



CRITICAL DISCOURSE OF AFRICAN VERNACULAR ROOTED IMAGERIES IN PITIKA NTULI'S SCULPTURES

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ABSTRACT

My paper presents a critical discourse on African vernacular rooted imageries in the contemporary sculptures of Ntuli, the ideas they convey to viewers and how Africanness is indicated in each depiction produced between 2007 and 2016. I read Ntuli's contemporary sculptures as African vernacular rooted because he appropriates in them cultural imageries from engagement with African contexts. Five images of his sculptures and installations were purposively selected for thematic and visual analysis. I adopt visual hermeneutics theory, formal analysis and cultural history methods for the reading of each work. The narrative reveals that Ntuli's vernacular imageries reflects black South African men and a woman rooted in past and present socio-political events in South Africa. The thematic interpretations of the imageries reveal ideas on massacre not merely during apartheid but in post-apartheid South Africa, torture of victims detained without trial, anti-racialism and reflection on a historical hero from Zulu culture.

KEYWORDS

Vernacular rooted | Imagery | Contemporary Sculpture | Installations | Africanness

INTRODUCTION

Pitika Ntuli (b. 1942) is not only a painter but also a sculptor, writer, and poet. He is a Professor of Fine Arts and the History of Arts as well as an adjunct Professor of Sociology. Ntuli was released from prison into exile, during which he traversed several diaspora countries within Africa and beyond. He sojourned in the UK from where he left to study at the Pratt Institute in New York, USA and obtained a Masters of Fine Arts and a Masters of Arts in Comparative Industrial Relations and Industrial Sociology. He returned to South Africa from exile in 1994 and took up a lecturing job at the Department of Fine Arts, Wits University. Although he participated in several exhibitions in Europe and the US, his first exhibition in South Africa was in 2010 and was titled *Scent of Invisible Footprints*.

Given the fact that Ntuli has been producing sculptures for over four decades, this research focuses on interrogating the African vernacular rooted imageries in his contemporary sculptures produced between 2007 and 2016. Ntuli's contemporary sculptures are read as vernacular because he appropriates in them cultural imageries that are rooted in South African cultures and as a rethink in the use of old terminology in opening new debate (Greaves, 2015:7; Gupta and Adams, 2018:2). Five of his works were purposively sampled, and the selected works are entitled *Marikana* (2012/13), *Silverton Three* (2013), *Mandela and the Rainbow Children* (2015), *The Torture of a Woman Giving Birth in Prison* (2015), and *Shaka Zulu* (2015). The works have all been analysed using visual hermeneutics theory, formal analysis, and cultural history methodologies. Therefore, in narrating the experiences represented, I adopt the visual hermeneutics which states that "a return to history" is necessary for situating the present experiences of the cultural imageries (Tolia-Kelly and Morris, 2004:158). To establish the ideas in each artwork, I focus the reading on forms and contents since form is insufficient for determining the idea in a work of art (Filani, 1998:33). The following research questions guided the discussion in this paper, what cultural imageries did Ntuli appropriate in his contemporary vernacular sculptures? What ideas does the interpretation of the renditions convey?

Although the research findings reveal that Ntuli's contemporary vernacular sculptures reflect past and

present experiences of black South Africans, Ntuli observes that "my symbolisms show the faces of my people, their voices, their movements, their cries, their laughter, their struggles and triumphs" (Ntuli, 2010:20). So, while such works are "infused with ... African sensibilities" (Ntuli, 2010:20), they hint on his response to the social issues in South Africa. The aims of those renditions are to engage the world with desired meanings and invoke viable emotions (Ntuli, 2010:17). Possibly, his experiences during the struggle against apartheid and imprisonment on death row left hurting and haunting memories in him. Pitika Ntuli posits that I was "carry[ing] echoes in my eardrums, memories in my mind" (Ntuli, 2010:22). His depiction *Torture of a Woman Giving Birth in Prison* (2015) possibly reflects one of such memories and echoes of agony in his eardrums.

