

4012W

SCULPTURE













Murenga and the origins of the Shona, 2021

Terracotta clay, fabric clothing, charcoal, and cardboard

Installation



Murenga and the origin of the Shona

Mythology and folklore are two themes that have always been significant to me. I have always liked the narratives, the characters, and how the histories of these themes evolve. My interest in myths and folklore are from my culture (Shona), located predominately in Zimbabwe. The Shona people have a vibrant oral tradition, and the foundations of the culture derive from these traditions. As a vessel of such a populous cultural group, I seek to extrapolate the influence of these oral traditions in creative works of art while guided by a text written by a renowned Zimbabwean academic. Through the guidance from oral traditions and writings, my current project refers to the biography and migrations of Murenga, a founding ancestor of the Shona people. Murenga contributes to the creation of Shona heritage as a great leader and fighter of the people. My approach in creating visual art while in the guidance of cultural writings and the passed on generational histories is also influenced by visual and cultural practitioners, griots in West Africa. The works of these guardians of cultures and traditions are significant. The way they convey information and engage the audience through creative interpretations is profound. The approach by griots in cultural continuation is an influence and inspiration for implementing my representation of this founding ancestor and their descendants.

Since the first year of my undergraduate degree, the characteristics of mythical beings have always been prevalent in most sculptural projects. The mythical beings often would be half-human and animal or half-human and plant. Untitled 2019 (Fig 1). The notion of half-human and plant characteristics of the metalwork project is in because of the traits of protection and strength found in a natural nest and metal. Sometimes the integration of humans, plants, and animals with their surroundings, characteristics, or appearance, is done to create a hybrid character. Bira Ceremony 2020 (Fig.2). My interest in folklore and mythology stems from my cultural ethnicity. The narratives of such themes are prevalent in everyday conversations, and the perpetual listening becomes semi-permanent.

