson Hlungwani 1983, Artist, Catalogue by curator
Ricky Burnett: The Communication Department, BMW (South Africa),
Johannesburg, 1989, Page 21

great storm at sea which the Lord had sent. Everyone on board was afraid as the ship tossed into the sea, and threatened to break in two. The people on board started calling to God for help, and at one stage thought that the ship was perhaps carrying too much cargo and was overloaded.

They started reducing the cargo by throwing it into the sea to lighten the ship and eventually the captain asked the sleeping Jonah to join them in a prayer as he was concerned for all their safety. After Jonah had been questioned, he answered (Jonah 1:8-12):

“I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of
heaven, who made the sun and land and sea”¹⁵

This reply terrified the crew and they demanded to know what he had done, but as the sea was getting rougher and rougher and Jonah was left with no option but to demand that he be thrown into the sea. Once his request had been met, the sea calmed down. The remaining people on the ship were afraid because they did not want to be held responsible for killing Jonah, while at the same time they began to fear God Almighty. After Jonah was sacrificed to the sea, he was swallowed by a fish - a huge water creature and a large monster, the symbol of Christ and the good of life. This is the reason why after it had swallowed him, it never killed him but rather took him to dry land after he, Jonah, had repeatedly asked to be saved.

Jonah wanted God to destroy the people of Nineveh, but at the same time he knew that God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger with abounding love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah never wanted the people of Tarshish to give up their evil and violent ways, rather he wanted God to annihilate Nineveh - he wanted God to wipe out his enemies rather than take

¹⁵ Goodnews Bible (Jonah 1:8-12) (United Bible Societies, 1976) Page 895

them into His grace. Jonah hoped for maximum destruction, and when this could not happen, he was frustrated, miserable and begged to die. Jonah was sent back to Nineveh because he had forgotten that God was full of love, mercy and forgiveness.

3.4 CHRIST PLAYING SOCCER - Jackson Hlungwani (Fig. 5)

The concept that, God is everywhere is strongly felt in Hlungwani's work, where for example God and His angels come down from heaven and are everyday people. They are down-to-earth people. They even play soccer and are definitely part of this world. There is nothing heavenly about them. (See Fig. 5) - Christ playing soccer.

Soccer is like a religion in South Africa. It is popular, it has been dubbed the people's sport. It is the sport that is played by everyone, rich and poor. The sport that is even played in the dusty township streets and rural areas. Christ is carved as a soccer player. He has long hair. His body is half twisted, huge and massive. Like a true athlete. His hands are wrapped on the sides. With the soccer ball sandwich between his legs, shielding it skillfully from his opponents. His eyes glued to the soccer ball.

Like a soccer wizard he knows what he is doing. He is about to execute some of his skills. Dribbling his way into the million followers of Christ through soccer. He is wearing soccer outfit i.e soccer jersey, shorts, socks and soccer boots. The jersey has the team's badge. Maybe this is a religious club. The club that is coached by God himself, with Christ as the captain. Hlungwani thought that the only way he could identify himself with the people was through the sculpture displaying Christ as a soccer player.

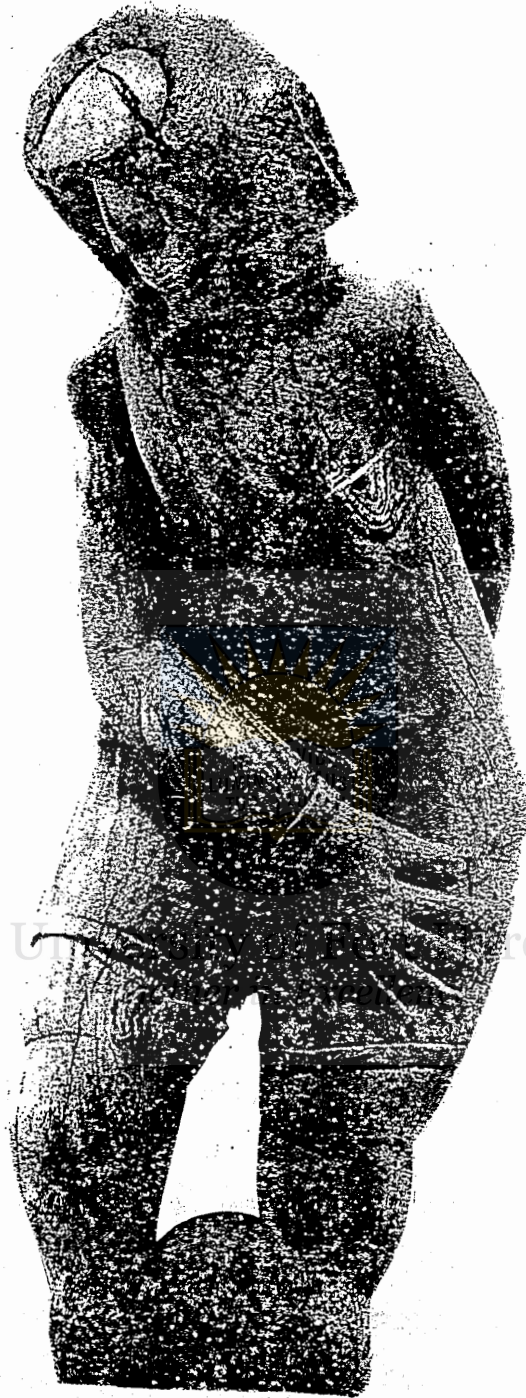


FIG. 5 CHRIST PLAYING FOOTBALL Jackson Hlungwani 1983, Nkonono wood, 580 x 240 x 320 cm Tony le Roi Collection, Catalogue by curator Ricky Burnett, The Communication Department, BMW (South Africa) Johannesburg, 1989, Page 7

4. LUCAS SITHOLE

“The sixties and seventies were extremely difficult years and the movement of Black people was severely curtailed. This had a detrimental effect on artists, dramatists and musicians, denying them access to venues and imposing strict censorship. The grip of apartheid laws tightened. Stricter censorship was enforced, and all but a few city venues were barred to black performers and audiences ... Black musicians found themselves removed by the government (in connivance with the white musicians’ union) from white hotels and nightspots, an important source of their revenue.”¹⁶

The above mentioned scenario has had tremendous effect on South African art and its future. In 1976 Lionel Davis, was imprisoned, and Winston Saoli was detained for political activities. At the same time Gavin Jantjies, Louis Maqhubela and Dumile Feni left the country. South Africa also experienced the tragic deaths of Cyprian Shilakoe, Julian Motao, Andrew Motjaudi, Ephraim Ngatane, and the eighties saw the death of Thamsanqa Mnyeale and Sidney Kumalo. Dan Rakgoathe went blind. Gerard Sekoto and Lucas Sithole died in the ‘90s. This led to a state of confusion and a huge loss in African art. It was also the time in which artists were forced to find new ideologies in response to the increasingly polarised African society. Artists were now in search of a new ‘African style’, and this idea was to identify the artists with an overall cultural tendency of going back to Africa. Hence, we see the emergence of Lucas Sithole with art forms that were concerned with an African identity.