In addition to works that are influenced by the cries and movements of black South Africans, Antoinette and Pitika Ntuli note that, "Ntuli is an African artist who is acutely aware of the significance of all things African, including his ancestors, the interconnectedness of natural and human worlds ... in shaping his art" (Ntuli and Ntuli, 2010:11). To demonstrate how the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds shaped Ntuli's art, David Koloane argues that, "most of Pitika's sculptures are anthropomorphic" (Koloane, 2010:35). The reason is, "in African worldviews animals are not separate from humans". Thus, you will discover that "each Nguni or Sotho family has an animal totem". Possibly, that world view accounts for shaping the anthropomorphic sculpture entitled *Shaka Zulu* (2015) (Fig. 05).

To narrate his engagement with tradition in Zulu culture, Pitika Ntuli claims that "in my culture when an individual or the community as a whole is faced with a crisis in the form of illness, or if demons wreak havoc in the lives of the people, the individual/community turns to Isangoma—the healer who will in turn 'throw bones' to divine the problem" (Ntuli, 2010:28). Although Isangoma is a Zulu name for identifying traditional healers, it is adopted in identifying such practitioners in southern Africa. But, to show the influence of this traditional practice on Ntuli, he has heaps of bones as an installation in his studio. According to Ntuli, "my bone sculptures seek to divine

myths and mythologies. I divine the state of our nation with my bone sculptures". However, the outcome of his divinations is not documented because they are not within the scope of this study.

While he appropriates cultural imagery from the South African context, Antoinette and Pitika Ntuli note that he is concerned in demonstrating African identity as the major drive for such appropriations (Ntuli and Ntuli, 2010:10). Thus, Antoinette and Pitika Ntuli conclude that "he is an African artist whose work is redolent of African influence and abundant references to Africa" (Ntuli and Ntuli, 2010:11). For the mere fact that his works show abundant references to Africa does not necessarily establish African identity except the content and context are interrogated to narrate such a stance. In tracing the ideas in his works, Pitika Ntuli argues that "ideas are not born in isolation. My brain or body responds to the external world, builds storage of facts and feelings that must be referenced for the world to interact with because art is [a] language that allows me to express disagreeable ideas agreeably" (Ntuli, 2010:25). I argue that not all viewers of artworks or Ntuli's works may interact well with his works for, except they understand and perceive the cultural and historical facts the works convey, their subjective interpretations may frame ideas that are not related to his.

In addition to creating installation sculptures, he also sculpts large stones. As Pitika Ntuli notes, "I chose a medium that suited me best: sculpture". Therefore, with his installations and sculptures, Ntuli is "leaving trails of artworks that speak where words fail" (Ntuli, 2010:20). So, his commitment to using installations and sculptures as a medium in communicating the

facts of his time makes his works worth interrogating. According to Ntuli, Shlomo Shoham's view expresses my belief, when he states that, "If the individual has heeded the call to ... embark on a search for ... creative expression; he still has to find the mode and medium of creativity optimally suited to his specific psycho-social configuration" (Ntuli, 2010:20). In narrating the media he uses in making his installation sculptures, Pitika Ntuli argues that "I can make bold to say in my art, 'Western found objects' are employed with an African spirit" (Ntuli, 2010:17). Although Ntuli's installations are responses to African scenes and issues, his argument establishes that he uses foreign found objects in narrating such stories rooted in South African space. This is evident in *Marikana* (2012/13), *Silverton Three* (2013) and *Shaka Zulu* (2015). To support Ntuli's stance on the media he employs in executing installation sculptures, David Koloane observes that his works show "a variety of found objects" (Koloane, 2010:135). Therefore, given the fact that his works and mode of renditions are contemporary sculptures, it destabilises any claim of reading them as a continuation of historical vernacular African art.

In terms of reception of Ntuli's sculptures, I argue that there has been local and international reception for his works, especially during the years he spent in exile and after returning to South Africa. Since his return to South Africa, his artworks have enjoyed a good reception. Examples of his works exhibited in public spaces include *Silverton Three* (2013) at Soweto, and *Marikana* (2012/13), which was a response to the Marikana killing of black African miners. Other works in this study are part of a sponsored project Ntuli was working on.

