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HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS IN THE STUDY OF FIGURATIVE WOOD-CARVING IN SOUTH AFRICA.

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Please note that this paper is a draft and that the foot-notes have not been included. I do not wish it to be cited in its present form.

It is a widely accepted and disseminated tenet in virtually all the literature on African art that no tradition of figurative sculpture comparable to that of West and Central Africa existed in Southern Africa[1]. This notion has bad and continues to have such wide currency in the literature that many blacks in South Africa are entirely unaware of the existence of their own artistic heritage.[2] The propagation and perpetuation of this myth has been predicated on the most meagre of evidence. It is significant in the light of the argument that follows, that the South African Government itself, in pamphlets issued for the information of prospective white immigrants from Europe,[3] continues to propagate this view of black South Africans as "fine-art" less. Here I am most concerned with the presentation of these peoples as having had no tradition of figurative free-standing sculpture as it was this form of material culture which had the widest acceptance in Europe and America as "Art"[4]. This situation has been exacerbated by the tendency in all the general literature on African art to represent Southern Africa with photographs of utilitarian objects such as headrests, milk pails and spoons among others [5]. What this paper will attempt, then, is to examine why this myth has gained such wide acceptance and it will be examined in relation both to the history of the study or lack thereof of woodcarving traditions in South Africa and to the actual distribution of such traditions.

What strikes one initially in perusing the literature on African art is that if any of the individual Southern African groups is mentioned, they are, ninety precent of the time, limited to the Zulu and the Shona, and the latter are often included only implicitly by reference to Great Zimbabwe [6]. In fact it is often clear

that the authors of such works have little or no knowledge of the existence of other cultural groups among the blacks of Southern Africa. Yet there are a few early publications which do give some coverage of the complexity of the material culture of these peoples, and they often include examples of wooden free-standing sculpture.[7] These books were often written by missionaries and travellers during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the present century.[8] In none of these, until the publication of von Sydow,[9] does one find any mention of "Zulu" figures, although many of them, including von Sydow, give examples of figures by other peoples in the region. Yet in most of the more recent literature there has been a persistent reference to "Zulu" forms as the most developed among Southern African traditional sculpture.[10]

In European, as opposed to British, museums of Ethnology, there is often a fairly accurate documentation of their Southern African material[11] which appears to contradict some of the documentation in British museums but which is ignored in much of the literature in English on African art. The British Museum, as late as 1976 still had material from various Nguni groups indiscriminately labelled as "kaffir", the Southern African material there being reserved till last for reclassification. Where the "kaffir" lable was changed, it was equally indiscriminately translated to be "Zulu" or "Xhosa"[12], in total disregard that some of this material might have stemmed from other Nguni groups such as the Swazi, Tsonga-Shangane, Fingo, Pondo and Ndebele, to name but a few.

What then is an accurate reflection of the real situation? The answer depends on what one is prepared to accept as "art" and what one rejects as "craft". Are Zulu or Shona headrests sculptures? Can they be considered "art" at all? While this question is central to the issue of why the traditional wood sculpture of Southern

African blacks is so obscured in the histories, I shall assume that, in line with recent methodologies in African art history[13], such distinctions between "high" art and "craft" can be discarded.

Accepting that we can discard the idea that to be considered "sculpture" an object must be non-functional and non-utilitarian, it emerges that almost all Southern African black peoples have or had a tradition of sculpture. Such traditons include the bone-handled knives of Southern Sotho groups, the wooden spoons of the Korana and Tswana[14] the wooden doors of the Venda, their divining bowls and the headrests of the Tsonga-Shangane. Headrests were made and used by many different South-African groups and range from the overtly figurative animals on some Tsonga-Shangane examples to the apparently "abstract" and non-figurative forms of Zulu or Shona examples.

But sculpture that is free-standing, i.e. that is not attached to any other object, is more limited in distribution in the region and is, where we have reliable documentation, almost inevitably linked to one of two contexts of usage. On the one hand are the figures used as symbolic and didactic tools in the initiation institutions of Tswana, North Sotho and Tsonga-Shangane males and Venda females.[15] The geographical limits of this complex can thus be defined as the Northern Cape, Botswana, the Transvaal and Southern Mozambique. More or less coinciding with this are the limits in which one finds some documented examples of figures used in healing and divinatory contexts, although puppet figures appear to have been used by both Nguni and South Sotho groups as well.[16] However, contrary to every lable put to figures from Southern Africa in the museums and the books, there are no documented examples of ancestor figures from the region: in

ancestor-veneration the objects which acted as a medium for locating the ancestor included headrests[17], hoes, piles of stones[18], guns[19], and trees[20].