¹⁶ Bozzoli, B., The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988) (Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 1988) Page 17

It is also interesting to note that Lucas Sithole studied art at the Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg between 1959 and 1960. The increasingly continuing growth of the centre came to a halt with the introduction of separate development in the '60s when the West Rand Bantu Administration Board took over the functions of the Johannesburg City Council and were unsympathetic to the provision of activities for blacks in cities.

The approach to art at Polly Street Art Centre was informal, and the school was viewed as a workshop. As soon as an artist had acquired an individual style, he was encouraged to become professional. These artists were therefore forced by circumstances and their situations to try and sell their art at an early stage in their development, unlike their white counterparts.

Professor E.J. de Jager believes that:

“Sithole is a sculptor of great talent and his work is in complete harmony with Africa. His work is indicative of the greatness which the new ‘African Art’ will attain. There is no trace of European influence and tradition, and his sculpture is indigenous both in form and concept.”¹⁷

Sithole once said that in The Argus newspaper:

“My art is African. I am an African whose imagination is definitely influenced by the beliefs of my peoples which I absorbed as a child.”¹⁸

¹⁷ de Jager, E.J., Contemporary African Art in South Africa (C. Struik, Pty (Ltd), Cape Town 1973) Page 28

¹⁸ Brooke, K., Legend in Sithole Sculptures (Argus Newspaper, 24 October 1975)

Sithole is one of the most popular sculptors in Southern Africa. He was born in Kwa-Thema, Springs Transvaal in 1931. He is the son of a Zionist lay priest while his mother was a washer-woman. It was his grandmother Tsayi Nomvumi, with whom he lived from the age of six months in Swaziland who influenced him to be an artist. His grandmother used to make clay pots for the Swazi Royal Family and chiefs and young Sithole would steal clay from her and shaped the likeness of people, animals and birds. This was to mark the foundation of his life long artistic career. His strong early urge for sculpture was later to form the zest and vigour of his creations, which in turn served as inspiration to many artists in southern Africa as a whole. His artworks responded to the apartheid era with a protest that took the form of social comment and a return to African mythology, thus giving pride to the African nation. He was concerned about an art that spoke to the 'African soul', and his images were sculptured with great sensitivity, emotion and understanding that has since never been equalled. He has emerged as one of the few artists who have reacted strongly to the era that tore apart African culture and philosophy.

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4.1 MYTHOLOGY - Lucas Sithole

According to Gabriel M. Setiloane in his book, "African Theology: An Introduction":

"Every culture has its fund of mythology. It is now commonly accepted that myth can no longer be discounted as mere fabrications of fertile minds of primitive people handed down from generation to generation. In myth there is something of a communal memory of the group as it has grappled with the

questions of its identity and all human origin, life on earth, being (What is the human person?).”¹⁹

Sithole was influenced by myths which he obtained from his grandmother. Sithole enjoyed these stories, which sometimes were told to frighten children and to teach them about good moral values and it was these (fables, myths, and stories) which later were to play a very important part in the creative life of Sithole, the artist. These myths were embedded in his imagination and he recalls a particular story, his grandmother told him of a she-snake that lived deep in the lake, and a he-snake that lived in heaven, and from time to time the she-snake would rise from the lake and ascend to heaven to be with its male partner.

Myths are always stories whose characters included human beings, both those who are dead and alive as well as cultural heroes and animals. These characters play a very important role in the African everyday life. Myths are central to their lives and the manner in which Africans should lead their lives.

Sithole's images were characterized by true love, joy, sorrow, hate and fear. His are themes which echo the past, but are seen in a more dramatic way that grip the imagination. Sithole's images are full of vitalism and have a life of their own. He also has the extraordinary ability to use the shape of the wood which gives account of his talent. His uncanny talent lies in exploring a piece of wood and giving it form, shape and emotions.

The African faith and belief in myth is comparable to faith in the scriptures of the Bible and they played an important role in the unconscious side of producing art works. They have encouraged an inherited and an emotional understanding of art for all people. Art works based on myths create a self recognition and a

¹⁹ Setiloane G.M., African Theology: An Introduction (Skotaville Publishers, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 1986) Page 3

personal discovery of what was and is part of African culture; art based on a common mythology responds directly to our (African) emotional needs and its reality is easily felt by us (Africans). It is an art based on a philosophy deeply rooted in the artist's own subconsciousness as well as his or her own ability to realize it in concrete terms. He/she (the artist), comprehends the dream world of mythology far better than we do, and reaffirms it in us.

Pablo Picasso believed that if he was conscious of what he was doing or had to do, he would not be creative. What the artist is doing when influenced by the subconscious world is to stir within his inner self a drive for creative action. His manifestation could be positive symbols of repressed desire, fear and compulsion.