ANALYSIS OF THE SCULPTURES AND INSTALLATIONS

His installation sculpture entitled *Marikana* (2012/13) (Fig. 01), shows mixed found objects. The title "Marikana" introduces where striking miners were massacred in August 2012 and still hints at a rural place of the Tswana cultural group (Naicker, 2015:99) in the North-West Province of South Africa. This was an installation in an open space in South Africa shortly after the grievous display of power by the police. The composition reveals three disparate vernacular imageries evocated with a variety of found objects which reference striking mineworkers before they were

massacred. This exemplifies a worrisome occurrence that might be linked with "the horror of apartheid [had it not] been officially laid to rest" (Neke, 1999:8).

The image on the left side is, in Pitika Ntuli's words, "the leader of the striking miners" (Ntuli, 2017). Though this is Ntuli's claim, I, however, argue that it could be a different mine worker rather than the leader. His head is constructed with a gearbox of a car, perhaps to signify how effective he was in thinking and directing the affairs of the miners. The

facial features constructed on the head signal a stern gaze at viewers, with mouth agape, possibly while he articulated reasons for the strike action. The green plastic container covering him, as Ivan Pijoo notes, hints at a subjective identity of “the image of Mgcineni Noki aka The Man in the Green Blanket” (Pijoo, 2017:1). Although Pijoo’s identification establishes the identity of the leader, it also locates his Xhosa cultural identity. The other two vernacular symbolisms were also created with found objects such as was evident in the oeuvres of Ezrom Legae (1938-1999). Ntuli’s adoption of found objects in creating installations is not limited to plastic containers but also includes exhaust pipes and other scraps. As David Koloane notes, his works show “uncanny utilisation of motor parts characterised by linear projections of entangled exhaust pipes and other tubular articulations, always offbeat in nature” (Koloane, 2010:35).



Fig. 01. Ntuli, *Marikana*, 2012/13. Mixed media, varying sizes. Artist’s collection (Courtesy of Ntuli)

This experience invokes the history of the massacre of protesting mineworkers before they were shot at by security police. Even though the Marikana incident happened in post-apartheid South Africa, a similar massacre took place on 21st March 1960, at Sharpeville, near Johannesburg. An article titled *Sharpeville* states

that “the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) started new campaigns against the hated pass system. So, on the morning of 21st March 1960, 5000 people gathered at the Sharpeville police station to start the campaign”. Though they were angry, they were peaceful and quiet when suddenly, the police opened fire on them without warning and this led to the death of sixty nine people¹ (Sharpeville, 1960).

¹ In the source text: the history of massacre is recalled through the Marikana episode.

It also invokes the Soweto uprising of June 16, 1976. However, in this interactive installation, the philosophy that seems to guide Ntuli is one that speaks in outright condemnation of the killing of the mineworkers rather than exploring the option of dialogue.

Although the aim, in Ntuli's view, is a condemnation of the killings, Gael Neke elaborates that it gives a clue to a "protest art [which] ran a course of rejection or at best critical ambivalence" (Ntuli, 2017; Neke, 1999:2). Alternatively, in Sandra Klopper's words, the aim hints at a massacre caused by "the greed of wealthy mining magnates" who did not allow for recourse to resolving the wage dispute strike despite its peaceful mode, so as to continue their exploitation (Klopper, 2013:137). Therefore, as WJT Mitchell argues, it serves as "a dynamic medium" of cultural weapon in a public space for viewers to relate with in calling for justice (Mitchell, 2002:2). Similarly, *Silverton Three* (2013) (Fig. 02), in Mitchell's (2002:1) view, is a title that hints on the formation of individual identities in South Africa. The identity of the three men suggests Wilfred Madela, Humphrey Makhubo, and Stephen Mafoko

The stylised vernacular sculpture located in Soweto depicts a man whose right hand, pointing skywards, holds a gun likened to an AK-47 thus evoking "the armed struggle"² (Ntuli, 2015). Although the dustbin lid on the left hand seems to symbolise a shield held by a warrior, Ntuli, however, argues that it "speaks to the cultural struggles generally referred to as the Soweto Uprising". It is however contestable for Ntuli to associate the dustbin lid with a different struggle because that symbol obviously evokes the idea of a shield. Perhaps he acknowledges that struggle to make the siting of the monument in Soweto relevant.