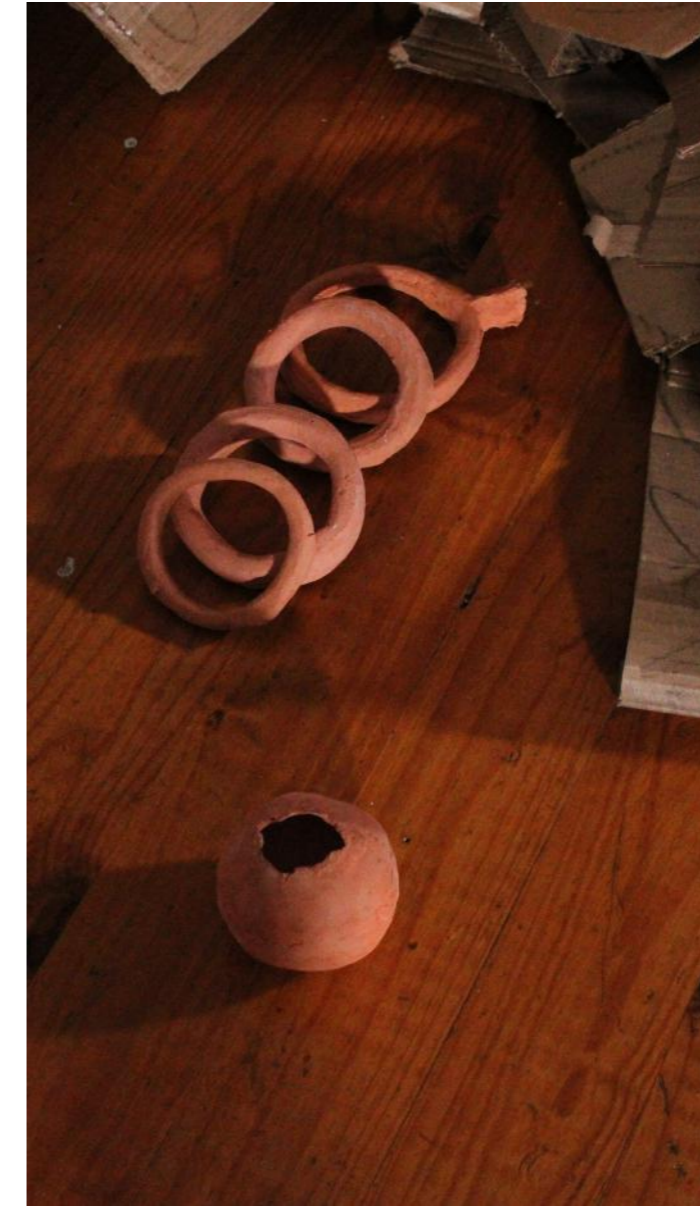
Fig. 1
Untitled 2019
Metalwork Project



Fig.2.
Bira Ceremony, 2020
Self-Motivated

The above artworks were my second and third-year undergraduate sculptural projects. Untitled 2019 Fig. 1 comprises elements representative of the Zimbabwean national emblem and the logo of my residence during the time. The commonality between the two suggests the notion of an eagle via the nest. The eagle became a concept of consideration for the metalwork project because the bird was present in areas resembling my home, country of origin, and the notion of belonging. The considerations came to existence by making a nest, as it blends all relations into one structure. The same inspiration of using references to animals, plants, and humans under the concept of folklore is an observation in my self-motivated project in Bira Ceremony 2020 Fig.2.

During the early 2020 lockdown, the idea came to fruition while at home because of the components on my desk. The desk elements were a reminder of the Shona Bira ceremony. The Bira is a union of communicating between



the physical and spiritual worlds done through musical performance. The lamp was overlooking the books, acting as if it was guiding the protection of them. The stature of the reading light toward the books reminded me of how Spiritual beings protect the physical, as noted by Shona tradition. The component on the desk is a tributary because it highlights the traditional customs done by most Shona families and communities across the country. The durability and resistant nature of cardboard material was a factor in creating the characters. The use of durability and resistance reflects how the Bira ceremony continues to resist cultural dilution while simultaneously being persistent in the progression of time.

My metalwork and self-motivated project show how I sought ways to bring cultural traditions within contemporary art. The projects in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 were the entry point to my focus on getting deeper engagement with folklore and mythology. The reason behind this is oral narratives that describe and preserve the histories behind the Shona culture. The elderly are the guardians of oral traditions. They also inherited this knowledge from their elders during their time as young people. My interest in oral knowledge is the backbone for researching texts that attest to these generational narratives. Accumulation of academic texts or articles concerning oral history has been beneficial in fathoming how the Shona ethnicity came into existence.

Tacing the Shona back to the Great Lakes is an article found in *The Patriot*, a Zimbabwean website that unravels the history behind the Shona people. The journal account has Six parts, where each focus on the origin of cultural and traditional practices of the Shona speaking groups. The write-ups are from academic expert Professor Sheunesu Mpepereki, who was at the University of Zimbabwe. Professor Mpepereki was a specialist in agricultural engineering and soil science: but also had a deep understanding

of the cultural dynamics that shape the country. Of all the six accounts, one that stood out the most was article number three that elaborated on the spiritual and physical backbone of the Shona culture. The spiritual world of the Shona contains significance in mediumship and is totemic, while the natural reveals notions of expansion and migration. The founding ancestral figures of the Shona speaking groups are in chronological order. They frequently appear in narratives of oral tradition: Nehanda, Tovera, Chaminyuka, and Murenga are the nexus of the growth of the ethnic group through expansion in the incorporation of customs and methods of identification. However, of all the founding ancestors of the Shona, I decided to focus on Murenga because he is a revolutionary character. The significance in representing Murenga in the project is because he is the ancestral figure who was an inspiration for the revolutionary struggle for independence. Knowing the great ancestor is essential and an inspiration to me as I am part of the genealogy that comes from a charismatic figure. The text is significant for the final year project because it revealed the earliest history of the Shona speaking groups I had not known. Through oral history, I understood Murenga and how his descendants resid-

ed between Central and Southern Africa. Learning from oral history and the text coincided and inspired me to undertake the project
www