Biblical scholars have cherished Old Testament stories about Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, yet they were infact myths. However, they become even more interesting when understood for what they really are: attempts by human beings on certain parts of the earth, and at a certain time have to explain the mysteries of human origins and the human state comprehended for what they are. These takes on another dimension and is understood for what it really is:

"We have, therefore, in spite of the ruthless efforts of the early Christian missionaries not totally lost memories of our past. However, because of the forces of Western civilization even these memories are progressively being eroded. The tragedy is that this erosion is so fast that we are running the risk of finding that we have lost the memory of our past (like the peoples of Europe) before we have assessed it and compared it with the new packet - Western civilization and culture. Here in South Africa, the

problem is magnified and further compounded by the fact that Africans face Western civilization at its most ruthless. The ideology of Apartheid invites confrontation most readily and intuitively at the level of seeking to declare us all the same because there is need to be the same. The dominating culture then places itself as the culture (even like the barbarian Romans set themselves over the cultured Greeks) and members of other cultures seek to identify themselves with the dominant one because there are advantages.”²⁰

Sithole is now recognised as one of the country’s foremost sculptor but for all this, he wanted to be known as:



“An African sculptor rather than a sculptor whose ancestry happens to be African. As opposed to many of his contemporary African artists, he has no wish to ‘get away’ from an African image. He says: ‘My art is African. I am an African whose imagination is definitely influenced by he beliefs of my peoples, which I absorbed as a child. But when it comes to the emotions experienced by humanity, we are not all that different from each other.’”²¹

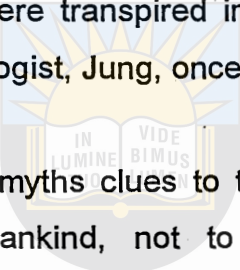
He personally had no wish to get away from the African image. His sculptural conception and knowledge of African culture was an important contribution to the

²⁰ Setiloane, G.M., African Theology: An Introduction (Skotaville Publishers, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 1986) Page 3

²¹ Brooke, K., Legend in Sithole Sculptures; (Argus Newspaper, 24 December 1975)

advancement in the world of sculpture at large. Sithole's creative sculptural process though African, is difficult to describe in words, for it can be said to be an outburst of beauty and a wealth of heritage which we today admire and pride ourselves on. It is an art that is concerned with our ancestry and is in harmony with itself.

It should be remembered that myths are stories stemming from a fertile imagination. Sometimes they contain an element of the truth but they are never meant to be taken literally. Even at the simplest level there is an expression of a serious belief in our wordly life, eternity and God. It was many of these myths that found their way to and were transpired into the work of Sithole. Talking about myths, a modern psychologist, Jung, once said:



 "He has seen in myths clues to the deepest hopes
 and fears of mankind, not to be despised as
 stories."²²

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However, myths should be looked at very carefully as a revelation of what is deepest in human nature and human concerns. They produce a philosophy and it is this philosophical approach that has made artists like Sithole and Hlungwani respected by the people; respected because they have practised an art based on African culture and beliefs. This is an art that teaches us about embodied stories with values, morals and cultural beliefs and the supernatural beings, many of which deal with such aspects as truth, justice, love, respect, punishment etc.

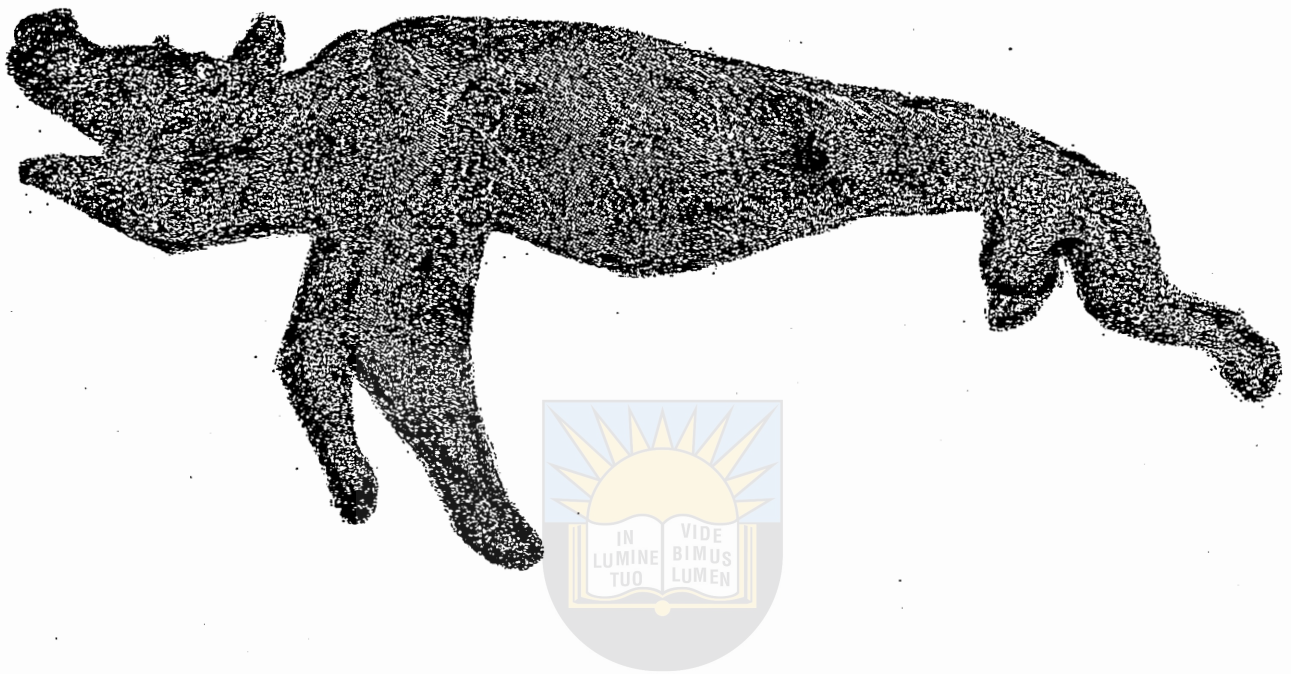
One of the mythical stories which later was to play a very important creative part in the career and life of Sithole, was the begging hyena (Fig. 6)

²² Perrinder, G., *African Mythology* (Peter Bedrick Books, New York 1991) Page 16