In narrating the media employed in this work, several scrap materials were employed in the creation of this full standing image that is above life-size. Though the head, made of gearbox, has tripartite faces, it appears to be a symbolic representation of "the three freedom fighters and captures three moods – calm determination; confrontation; and surprise"³ (Ntuli, 2015). The gearbox head, as Pitika Ntuli further observes, "symbolise[s] the working of the brain, significantly the brain of a military struggle". A feather like symbol atop the head, on which

a dove perches, does not merely symbolise peace, but "a war feather ala Shaka, Maqoma, Sekhukhuni and other traditional leaders who resisted colonial incursions into our sacred land"⁴ (Ntuli, 2015).



Fig. 02. Ntuli, *Silverton Three*, 2013. Metal, 5metres. Soweto. (Courtesy of Artist)

Furthermore, a solid iron from an earthmover is welded to the symbolic body of this imagery to create the torso and limbs. Notwithstanding the interpretations of the different parts employed in constructing this vernacular imagery, in John Peffer's view, it demonstrates "expressive distortion of the human form" (Peffer, 2009:42). The symbolism stands on two solid metals welded to the upper frame which symbolises the body. Pitika Ntuli argues that the earthmover "symbolises the struggle for land and the imperative for its eventual redistribution"⁵ (Ntuli, 2015). It is arguable however to associate the earthmover used as the massive legs of the monument with the struggle for land. It nonetheless reveals an attempt at relaying a present political commentary that is beyond the past which his visual narrative seeks to make. Ntuli further notes that "the centrality of space [at] this moment is characterised by

2 In the source text: Ntuli narrates the significance of the symbol of the gun.

3 In the source text: Ntuli's description hints on his perceived view of the young men's plight before they were killed.

4 In the source text: even though they had no such symbol of war feather, Ntuli likened them to warriors hence the portrayal of the element.

5 In the source text: although he recalls the land struggle, the work particularly addresses the siege that led to the death of the three black men.

a womb-like opening in the centre of the Monument, symbolic of the birth of a new, caring society”.

Although the reading “explored form and content” (Filani, 2018:17) of overt political rendition, the category of the present experience invokes the cultural history of the three black South African men who were killed on January 25, 1980. They were until police killed them during apartheid, members of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Mafeno, 2013:1). According to *South African History Online*, they

... were allegedly on their way to carry out a planned MK sabotage mission on petrol depots at Watloo near Mamelodi. En route, the trio realised they were being tailed by the police. In an attempt to escape, they took refuge in a branch of Volkskas Bank in Silverton, Pretoria. They held 25 civilians in the bank hostage, making a number of demands, including a meeting with State President Vorster, the release of Nelson Mandela and a man called Mange, as well as R100, 000 in cash and an aircraft to fly them to Maputo (*South African History Online*, 2011:1).

Rather than grant their requests, a team of security police stormed the bank and killed the three black South Africans. As Pitika Ntuli notes, “the Monument captures the significance of the siege in re-igniting the hope of the oppressed”⁶ (Ntuli, 2015). Given that the monument symbolises a commemorative vernacular sculpture in honour of the “fallen heroes” for their role in the liberation movement (Koloane, 2010:140; Peffer, 2009: xviii), it might also be argued that the formal elements of this depiction are in dissonance with commemorative sculpture in African art. Somewhat, it “tell[s] a story of courage, [and] self-sacrifice” displayed by soldiers (Combrinck, 2013:11).