According to oral history, Murenga was a son of Mambiri who lived most of his life in Guruuswa. He was a fearsome character as described in oral tradition narratives. His legacies are an inspiration to Shona revolutionary groups when fighting for independence. Murenga had his children and who were Mushavanhu, Chaminuka, and Gumbi. The children of Murenga went on to lead the people in all ways of living, spreading customs and philosophies they had inherited from their ancestors. His children with the people are the ancestors that sojourned from East and Central Africa towards the Southern parts of the continent. The use of oral tradition with the text from renowned academic Professor Mpepereki informing about Guruuswa and Shona cosmology is intriguing. The accounts of these individuals are fascinating as they inspire me to undertake a cultural-historical project. The primary focus of my current project is how Murenga and his biography is an inspiration to Shona in

all endeavours of daily life (Mpepereki, 2014).

One characteristic of the great ancestor I have experienced is in being a leader. The traits of being a leader have been pivotal in positions I embarked on at school or any area of activity. The aim of the project is in notions of belonging, having pride in being part of the cultural DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) established for thousands of years. The idea of having a sense of pride and passion is a recurring theme that I try to implement when creating artwork. Migration of the founding ancestors from area to area as depicted by oral tradition is also of interest. The interest in migration relates to how I also have moved from my country of origin for school. Moving from one country to another has its challenges because of learning new systems of living. As an inspiration by how the ancestors adapted while migrating, the notion of adapting is what I highly embrace. My current body of work reveals how I intend to blend the traits of the medium, theme, and characters into one hybrid representation.



Fig.3

Murenga and the origins of the Shona, 2021

Final Year Project in progress

The creation of the work comes from a collection of cardboard boxes I had in my storage area. Most of the cardboard boxes were for containing and protecting various products. The boxes reminded me of the quantities of product distributions that happen daily for personal purchasing and or sending products. The cardboard reminded me of how prevalent commercial distribution is among Zimbabweans. Distribution can be through trucks, buses, or air travel. Many Zimbabweans travelling always send products to their families. The dependency of bringing goods to the country is an aftermath of the economic and political transformations since independence. These changes have led compatriots to seek novel avenues of living due to the political

and economic imbalances affecting the nation (Madimu, 2020). The modern use of cardboard made me ponder on how the Shona ancestors distributed goods during their time. Historically, the Shona would have clay pots of different forms for various tasks. The clay pots were also for the collection of tribute after being victorious from neighbouring tribes. The clay pot and cardboard became recurring themes to consider for the creation of the project because both are protective materials. The protective nature of both the cardboard and the clay pots began echoing of an idea of resistance. Both materials resist forces of various measures with the intent of preserving whatever object. The theme of protection and resistance-associated in the materials made me realise the above two attributes in his demeanour.

Murenga was a respected person. He protected his people from foreign tribes, resisted internal conflicts, and always put the people in safe conditions. Oral history attests to how Murenga was a venerated figure (Mpeper-eki, 2014). The notion of protection and resistance that Murenga contained while leading the people guided how I wanted to produce my final work. The cardboard

and the clay would represent the great ancestor because of the nature provided by the materials when used. Another point in representing Murenga with cardboard and clay is because the clay is an embellishment of the traditional customs while the cardboard echoes the commerce and trade movement which happens daily. The last component in my current project is the use of fabric. The partial figures made with found clothing represent everyday Zimbabweans. The fabric envelops the clay (customs) and the cardboard (commerce) as imagery of how Murenga's descendants throughout Central and Southern Africa navigated and expanded the culture through trade and traditional customs. Fig. 3 is an illustration of how all the materials blend into the cultural narration.