4.2 BEGGING HYENA (Fig. 6)

“Lucas Sithole utilises the natural curve of the wood to shape his form and etches deep into the body of the animal to produce a gnarled striated outward coat. As with most of his animal and figure sculptures, there is a story/myth surrounding the hyena with which the sculptor prefaces a look at the sculpture. ‘Once there was an old farmer and his wife. They owned a little dog with a long tail. This dog had served his master for many years and now he was old. So the farmer, not wanting to feed a useless dog, decided to put him to sleep; his wife begged and pleaded until eventually he gave in and said he’d let him live. But the old farmer took the dog to the woods and left him there to die. The old dog met up with a hyena who trotted up, dragging his hindquarters. ‘What is the matter dear old friend?’ asked the hyena. ‘Oh, I have been deserted by my master and I’m sure to die,’ said the dog. ‘I’m now so old he doesn’t want me anymore’. The hyena suggested a good plan. ‘I will rush up on the children and give them a fright and you can come and chase me away. In return you can give me a lamb,’ the hyena said. The dog did as he was bid but when the hyena turned up to claim his reward, the dog said: ‘You wanted my master’s sheep, but I would never be unloyal to him. Go away.’”²³

²³ Dempster, C., Lucas Sithole (The Star Newspaper, Education Topic Today, Vol 4, No 45, 30 March 1981)



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FIG. 6 BEGGING HYENA (LS 6802) Lucas Sithole 1968, Lemon wood, 58 x 133 cm. A pictorial review of Africa's major Black sculptor by F.F. Haenggi, 1958-1979. Published by Gallery 21, and the Haenggi Foundation museums, Johannesburg, Page 57

4.3 DANCING TO THE WAVES - Lucas Sithole (Fig. 7)

This is what Sithole had to say about his sculpture "Dancing to the waves" (Fig. 7):

"One beautiful morning, I went down the river, where all my beautiful friends used to bathe and where we did our washing and shared our secrets and jokes. But when I came to the river, there were none of my friends. Everything was quiet and still; there was no wind, nothing, it was deserted. So I undressed and put my clothes on a big rock nearby and started washing and bathing. I sang my best song, which is our way of inviting our friends. At first I was only singing and humming softly to myself, then I found myself dancing and wriggling this way and that way. Suddenly, the river which I thought was asleep, started running and flowing and then I heard it sing back to me, beautiful music from the waves. So I found myself singing louder and louder and the waves got bigger and bigger, but I was dancing on a beautiful rock. Then all of a sudden, I heard thunder which did not scare me, for it added some rhythm to my music. Then I heard whistles from the wind, and cries of some humans. First I thought they were singing, but they were being swept away. Maybe I thought it was a tornado again, looking for his wife. But, because I know he loves my dancing and



FIG. 7 DANCING TO THE WAVES (LS 8120) Lucas Sithole 1981. Zulu indigenous wood 137 x 37 48 cm. A Pictorial Collection of Africa's major Black Sculptor by F.F. Haenggi, 1981-1988. Compiled by Gallery 21, and the Haenggi Foundation Museums, Johannesburg, 1981

singing, he wouldn't harm my family and if he sees women dancing nude, his anger will cease."²⁴

Sithole has utilised the shape of the wood, he has carved half human, half creature. The sculpture itself is thin and elongated, the two arms are twisted. The sculpture seems to be dancing to the rhythm of the waves. The head is round with a long nose, protruding eyes and open mouth. This is one of the sculptures that can only exist in the world of Sithole. The world of African culture, and river spirits.

Sithole wants us to understand the beauty of African culture. He tells us of an African woman. She is nude. Mother of the nation. Singing to the river. She has the power to calm the river. The power to talk to the river spirits. The river spirits enjoy her sweet melody. Even the tornado cannot hurt her.

4.4 MANZI PHELILE (KLAAR WATER) - Lucas Sithole (Fig. 8)

God Almighty is envisaged as the Supreme Being living in heaven, and He is concerned with rain which men, women and animals cannot do without. This is why many artists made sculptures which were concerned with rain. Rain, as we know, has always been welcomed among all people. If there is rain, there is water and the rivers will flow again, water gives us life.

Manzi phelile (Fig. 8) is another sculpture by Sithole which shows how the fish depends on water for survival. Manzi phelile means, there is no more water, and as we know, fish become frustrated when the water they live in, starts running low. The great fish is shown in trouble. Not only has his swimming gone slow, but he can no longer find food. The fish is shown left alone, all the other animals

²⁴ Sithole, L., Dancing to the waves (Biography Notes compiled by Gallery 21, Johannesburg) LS8120



FIG. 8 **MANZI PHELILE (Klaar Water) (LS 8307)** Lucas Sithole 1983, Mkonto wood, 32 x 131 x 37 cm, A Pictorial Collection of Africa's major Black Sculptor by F.F. Haenggi 1981-1988 compiled by Gallery 21, and the Haenggi Foundation Museums, Johannesburg, 1981

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in the river are dead, and suddenly he realises that he is swimming in mud, the jaws of death awaiting him. The fish curses God for not bringing the rain which is the source of life, whilst at the same time he knows that God Almighty is the creator, sustainer of life, moulder, giver of breath and soul. He also knows that He is the giver of rain and sunshine and the one who brings the seasons and the drought. He knows also that He is the one who roars and thunders in the sky.

Sithole's fish cries out to God, a God who binds even kings. God gives and takes what he wants. The providence of God is shown by such names given to him: Father of babies, great Mother, greatest of friend, the kind one, God of pity and comfort, the providence who watches all like the sun.

4.5 TO THE ANCESTORS - Lucas Sithole (Fig. 9)

Sithole has dedicated this sculpture to the ancestors. He believed that Africans were concerned with the issue of life after death and the spirit of the dead. Death to them was like a long sleep from which they believed they would one day wake up and come back to life. Hence the respect for the dead and ancestors, and their ongoing concern about the dead. After the supreme being Africans believed in many other spirits which took the form of glorified heroes, ancestors, natural forces and animals. Despite all the other gods, they believed that God was their first ancestor and they respected and feared him, and felt inferior before him. They felt small before the eyes of God and when they approached Him there was a need for a helper. They required someone closer to themselves and which took the form of their ancestors. Ancestors, as mentioned, gave birth to the tribe, and are higher spiritual beings, ancestors (Fig. 9) and therefore made intermediaries between man and God.