In addition, I argue, that this public art becomes not just a vehicle for revealing the multiplicity of hidden stories of the liberation struggle, but the silenced histories of oppression (Opper, 2010:45). Africanness is indicated not merely for reflecting black South Africans who were indigenous to the continent, but, as Ntuli “ingrained into the monument Adinkra and Dogon symbols of reconciliation, bravery, fearlessness and humility” (Combrinck, 2013:11). Consequently, these symbols demonstrate the wider context of African identities in other African nations. Conversely, in *The Torture of a Woman Giving Birth in Prison* (2015) (Fig. 03), we see a different “thematic thrust” (Filani, 2018:20). It unravels an area of power abuse during the recent past apartheid government (Neke, 1999:8).

The context depicts a stylised but expressive vernacular imagery which references a black African woman standing but bowed with both hands raised and the head of a baby around her stomach. During a response to interview questions, Pitika Ntuli notes that “she was giving birth to a baby while in prison yet beaten by a policeman during the apartheid period” (Ntuli, 2017). While the work, however, gives dissonance to torture as no depiction shows the act of brutality, Pitika Ntuli argues that “the two hands were raised in self-protection and defense from the several stripes the policeman was laying on her. Yet, the expression on her face suggests courageous affirmation to the police officer that ‘the stripes will not make me cry’” (Ntuli, 2017). Despite the height of oppression and torture, her hope of giving birth to her baby did not dim. However, her posture and facial expression recall similar mode of depiction that was evident in the works of South African artist Dumile Feni (1942-1991), who represented man like beast.

6 In the source text: this narrates the function of the struggle for liberation from apartheid.



Fig. 03. Ntuli, *The Torture of A Woman Giving Birth in Prison*, 2015. Stone, 1.7 Metre. Artists Collection (Photo by Sule A. James)

The medium Ntuli employed in executing this sculpture is a large stone that is about life-size. In Pitika Ntuli's view, the process of production is described as "entering into a conversation with a piece of granite stone" (Ntuli, 2010:26). During his encounter with the stone, series of destruction takes place as he begins to use a sharp angle grinder to cut out unwanted parts. The process continues with the use of a chisel to shape out different aspects of the symbolism. From the top of this stone sculpture, a close look at the hands reveals that they were shaped differently, the one on the right side appearing bigger, perhaps suggesting that it is swollen as a result of the severe torture by security police. This invokes the idea of a "body in distress as a sign of the inhumane condition" (Peffer, 2009:41). In the depiction of her legs, it seems the artist gave no consideration for proportion, as her right leg is carved bigger than the left leg.

In narrating the cultural history of this depiction, it might be argued that "Ntuli's sculptural piece ... is inseparable from his country's history and his experiences" (Naidoo, 2010:123). Before Ntuli was released into exile, he "was in a death cell at Matsapa prison in Swaziland" during the period of apartheid (Manaka, 1987:12). Possibly, it recalls one of the past cries echoing in his eardrums. But before Ntuli was imprisoned for political struggles, between the 1960s and 1980s, cases of the security police detaining black South African men, women and children opposed to apartheid without trials were unsavoury (Merrett, 1990:28). Aside from imprisoning them, the security police acted with impunity while interrogating and torturing them. Commenting on this phenomenon, Christopher Merrett observes that "Women constitut[ed] 10% of the detainee population in late 1986 [and many] encountered specific problems, in particular, miscarriages after assault, [and] tear gassing during pregnancy" (Merrett, 1990:30). The consequences of such torture resulted, as Merrett further notes, in "at least one fetus ... [being] found in a cell". In narrating this experience during dialogue, Pitika Ntuli claims that "because of the brutality meted out to this woman while giving birth, her baby came out in an abnormal way appearing around her stomach, rather than fall to the ground" (Ntuli, 2017). While Ntuli's stance seems contestable, to imagine that police brutality did not cause stillbirth but abnormal delivery, John Peffer argues that such "brutal acts ... were rarely seen unless you were there in the jail cell [or] you had scanned the newspapers for clues" (Peffer, 2009:60). Thus the philosophy that guided Ntuli's production is perseverance in adversity.