In the Northern Transvaal there are a number of initiation institutions whose distribution does not necessarily coincide with lingustic or cultural boundaries, nor with political entities. Thus some Tswana groups have similar initiation institutions to some North Sotho, the Western Venda follow North Sotho male Initiation patterns but follow Venda tradition in the Domba initiations for women. In the area of the central lowveld, the Lovedu, Phalaborwa, Kgaga, Tsonga-Shangane and some Swazi elements attend the same initiation lodges.[21] The Tsonga-Shangane and Swazi, however, retain alongside this the Nguni practice of forming age-grade regiments among their male youth. It is from these contexts of, generally male, although also unusually female, initiations that the vast majority of free-standing sculpture springs, and this includes all those figures presently classified as "Zulu" ancestor figures. Not only is there no evidence that the Zulu ever used "ancestor" figures, there is also no evidence that they ever used them in initiation.

It is suggested that Shaka, in his re-arrangement of the Zulu youth into a military age-grade system, outlawed all previous forms of initiation.[22] This would yield a date of ca. 1820 for a terminus post quem in the dating of any possible initiation figures among the Zulu, thus rendering the chances of any such figures' surviving to the minimum. Research in the literature on other, particularly Southern Nguni groups such as the Bhaca, Fingo, Pondo, Pondomise and Tembu has not yielded any evidence, either from prior or present initiation institutions, that figures were ever used in this context by any Nguni-speakers. A possible exception to this may be some Swazi groups in the

area of Bushbuck Ridge (Northern Transvaal) where Sotho or Tsonga initiation is followed.

It appears that the identification as Zulu of many of the scultures in question has rested on the fact that the male figures in this style often wear a headring, a headdress to which only seasoned Zulu and other Nguni warriors were entitled [23]. But, with the dispersal of Zulu groups during the Mfecane, the groups formed by the followers of Mzilikaze, of Matshangane and of Mswati i.e. the Zimbabwean Ndebele, the Tsonga - Shangane and the Swazi, all retained the Zulu age-grade system and its symbols of status, including the headring. Furthermore other groups with whom these Nguni elements came into contact often copied the headring hairstyle, as can be seen in some Pedi sculpture and among Ronga and Djonga Tsonga in Mozambique. Informants in Gazankulu, where figures with headrings appear paired with female figures suggested that they were not only used in initiation institutions, but were also set up near the chief's dwelling when the seasoned warriors were given their headrings. The presence of the female figure was explained by these Tsonga-Shangane as showing that only men who had reached this status were allowed to marry.[24]

Furthermore, both figures with headrings and other figures in a similar style but without headrings are documented in European collections, sometimes at an early date, with either a general provenance of South-East Africa, or Kaffir or, and probably more accurately as Thonga.[25] Two figures in the British Museum, accessioned in 1893 and published a bit later by Distant,[26] are extremely accurately provenanced as Being Magwamba - a Tsonga-Shangane group- and coming from the area of Spelonken in the Transvaal.[27] Yet the practice of accessioning these figures as "Zulu" continued unabated throughout the next seventy years.[28]

The issue is, however, complicated by the fact that staffs with their tops carved as heads in a similar, if not identical style, have been documented in, and collected in Zulu areas[29]. There may be an historical explanation for this in that Tsonga blacksmiths and carvers in northern Zulu territory are known to have worked for Zulu patrons[30] and could well have produced these staffs for these patrons. The fact that they were found in a wider distribution in Zulu territory could be explained by either the mobility of the object or the mobility of the carver. That this is not unlikely is evidenced by the fact that Ellenberger[31] recorded under what he called "Basotho" woodcarving a headrest that was undoubtedly of Shona manufacture, and that Sotho-style bone-handled knives had been collected in Swazi territory before the turn of the century.[32]

Similar cases of unjustified classification of figures as "Zulu" are demonstrable in the famous British Museum figure and a pair in the Royal Scottish Museum [33]. The British Museum example was identified as Zulu by Fagg on stylistic grounds. It came originally from the Wellcome Foundation, which does not have any record of a more accurate provenance than "South-east Africa". Fagg seems to have compared the head of the British Museum figure to early examples of "tourist" figures from Zulu territory [34] and the decorative elements on the "body" of this figure to Zulu headrest forms and to have arrived at a classification of "Zulu" for the figure. Following the same route, and using Fagg's authority, Idiens identified two figures in the Royal Scottish Museum, as Zulu although the documentation of provenance of these figures is equally sketchy[35]. In fact the examples of this are legion and both a market for and a myth about so-called Zulu sculpture has been built up with no foundation in fact.