According to Lucas Sithole, his art was influenced by African culture and the respect for the dead, and Africans have always thought of the dead as their

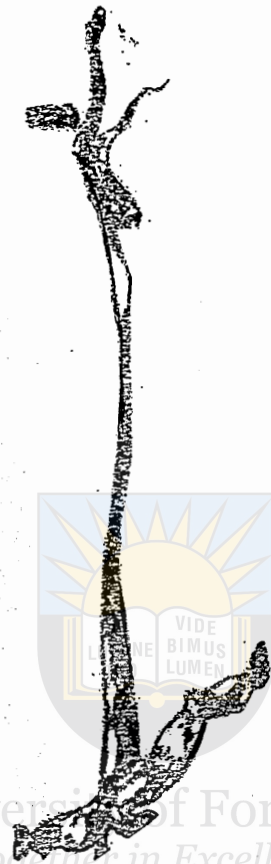


FIG. 9 TO THE ANCESTORS (LS 8308) Lucas Sithole 1983, Tamboutie wood, 133 x 126 x 46 cm. A Pictorial Collection of Africa's major Black Sculptor by F.F. Haenggi 1981-1988, compiled by Gallery 21, and the Haenggi Foundation Museums, Johannesburg 1981

ancestors - people we need to make peace with, so that they will live forever, as people around us, looking after and guarding our interests. They are regarded as intermediaries because they carry our requests and interests to God. Conceived as higher spiritual beings, they are often spoken of as having human form and seen as though they were alive rather than dead. Ancestors are people who possess intelligence and power, and since they were human beings before they died, they were created in the image of God, after death they serve as a link between those who are alive (human beings) and God.

After death, ancestors continue to live close to their families and their homes, where they once lived as human beings. They are concerned about their family members, and if their families forget them, they visit them in the form of dreams. They also communicate with them in the form of visions, and can for example, sometimes bring suffering to their loved ones who have forgotten them.

Africans remember the dead through myths and stories told about them. They recite and sing praise songs to their ancestors and remember the spirit of their true leaders, outstanding men and women, heroes, warriors and clan founders. These people continue to be respected and honoured and brought back to life even though they are dead. We remember them as our ancestors and we ask that their spirit always be constantly with us and guide us.

“To the ancestors” (Fig. 9) is a thin, elongated sculpture which seems to have attached itself to the ground where ancestors live. Its head is tilted slightly backwards thus facing up in heaven. The arms are outstretched as if are intermediating with God and asking for mercy on behalf of his followers.

4.6 WITCH-DOCTOR / MEDICINE MAN - Lucas Sithole (Fig. 10)

Mythology is believed to have originated with the reciter of the dreams of the chiefs and dreams are generally considered to be part of an African's everyday life. Also Africans believed that answers to peoples' fortune could be found in the interpretation of dreams by the medicine man / witch-doctor. This is what Sithole is saying about the medicine man / witch-doctor (Fig. 10):

"I met this medicine man and wanted to be friends with him, but then I was very frightened. He was in his village. I walked to his garden. He saw me and said: What do you want? I told him I was looking for some wood. Someone pointed up to the tree near him, from which there were many dead snakes hanging. There were also snake skins hanging around his neck and hair. I had started to carve this sculpture and wanted to show it to the witch-doctor before it was completed, but, he did not want to see it and threatened that I would not get away alive, if I showed it to him. So I left then in my truck and he never saw the sculpture."

African society is based on the organisation of family, and each family cell is considered exclusive. The tribe is always conscious of the fact that it is different from another. As a group they shared the same beliefs and lifestyle, and their daily lives are controlled by these beliefs to form a certain pattern of accepted behaviour, which everyone follows without questioning. Failure by an individual or certain group members to abide by the normal accepted behaviour will lead to serious consequences for the group or an individual, and only the witch-doctor or the medicine man can be called upon to reverse the situation. The punishment for such deviation is believed to come from the spirits.



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FIG. 10 WITCH-DOCTOR / MEDICINE MAN (LS 8211) Lucas Sithole 1982, Msimbidi wood 76 x 48 x 43 cm. A Pictorial Collection of africa's major Black Sculptor by F.F. Haenggi 1981-1988. Compiled by Gallery 21 and the Haenggi Foundations Museums, Johannesburg, 1982

The medicine men, kings and chiefs are in most cases the head of the group or the tribe. They are therefore in charge of inflicting punishment on the tribe or an individual, and all those who cannot appease the gods. Africans, as we know, were always in constant contact with the gods and the spirits, who were concerned about the tribe. However, Africans believe in the spirit of the ancestors and the most disturbing fear that could fall upon society is bad magic, sorcery and witchcraft. These are seen as the greatest enemies to a group or tribe and when the perpetrators of these acts are caught they are harshly punished and in most cases the witch-doctor / medicine man could be employed to catch these perpetrators.

Once an individual believes that someone may have caused a misfortune against him or her, he tries to identify the offender. In most cases the service of a medicine man or witch-doctor is required, who may for example ward off evil influences affecting the person. Warding off the evil spirit, applies not only to individuals, but also to the tribe at large.

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When we look for example at the sculpture, 'Witch-doctor / Medicine man' by Sithole we feel that the sculptor is pledging solidarity with an African belief, and its appearance is meant to give us an african identity.

The medicine man was the leader of the tribe, he was a herbalist, diviner, rainmaker. He also occupies the most respected position in the society, and is concerned about its welfare and well being. His main purpose is to heal the nation and bring stability to the tribe. This he does in the form of prayers, rituals, and sacrifices, and in so doing he channels good health, fortune and welfare to his people. He also has to ensure that peace and stability is the order of the day in his tribe. All artworks are to be administered by him. African life is controlled by taboos and norms and this in turn prohibits and limits certain actions that could be practised. Those who transgress the law are punished, as this is

tantamount to offending the spirits of the ancestors. It is only the medicine man who can capture and talk to the spirit.

The medicine man can also cure and look after the sick, and has the ability to protect the tribe and the nation in general. He also has the power to control supernatural forces and the evil spirits. The medicine man is chosen into his portfolio by a council of elders. He is chosen because of his intelligence and his gift of seeing and understanding what the ordinary person cannot. He should also have extraordinary power, wisdom and power beyond any other human being. He enjoys such titles as artist, physician, priest, leader, healer. These are some qualities that have been enjoyed and bestowed upon Sithole.