According to Pitika Ntuli, the "aim of this depiction is a reflection on the dimension of torture of pregnant women in detention during apartheid" (Ntuli, 2017). Alternatively, as Gael Neke observes, the idea hints at "Apartheid ... reworked through the current concerns of examining ... history" (Neke, 1999:8). Therefore, in Anitra Nettleton's words, it "aimed for simplified forms considered purer, more truthful and more closely linked to the emotion of the artist" (Nettleton, 2011:141). Furthermore, as Sandra Klopper argues, it "capture[s] the emotionally challenging experience of ... living in apartheid South Africa" (Klopper, 2013:137). However, this social reality in South Africa is not a representation of socio-cultural activity but of a culture that was defined differently as resistance to oppression from agents of apartheid (Peffer, 2009: xviii). In

contrast to the sculpture that has been interrogated is his large stone sculpture entitled *Mandela and the Rainbow Children* (2015) (Fig. 04). Although the artist adopted the concept of rainbow children as a title of this vernacular sculpture, as Neil Lazarus claims, the rainbow nation “is the myth of South African exceptionalism perpetuated in the form of shiny new campaigns and slogans” (Lazarus, 2004:617).



Fig. 04. Ntuli, *Mandela and the Rainbow Children*, 2015. Stone, 3.6 metres. Artist's Collection (Photo by Sule A. James)

The formal structure of this vernacular sculpture in the round depicts a large African man seated on a chair, carrying six young children in his bosom, supported with his two large hands. While introducing this sculpture, Pitika Ntuli claims the depiction references “Mandela and the races that makeup South Africa. These include black Africans, whites, Indians,

Coloured, Asian and Chinese” (Ntuli, 2017). However, the mode of depiction does not show any distinct features to establish the races identified. The carved head of this large imagery notwithstanding, the mode of depiction with chisel and hammer, in Jean Borgatti’s view, demonstrates an African portrait that depicts a real person whose life forms part of the historical narrative of a nation (Borgatti, 1990:37). On his left shoulder rests a jungle rabbit with long ears carved close to his face, to present not merely a visual but symbolic narrative to the six young children. Jonathan, Ntuli’s manager observes that “the rabbit seems to be asking Mandela how he survived 27 years imprisonment” (Jonathan, 2017). But Pitika Ntuli notes that his survival is “likened to the survival of a rabbit in the jungle; though small, the rabbit survives the antics of bigger predators” (Ntuli, 2017). It is this survival of imprisonment that brought Mandela to the position of becoming the first democratically elected president of South Africa.

In reading the formal structure of Ntuli’s sculpture, as David Koloane observes, when “you move around the piece different scenarios emerge” (Koloane, 2010:140). One such scenario which emerges on Mandela’s back is a large iron chain inserted in the middle of his back, symbolising his backbone. Although Jonathan claims that, “the chain represents his backbone”, he adds that it “symbolises his strength and resilience in suffering, his struggles and steps to freedom” (Jonathan, 2017). However, his freedom, as Colin Richards argues, for many across the globe the South African victory in the liberation struggle is a perfect case of justice and equality (Richards, 2011:51). Thus, Ntuli’s philosophy projects not just Mandela’s freedom which attests to victory in the liberation struggle, but also his selflessness.

To situate the present experience in Ntuli’s sculpture, it reflects the history of past oppression and racism in South Africa before Nelson Mandela was elected president in the first democratic election in 1994. According to Neil Lazarus, Gordimer speaks “of the meaning of April 1994, when, as she put it, ‘South Africans of all colours went to the polls and voted into power their own government, for the first time’” (Lazarus, 2004:621). Before 1994, in Sandra Klopper’s view, the Nationalist regime that entrenched abuse of human rights and realities of racism rose to power in 1948 (Klopper, 2004:68). During those dark years of oppression, those who engaged in political

opposition against apartheid were detained in prison without trial (Merrett, 1990:28). Mandela and other political prisoners were detained in Robben Island for over two decades until February 1990, when they were released (Klopper, 2004:68). After his release, in Barbara Nussbaum's words, Nelson Mandela remarks that "to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others" (Nussbaum, 2003:24).