What is actually known of the traditional contexts in which the free-standing figures were used by Southern African black peoples is largely the material collected and published by missionaries and anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,[36] and to a few later anthropologists[37] and to current research. Problems arise, of course, in that some of the traditions that were current in the nineteenth century are in abeyance today, and some of the practices that have survived till today have undoubtedly undergone changes.[38] In the writings of German and Swiss missionaries one has record of the use of figures in ritual situations,[39] but little inquiry was made by London Missionary Society operatives in the region about objects they collected from the "natives."[40] Thus more is known of the objects made and used by North Sotho, Venda, Tsonga and South Sotho groups where missionaries of the German and Swiss missions worked than is known or published of the objects made and used by the Nguni in general [41].

It is therefore even more difficult to understand why the Zulu have been credited with the creation of so much figurative sculpture. The missionaries and anthropologists in general would have anyway had greater access to objects whose use and manufacture did not involve any proscriptive norms. Thus they say very much more about the useful objects than they do about the sculptures of any of the "natives" with whom they dwelt.[42] By crediting the Zulu with the creation of "sculpture" as opposed to "craft", they credit them with, albeit implicitly, a greater degree of "culture".

The reasons for this prejudicial preference are parallel to the reasons for the neglect and even suppression of any evidence that the black peoples of Southern Africa in general were capable of producing figure sculpture of equal "quality"[43] to that produced by West or central African peoples. These reasons are to be looked for in the political discourse and power structures of

colonialism and imperialism in Africa.

Southern Africa as a whole and South Africa in particular were subject to a far more thoroughgoing colonization by white settlers, evangelisation by Christian missionaries and subjugation through white military and economic power structures than any other part of Africa. It has been argued in some recent literature on Victorian views of the African, that evangelical and colonial activity was justified by particular, but different ideologies [44]. Thus Victorian attempts to justify their subjugation of the "natives" in the colonies was based on a racist and evolutionist theory of the "innate" inferiority of the black-skinned peoples. That they used the term "Kaffir" for the blacks in their two earliest South-African colonies i.e. the Cape and Natal, is indicative of this attitude. Yet for the British, and in spite of the interminable wars they fought against the Zulu, this group emerged in the discourse of colonialism as a "cut above the rest" of Southern African blacks. The Zulu were often claimed to be "Hamitic", ie. to have Arab characteristics and thus to be truly "Kaffirs" i.e. unbelievers or lapsed "muslims". Their military organization impressed their would-be colonial masters and so they became better known than their less militaristic neighbours.[45]

But it was not the Zulu who produced most of the free-standing sculpture from Southern Africa of the type that missionaries, artists and anthropologists were prepared to admit to the status of "art". The missionaries in their attempts to rescue the natives" from their heathenism had to admit that the African was not necessarily innately savage and uncivilized. Thus missionary literature can document the skills of these heathens as indices to their possible betterment. The objects collected by the missionaries throughout Africa as curiosities and "trophies" of the war against heathenism were themselves to be the harbingers

of a new view that black peoples were possibly "civilized" and that allowed Independence for African peoples to become a probability. But the missionaries and colonialists who established themselves earlier in South Africa appear to have been more efficient than in the rest of Africa[46] in removing from their original contexts most of the crafted objects of the subjugated and converted peoples. Ninety percent of Nineteenth century collections of Southern African woodcarving is in European, especially, British, Dutch and German museums[46]. A few major collections dating from the fisrt part of this century have remained in South Africa, but are under constant threat from the market forces in America and Europe. This interest in art from Southern Africa is quite new, but continues in a manner allied to the colonialist domination of the people themselves. European domination in South Africa has traditionally relied on the justification in racial terms of white superiority over black, and the rights of the whites to dispose of black labour, land and property as they saw fit[47].

It is clear then, that it served the purposes of the white Settlers in South Africa who saw a perpetuation of white domination as their only future, to maintain the myth that South African blacks were more "primitive" and less advanced than their West and Central African counterparts. While West and Central African countries were gaining their independence and setting up museums in which to preserve their artistic heritages, black South Africans were increasingly subjected to an ideology which denied them any past or future culture[48]. It is only since 1970, with West and Central African art works becoming ever more rare that a market for South African traditional arts has been growing[49], the growth of the market has been in direct proportion to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

It is interesting that in Zimbabwe where a programme of suppression of information on Shona traditions ended in a moratorium on research into Great Zimbabwe, the objects and buildings which white colonists insisted could not be of black manufacture, ultimately became symbols of black nationalist aspirations and cultural pride. Similar processes may yet emerge in South Africa as a wider dissemination of knowledge about historical cultures in the country is effected.