4.7 HAPPINESS TO THE WORLD - Lucas Sithole (Fig. 11)

This sculpture was made from a 'Zulu indigenous wood' in 1987 and it was bought from Gallery 21 in Johannesburg by the 'Evangelische Kirche' in Berlin, Brandenburg, Konsistorium Berlin, West Germany in 1989.

A leaflet that was published specially for the occasion explains that the German Evangelical Church day was held in Berlin from 7 to 11 June 1989. The sculpture was shown in one of the halls dedicated mainly to church services. It is believed that the church was attended by 154 000 permanent participants, making it the biggest such event in post-war Germany.

Here we see an increasingly slender shape of the crucified Christ. He is thin and elongated. His appearance is horrifying, with his hands outstretched from his head. In fact, the hands seem to be growing from his head, looking like someone who is held at gunpoint. His body is slightly twisted and his knees locked together thus giving rhythm to the sculpture as a whole.



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FIG. 11 HAPPINESS TO THE WORLD Lucas Sithole, 1987. Zulu indigenous wood, 195 x 38 x 22 cm. Specialist in Contemporary Art from South Africa, Gallery 21, F.F. Haenggi, Johannesburg. The sculpture was sold to German Evangelical Church in West Germany, 1989

The body of Christ appears to be stretched to the utmost and it is almost torn between the powers that pull it downwards and hold it free from above. It is a tormented body, naked and fragile yet emotional, simple, humble and down to earth.

Many people were horrified and shocked when they saw this crucifix. It is disfigured and hardly looks human. The Christ figure is malnourished, and his face is tortured by the final pain before death. The mouth exhibits a struggle for air, the breath of life. This is the art work that can only happen in the world of Sithole, the world of African Mythology and culture.

His arms grow out of the distorted face and fragile body - the body's narrow line dissolves into the outstretched arms as if he is saying, "I lift up my hands to you in prayer, like dry ground my soul is thirsty for you," (Psalm 143:6). Here the display of tortured life is drawn into the outstretched arms and hands, and yet the hands facing the viewer create something victorious and certain in the movement of arms. Sithole, the artist, named this work "Happiness to the world" (Fig. 11). The work echoes Isaiah (51:3), which says:

"I will show compassion to Jerusalem, to all who live in her ruins. Though her land is a desert, I will make it a garden, like the garden planted in Eden. Joy and gladness will be there, and songs of praise and thanks to me".²⁵

The wooden cross of the crucifix is invisible, but is implied in the tense body and engraved on the face. Unseen it carries this body and the outstretched arms. "Happiness to the World" ultimately was placed in a chapel dedicated to the Christian Church at St Matthew, Berlin, West Germany.

²⁵ Godnews Bible (Psalm 143:6) (United Bible Societies, 1976) Page 619

5. THE ART OF HLUNGWANI AND SITHOLE THAT STROVE TO RESTORE THE LOST AND NEGLECTED AFRICAN TRADITION, IDENTITY AND PRIDE

According to David Koloane in his notes, 'The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression', in the 19th century, South Africa experienced what he calls the unprecedented wave of invasions orchestrated by white European powers. The country was divided into various colonies and territorial expansion was the act of industrialized countries of western Europe.

He also believes that Christian missions from European countries embarked on the process of converting indigenous communities through the salvation of the Bible. Communities were discouraged from all forms of traditional worship and ritual. Countries in southern Africa such as Zambia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa were at some stage under British colonial rule. While Angola and Mozambique were under Portuguese rule. The problem of identity was largely determined by specific type of colonial domination. Creative activities in the traditional lifestyle of most African communities was seriously affected.

David Koloane believed that:

"Industrialization which followed in the wake of colonization in some areas introduced cultural artefacts as marketable commodities. The European concept of artistic excellence was essential not only as an aesthetic criterion but as a marketing strategy as well. This aesthetic criterion, applied to locally produced artefacts, became the barometer of evaluation in colonized countries. South Africa, a highly industrialized country, gradually transformed

its black communities to the wage-earning system of subsistence. Such a system facilitated a rapid urbanization of communities. The organization of cultural activities such as sport and the performing disciplines of music and tribal dancing was initiated in the gold mining compounds. The compounds housed mine workers from different parts of South Africa and from different tribal communities. 'They encouraged separate tribal dancing competitions which became a popular form of entertainment for the worker and the white tourist alike.' The promotion of sport and music was also, in a sense, a process intended to cultivate a competitive spirit based on European values."²⁶

And "Accordingly, the visual arts were chaperoned into the market place through liberal programmes such as the Polly Street Art Centre. The centre was founded in Johannesburg in 1949. It is a historic milestone because it was the first visual-arts programme for Black artists in South Africa. The Polly Street Art Centre was conceived as a recreation facility for the Black workers of the city. It catered for music, boxing, sewing, cooking and the visual arts. The centre later came under the wing of the Johannesburg City Council's cultural section in 1952. It then acquired a prestigious reputation and produced the first group of professional artists. The instructor was a professional White artist who

²⁶ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

conducted lessons on a part time basis in the evenings. The Polly Street programme, together with subsequent non-formal projects which followed in the seventies and the eighties, introduced European teaching methods, techniques and materials. Other projects included the Federated Union of Black Artists commonly known as FUBA, Funda (which means “to learn” in Zulu), both of which are in Johannesburg, and the Community Arts Project in Cape Town. In essence, these centres constitute significant cultural institutions within Black communities. For, with a few exceptions, art is not catered for in Black schools.”²⁷

Koloane also reminds us that:

“In the South African context, the identity dilemma has been aggravated by socio-political conditions created by the apartheid system. The Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 have largely contributed to the cultural dislocation of numerous communities. Territorial space is the stage upon which a community enacts its culture and idiosyncrasies: it is the landscape which lends character to artistic expression. The Land Acts have succeeded in virtually removing the ground from under the feet of numerous communities. While 87 % of the land was

²⁷ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

allocated to white ownership, a mere 13 % was left for the black people."²⁸

The displacement of community in South Africa has forced displaced people to move to industrialized areas. This resulted in unwanted squatter settlements around major towns and cities. Men left their homes for service as miners, domestic workers and industries just as it was in the case of Jackson Hlungwani.