My interest in the Shona heritage comes through analysing the migrations depicted by oral tradition with earlier Iron Age migrations on the plains of Africa (Huffman, 1970). Comparing oral traditions and scholarly archaeological findings would be pivotal in understanding the various cultures on how they are related to the Shona culture. Among the Bantu speaking countries, there are similarities in dialects as well as traditional practices. One area stated by the renowned professor is the relations between Venda, Nambya, and Shona because of sharing

common ancestors. The chronicles and similarities of the Shona and neighbouring cultures have been a gateway for my cultural-artistic production. The approach I try to convey in my artwork is associated with the methods of communication undertaken by the griots in West Africa. The griots are the guardians of their culture and traditions. While the griots narrate the histories of their ethnicities, they creatively inform the public using music, poetry, and oratory mechanisms (Okoh, 2018). By being the guardian of culture and traditions, the overall stature of how griots operate is appealing. The narrations of the griots are of interest to how I intend on producing projects and understanding art. The significance of the narration is because the griots constantly revere the past. Revering the past is an attribute that I sometimes implement when brainstorming. However, after having brainstormed the destined project, my hope is always in fulfilling a concrete understanding of the subject. Understanding the subject through memory, research, consulting elders, I hope to share information with every audience.



In summation, mythology and folklore will remain intriguing subjects to the creation of my body of artwork. Oral history and various literature are pivotal as they are portals that release myth and folklore accounts. Shona heritage contains prosperous Oral traditions which shape the foundation of the cultural group. My interest in myths and folklore became a gateway to gathering accounts of the origins of Shona to have sound knowledge of cultural establishments. With the assistance of academic writings and inspiration cultural narrations of the griots, my final year artwork reflects and assembles oral history, academic literature, and preservation mechanisms of griots. The area leading to the creation of the project is being part of a cultural group that originates from the great ancestor Murenga. Contemplating Murenga's migrations with my migration is an inspiration to the final year project to show the cultural patterns and similar experiences despite the different timeframes. Understanding the biography of Murenga and the culture is significant personally and to my approach to the project. The intent is to restore and replenish cultural systems or philosophies for the growth of Shona culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Huffman, T. N. 1970. The Early Iron Age and the Spread of the Bantu. *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*. 25, 3-21.

Madimu, T. (2020) 'Food Imports, Hunger and State Making in Zimbabwe, 2000–2009', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 55(1), pp. 128–144. doi: 10.1177/0021909619868735.

Mpepereki, S. 2014. Tracing the Shona back to the Great Lakes: Part Three. Tracing the Shona back to the Great Lakes: Part Three | Celebrating Being Zimbabwean (thepatriot.co.zw)

Okoh, I. 2018. What Is a Griot and Why Are They Important? What Is a Griot and Why Are They Important? (theculturetrip.com)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Throughout my undergraduate journey, I received tremendous assistance and support.

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to Michaelis School of Fine Art for accepting me into the BA in Fine Art program. From the very first to this final year in 2021, the institution has nurtured and enriched my knowledge of the visual art world. The projects and lecturers were of profound importance as each semester progressed. I grasped various insights that were not only applicable to art but life.

A special thank you to my supervisor, Professor Jane Alexander, for her practical expertise and invaluable advice. Her immense art knowledge and unceasing ideas were significant in the direction suitable to my ideas concepts and possible artistic approach.

Finally, the completion of the project is made possible through my parents and brothers: Joseph, Cynthia, Tinashe Emmanuel and Anesuishe Mapisire, for their never-ending involvement in my life. An appreciation mention also goes to Edmond [Kloof KwikSPAR], Duncan Meyer, Collin Kroutz, Mzwanele Henyana, Cassie Robbertze, Sherwyn Janjties, Daniel Tucker, Bonginkosi Majoka, Klare van Heerden, Livia Schneider, Kaylee Bush, and Aimee Pullon as they assisted and gave input towards the fruition of my final project.

Thanks again for the assistance and encouragement.

