

## LIVING CULTURE AND CREATIVE CULTURAL ASSETS

J.M. Dederen

University of Venda for Science and Technology

### Available information

A presentation of the cultural assets of the Soutpansberg could be divided into two separate but also related and complementary categories, namely LIVING CULTURE and ARCHAEOLOGY. The first one includes different kinds of interesting knowledge and practices shared and actively practiced by the inhabitants of the region, such as healing and initiation. Some of the better documented aspects in the region relate to creative culture: pottery, woodcarving, dance, orature, music and dance, both 'traditional' and contemporary. Archaeological data refer to the remnants of past cultural knowledge and practices (artefacts, sites, shelters, monuments).

### *Soutpansberg defined*

The Soutpansberg is the 'traditional home' of many Venda speakers in South Africa. The name was used by settlers as reference to a magisterial district comprising the majority of the 'Venda tribes'. There is ample anthropological and archaeological evidence for the existence of a pre-colonial regional culture including the Soutpansberg into a wider territory stretching from Botswana, over the Limpopo and southern Zimbabwe into Mocambique.

### *Details of author's data sources/database*

Contemporary sculpture from Venda is produced by thirty odd artists. My introduction to the fraternity of woodcarvers dates back to 1987 and my interaction reached its peak between 1992-97 when I facilitated a number of workshops and exhibitions for outside sponsors. I used informal interview data, photo's and video material for a doctoral project.

### *Importance of the component:*

The Venda artists were 'discovered' by the art market in 1985 and 'developed' by some energetic souls within the Venda Development Corporation in the second half of the eighties. Art works from this area have been exhibited in major national and international events (Venice Biennale; Vita awards; Oxford Museum of Modern Art; Stockholm's Kulturhuset; Berlin's House of World Cultures etc.).

### Summary statistics

I have grouped members of the collective of Venda woodcarvers for convenience sake into four subgroupings: the Central (Muledane; Tshakhuma); Western (Nzhelele); Northern (Mutale) and Southern (Elim-Giyani) clusters. There were in the late eighties literally hundreds of woodcarvers (of curio and traditional-functional items). I know

thirty odd carvers who produce figurative pieces. The tradition of woodcarving obviously predates the 'discovery' of Noria Mabasa, Jackson Hlungwani and others in the mid eighties. Its promotion by the national and international art world, on the other hand, has 'created' (or at least boosted) a novel tradition of contemporary sculpture.

### Major studies and publications

The traditional woodcarving has been the subject of a doctoral thesis by Prof. A. Nettleton (Wits). Duncan (MA Wits) has clarified the success of Venda sculpture in the local art market. My own doctoral project is, at present, the only attempt at a comprehensive study of the collective of Venda woodcarvers. The same artists have been included in a variety of monographs, catalogues on South African art. These contributions, I feel, have been both superficial and ideologically biased. They are covered in the literature review and bibliography of my thesis.

### Recommendations for priority studies required to fill any gaps identified:

- The link between contemporary and 'traditional' forms of sculpture, including archaeological clay figurines in the region, needs to be explored further.
- Only two of the producers of figurative carving have been studied as individual case studies: Hlungwani (BMW exhibition catalogue) and Mudzunga (Kaplan, MA wits).
- How can sculpture, old and new traditions, be meaningfully integrated in the educational curriculum?
- How can it contribute to the development of the wider creative potential in the province?
- Effects on use of indigenous wood; alternatives.
- How to 'convert' more roadside carvers to figurative carving (partly covered in the thesis).
- Given the unemployment levels in the province, the major challenge for researchers in the area remains to find ways of balancing academic interests and concerns with real socio-economic problems in the area.

### Major stakeholders in the preservation/development of creative culture

Apart from the obvious stakeholders: academics and their students, government departments and the media, there are some excellent examples of 'the industry' supporting research and promotion activities in the field of creative culture:

- e.g. Lajuma caters actively for ecological research;

- Lesheba organizes workshops for woodcarvers;

both Lajuba and Lesheba have educational programs for surrounding communities.

Shiluvari initiated a development and promotion organization (Ribolla)

### **Related components/experts**

Excellent contributions have been made in three aspects of the field of creative culture, which at the time of investigation were found to be of special interest (compared with other cultural areas in South Africa):

- Dr. J. Kruger (previously Univen; Potch): ethno-musicology.
- Dr. I. Leroux (previously Univen) orature.
- Dr. Van Tonder (RAU) Venda dance.



N. Hahn