The portrayal of Mandela in historic dialogue with the rainbow children is, in Pitika Ntuli's view, a reflection of his anti-racial stance (Ntuli, 2017). The portrayal, as Pitika Ntuli observes, hints at "a worldview predicated on interconnectedness, interrelationships and interdependence" of the races in South Africa (Ntuli, 2010:17). And in Sandra Klopper's words, it seems Mandela was "exploring the ways in which the present has [to be] shaped [from the] painful experiences [of] the country's past" (Klopper, 2013:129). It might be argued that although South Africans clamoured for a non-racial nation, more than two "decades since the end of apartheid ... this myth of South African exceptionalism" (Lazarus, 2004:611) appears elusive. Despite such a mythological campaign, the work, however, seeks not merely to relay but remind of and uphold this South African cultural value that underlies the attitude of promoting harmony and unity of a non-racial country. In *Shaka Zulu* (2015) (Fig. 05), the title presents a subjective identification of a distant past personality rooted in Zulu culture.

The sculpture shows a mixed media abstracted anthropomorphic vernacular imagery in the round. Given that it is individualised with name, it evokes the referencing of an ancient African man from Zulu ethnic group in South Africa. It depicts a warrior standing tall from his base in a "totemic stone" rendition (Peffer, 2009:42). The primary medium adopted is stone, but other media employed are tubular pipes, flat metal sheets, car gearbox for the head and cow horn to signify the animal emblem Shaka appears closely related to and not a physical resemblance. Even though it is a large totemic stone sculpture, it draws attention to the weapons Shaka holds and his height. His two legs are carved out without any footwear, possibly to demonstrate as *Biography of Shaka Zulu* notes, that "Shaka Zulu found that taking off his sandals and fighting barefooted helped him manoeuvre better".⁷

However, the upper parts of the legs are stylised with no resemblance to the appearance of human legs. This hints on possible inspiration from an earlier tradition of free-standing Tsonga figurative sculpture in South Africa (Nettleton, 1988:49).

A breastplate-like depiction in front of the imagery reflects a symbol of a short spear that is kept as a spare for attacking his victims. His two hands were constructed with the tubular pipe of car exhaust and engrafted into the upper part of Shaka's shoulder to form his arms. This mode of combining different materials, in Manaka's words, reveals that "Pitika is an innovative sculptor who uses whatever material is at hand" (Manaka, 1987:12). Even though he combined materials to exemplify the warrior, his posture gives clue to readiness to attack, as he holds a spear in his right hand backward, and his left hand holding a shield in front for protection from enemies' weapons. Pitika Ntuli argues that although "Shaka Zulu is often depicted with long spears; in reality, he carries short spears with which he attacked his victims" (Ntuli, 2017).

Fig. 05. Ntuli, *Shaka Zulu*, 2015. Mixed media, above 3 metres.



Artist's collection, (Photo by Sule A. James)

⁷ In the sourced text: the biography of Shaka Zulu, 2017 online.

Although the head of the imagery was constructed with a gearbox, the face demonstrates, in John Pepper's words, a person "harnessing the physical characteristics of animal" (Peffer, 2009:59). More so, the gearbox in the work of Pitika Ntuli symbolises the working of the brain, in this context, of Shaka Zulu's brain. Despite that, the fusion of cow horns to the gearbox head does not merely signify the animal totem to which Shaka Zulu's behaviour and person were interconnected but his strength. It points at, "a long oral tradition in Africa, adopt[ing] age old stories in which human behaviour is subject to scrutiny by reflection in the animal kingdom" (Greenberg, 2008:[sp]). Such interface of animal-human elements relays a social commentary in contemporary South African art because it is a style that is evident in the works of Jane Alexander and black South African artists – Sydney Kumalo and Ezrom Legae. As John Peffer argues, "imaging the human figure in abstracted non-human form ... is a trend that dates to the canonical African sculptural forms" (Peffer, 2009:42). While the evocation of human figures in abstracted non-human form was a trend in traditional African art, the contemporary trend is implicated by time and period. However, the round gearbox head invokes a similar style in Zulu free-standing sculpture which, in Anita Nettleton's view, shows that "the male figure often wears a head ring, a hairstyle to which only [a] seasoned warrior among the Zulu groups [was] entitled" (Nettleton, 1988:49).