David Koloane also wrote that:

"Authorities in various regions were compelled by the rapid development of industry to formalize segregated residential areas - constellations of townships consisting of uniform, tiny, grey match-box design houses. It was the coming into power of the nationalist government in 1948 which institutionalized apartheid. The grand apartheid design, conceived by Dr. H.F. Verwoerd in the sixties, became embodied in the Bantustan policy. Pockets of land, some often barren and miles away from anywhere, were designated to different communities on an ethnic basis. In other words, every member of the black community was attached, regardless, to an ethnic Bantustan. The primary objective of the Bantustan Homeland policy was to promote ethnic consciousness."²⁹

²⁸ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

²⁹ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

Obviously "The Bantustan concept was underpinned by an array of legislation such as the Group Areas, Separate Amenities, and Bantu Education Acts, resulting in segregated schools and residential areas. Identity documents were likewise also issued. The existence of the homelands and self-governing states, such as Lebowa, Bophuthatswana, Venda, Kwazulu, to name a few, is a living testament of this grandiose scheme."³⁰

It should also be remembered that the sixties and the seventies were the height of apartheid's most repressive laws. Communities were restricted from sharing facilities such as schools, cinemas, libraries, museums, art galleries, etc. Black artists work were being displayed alongside those of their white counterparts in commercial galleries. Art competitions were conducted along non-racial lines. The Visual arts was under white control. Not a single gallery, let alone museum, existed for the black community, rural or urban. At the same time, artists like Hlungwani and Sithole were dependent entirely on their art market for their livelihood.

David Koloane believes that racial discrimination within the visual arts is usually subtle and undetectable to the uninitiated. He went on to say that:

"There is an implicit racial bias in the reviews discouraging Black artists from adhering to or admiring European artistic movements. Instead, Black artists are urged to retain a clumsy, naive expression. A White artist who assimilates a supposedly African

³⁰ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

motif or design in his/her work is often hailed as innovative. Bias notwithstanding, art reviews are just as important to artists as they are to the art market and interested public. Artists may pretend that they are unaffected by reviews on their work, but since art, today, has become a commodity for the market place, the review plays a significant part in promoting their work and, thus, determining its market value. Therefore, however biased or patronizing a review may be, artists must depend on a favourable review in order to sell their works."³¹

The Northern Province enjoys a subtropical climate with densely populated vegetation. David Koloane believes that:

"Wood carving, especially in Venda, is a common preoccupation within the community. It embraces the production of utilitarian and ceremonial artefacts. Elaborate doors are carved to honour royalty; gigantic drum designs for major ceremonies are created."³²

It was in this spirit that rural artist (Northern Province):

"In 1984, one of the most significant art exhibitions ever to be mounted in South Africa was displayed in Johannesburg. It was curated by Ricky Burnett under

³¹ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

³² Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

the aegis of the BMW motorcar manufacturing company. It later travelled extensively in Germany. Included for the first time in a local exhibition was the work of artists from the rural north and eastern Transvaal. The northern area encompasses the tribal communities of the Pedi in Lebowa near the town of Pietersburg; the Tsonga in Gazankulu near Louis Trichardt, and the Venda near Duiwelskloof are located toward the east. These communities are some of the few who still maintain traditional values. Both Gazankulu and Venda are far from any major town or city. This exhibition, known as the "Tributaries", was a revelation to the local art world. The artists from the rural areas soon became household names in wealthy suburban homes. Amongst these were Jackson Hlungwani, the late Nelson Mukuba, Johannes Maswanganyi, Noria Mabaso and Phutuma Seoka. Their work was perceived as the missing link in the romantic notion which combines traces of the Old with the New. A mythical realm of magic was woven around the artists and their environment by the White art reviewers, researchers and spurious dealers. The fact that the artists were obviously untutored in the western mould helped to support and perpetuate this myth."³³

³³ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

David Koloane believed that:

“Jackson Hlungwani has often been referred to as a shaman/artist by local art fundis. Jackson is of Tsonga origin but has settled in neighbouring Venda. This is characteristic of a continual interrelationship existing between the different communities. It is facilitated by shared customs and by intermarriage. A fervent exponent of the Old Testament in the Bible, Jackson is endowed with prodigious energy. In his work the fish symbol is synonymous with a sacred icon. Over the years he has executed near his home in Mbhokota a mammoth shrine which he calls the ‘New Jerusalem’. The shrine is composed of awesome carvings with biblical connotations. Boulders, rocks and other local materials have been used. Jackson, who recently held a major exhibition, again curated by Ricky Burnett under the sponsorship of the BMW company, has become a legend in South African art.”³⁴

Hlungwani’s work was labelled “transitional art”, the art that Koloane says:

“was introduced by academic researchers and reviewers to identify a category of work which fell between mainstream expression and craft. Included were artefacts such as beadwork, musical drums, wire sculpture, walking sticks, various types of

³⁴ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

carving and so forth. Seminars were convened in academic circles where papers on the subject were delivered. Although controversy arose over the transitional art label in art circles, a lucrative market blossomed in commercial galleries, craft outlets and street markets. The transitional label, which is probably more suited to anthropology than the visual arts, was often applied indiscriminately in various quarters to works which were specifically produced by Black artists. The inappropriateness of the label accelerated its demise as its validity was being increasingly challenged. The term 'transitional art' is believed to be used by those who consider themselves authorities on future developments to describe the township art that may eventually prove distinctive or characteristic of a free society."³⁵

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This is how S. Sack in the *Neglected Tradition*, described the work of artists from the Northern Province:

"During the 1980s the work of a number of sculptors working in the Northern Transvaal part of the country, Gazankulu and Venda came to the attention of academic researchers and galleries. This work, given its major public viewing on the tributaries exhibition caused a significant stir bringing what appeared to be completely autonomous aesthetic, an art that was no

³⁵ Koloane, D., The dilemma of identity: A focus on contemporary black South African expression. (Notes) 1990

way mediated by forces of white market or white teachers."³⁶

Ivor Powell when reviewing the Tributaries exhibition said:

"Much more important, though, was the realisation that there is an indigenous independent and vital art in South Africa and that it has been flourishing for years, unheeded by and regardless of the mechanations of the art world in general."³⁷

Ricky Burnett says:

"Jackson belongs to what you'd describe as the peasant class, a group of people only marginally involved in contemporary South African developments. Yet when you listen to him speak and couple that with his sculptures you realise you are in the presence of the most sophisticated artistic mind in the presence of a profound man."³⁸

Hlungwani is one of the South African artists who lived largely in the rural area. He had little formal education, least of all in the arts. He grew up in the country where Blacks had no control over their culture. They have rejected their culture for years and have turned in the face of those who rejected them (Western culture). The white artist belongs to the Western culture that rejects black

³⁶ Sack, S., The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988). (Johannesburg Art Gallery, JHB) Page 27

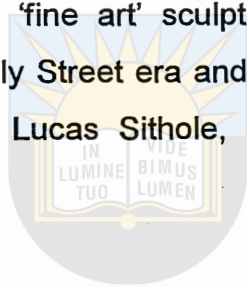
³⁷ Sack, S., The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988). (Johannesburg Art Gallery, JHB) Page 27

³⁸ Leshoai, T., Breathing life into sculpture: I do it first for God and then my people says Hlungwani (City Press December 3, 1989) Page 16

culture. Hlungwani belongs to the marginalised dispossessed and displaced that has over the years overlooked Black culture. Thanks to Hlungwani for bringing black researchers into our culture, providing moral support and encouragement in rediscovering 'ourselves'.

Hlungwani like most artists in the Northern Province worked from unprocessed wood which included roots of trees, dynamic movements and natural forms. M. Martin explains that:

"Both of these sculptural approaches can be compared to the 'fine art' sculptured tradition that arose out of Polly Street era and work produced by Sydney Kumalo, Lucas Sithole, Ezrom Legae and many others."³⁹



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³⁹ Sack, S., The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988). (Johannesburg Art Gallery, JHB) Page 27

6. CONCLUSION

According to Gabriel M. Setiloane, he is:

“very concerned as to what Western man’s nurture has done with his God-given human-ness Botho / uBuntu. Is it perhaps, because Western man has piled on himself all kinds of sophistication which he calls civilization, Christianity, Science or Philosophy, that he has consistently and progressively brainwashed himself and his offspring over the ages, that he is now impervious and insensitive to Divinity in this manner.”⁴⁰

What is happening in South Africa is that African artists like Hlungwani and Sithole have been living in two levels which is their traditional world view and western cultural level.

Both artists worked from unprocessed wood which included roots of trees, dynamic movements and natural forms which they explored to inspire vitality, form, emotions utilizing the shape of the wood employing their personal styles.

At the same time Bill Ainslie saw another dimension in the recognition that all people have within them the capacity for artistic expression. He said:

“We stand between the pole of ‘high art’, which challenges all tastes in its quest for the unconditional act/work, and the pole of community or grass-roots-

⁴⁰ Setiloane, G.M., African Theology: An Introduction (Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1986) Page 38

art, which recognises that all people are capable of authentic and vital expression.”⁴¹

Aggrey Klaaste said that Hlungwani:

“Reminds us of universal truth. Especially he reminds us that man has the free will, the creative space to express himself and his world in many ways. It is up to us to express this difference, this unique creative spirit in sincere and genuine ways if we are to change the world, if ever so slightly. It gives people, through the creative experience, the happy feeling that the eternal truths can be reached in many ways.”⁴²

Klaaste went on to say that according to Simon Pugh, the values admired in the so-called Western masters are also present in the ‘marginal’ art as in Hlungwani’s case.

“This is especially true for South Africa, and large parts of the world, where dogmatic and fixed views of the world are part of the accepted conventional wisdom, where to step out of the accepted ambit of beliefs, is to become an outsider or even irrelevant. Hlungwani reminds us of our essential humanity which is both unique and dynamic. He teaches us that his revelation is a personal experience. He

⁴¹ Ainslie, B., The state of art in South Africa (Conference July 1979, University of Cape Town) Page 80

⁴² Klaaste, A., Jekiseni Hlungwani Xagani (Catalogue Published by Communication Department BMW (SA) (Pty) Ltd Johannesburg, 1988) Page 26

displays that perception in me that we are, in a way, images of the world.”⁴³

Hlungwani is highly religious, he does not see discontinuity between the past and present, life and death, God and gods, Israel and Africa. He is sincere in his unique philosophical dualistic approach to life in general.

In my view, when we speak of the art of Hlungwani and Sithole, we speak of the art of the poor and disadvantaged. It is the art that has been flourishing for years before it was discovered by academics and researchers and given the recognition and the sensitivity it deserves. This is the art that has been moulded in ‘African perceptions’. The art that speaks to the soul of Africa for Africans. The art that has been modified by the philosophy and understanding of the disadvantaged. The art that is in search for a new spiritual identity and sharing its loyalty between God and gods, the past and present, at the same time trying to rediscover its indigenous autonomous aesthetics. The marginalised art that need not be dominated by other cultures.

Andrew Verster wrote in the state of art in South Africa under the heading, ‘is there a South African art or is it still to happen?’ He wrote that there is no South African art. He believed that South African art died before it was born. The reason is:

“They lie in the divided structure of our society. Not only have we inherited the traditional disparities of wealth and opportunity based on colour, but we have used these to separate ourselves into non-communicating groups, so that at no stage could it be

⁴³ Klaaste, A., Jekiseni Hlungwani Xagani (Catalogue Published by Communication Department BMW (SA) (Pty) Ltd Johannesburg, 1988) Page 26

claimed that we were even ONE nation, a united country sharing the same ideals."⁴⁴

This is what Andrew Verster had to say about black artists:

"The black artist sells to a white public, his audience is white, his compatriots in the art world are mostly white, his critics are white, those who give him advice are white, any institution where he can go for training is white controlled and almost exclusively white-staffed. This dissociation from his people must make the usual problem of any artist even more complex. He can however be reasonably certain that what he makes will have a market, as the white art public, through an excess of guilt, or a genuine wish to see an underdog triumph, misguidedly abandons all critical standards and sees in every black scribble the seeds of genius and hungrily devours everything in sight."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Verster, B., The state of art in South Africa (Conference July 1979, University of Cape Town) Page 21

⁴⁵ Verster, B., The state of art in South Africa (Conference July 1979, University of Cape Town) Page 29

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