He was not just an ancient traditional ruler, but a warrior. As John Havemann claims, the icon Shaka Zulu

was "born in 1787 in unfortunate circumstances. He was an unwanted child and this affected his approach to life throughout his entire life".⁸ His background, as observed by Havemann, may have accounted for his turning out to be a warrior. History reveals that "Shaka used warfare to achieve his political agenda and to instil fear and respect for his rule" (Mbili, 2017:1). Arguably, such a traditional style of leadership defines not just a subjugation of people in his kingdom but introduces an oppressive personality. However, his reign as king was short lived, as he ascended the throne in circa 1820 and died in 1828 (Nettleton, 1988:49; Mbeje, 2017:1). It seems the philosophy that guided Ntuli's work is that of honouring cultural heroes for the present and future. Pitika Ntuli observes that the sculpture is aimed at the visual narrative of "Shaka's short spears rather than long as he is often depicted holding" (Ntuli, 2017). The portrayal hints at the "core beliefs and practices [of] ... honouring ancestors" (Kleiner, 2010:393). On another level, it evokes an "African [art which is] ... based on the exploits of ... [an] individual who triumphed over adversities to positively impact the lives of members" (Adejumo, 2002:167) of his kingdom.

Possibly, Ntuli, in a historic gesture in the twenty first century appropriated the image of an ancient traditional leader and warrior to make a historical commentary on his life experience. Africanness is indicated in this depiction not merely in its reference to a traditional hero in Zulu culture but in the history of warfare and conquests that are indigenous to the African continent.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the narrative on Pitika Ntuli's sculptures in this paper reveals that his vernacular imageries, which reflect African identity by heritage, culture and history, are rooted in distant and recent past as well as present experiences of individuals in South Africa. To situate his contemporary arts in South Africa, in Sandra Klopper's view, Ntuli "evokes histories of violence and exploitation, past and present" (Klopper, 2013:137). He did so by reflecting on the numerous killings of black South Africans during the apartheid as well as post-apartheid era making his works to function both as "accusation and a reminder" (Neke,

1999:3) to those who tortured and killed blacks in the prisons or during protests in South Africa.

Furthermore, the readings of Ntuli's contemporary African sculpture reveal different aims which reflect not merely symbolic embodiment of cultural belief, value and attitude of courage but endurance against external affliction and torture during apartheid. As Gael Neke notes, Ntuli's works "open up a space, within and beyond its terrain, for South Africans to face their history" (Neke, 1999:1). Perhaps, Ntuli had to evocate these ideas in the twenty first century given

⁸ This view was extracted from an online article that narrates the history of Shaka Zulu and possible reasons for his brutality and approach to warfare.

the fact that he was in exile until the end of apartheid. Consequently, in Homi Bhabha's view, considering the different forms of brutality, I question "What kind of a cultural space is the nation with its transgressive" (Bhabha, 1990:6) activities? Despite those numerous hurts from the past, a non-racial campaign was launched and promoted when Nelson Mandela was elected president. Rather than retaliate for the past repressions and sufferings of black South Africans and himself during the apartheid era, Mandela chose the path of forgiveness and racial unity.

Lastly, his evocation of Shaka Zulu serves to convey many historic issues not just about him but about the Zulu identity. Zulu as a term referred only to a clan which recognised Zulu as its founding ancestor before King Shaka ascended the throne. But soon after Shaka's conquest and consolidation, the term Zulu was employed to include hundreds of clans under Zulu monarchy. Over time its usage extended not only to the monarchy but to an ethnic identity that is linked to Zulu language⁹ (Mbeje, 2017:1).

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⁹ In the source text: Cyril Mbeje narrates the history and emergence of Zulu identity in relationship to Shaka Zulu.

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