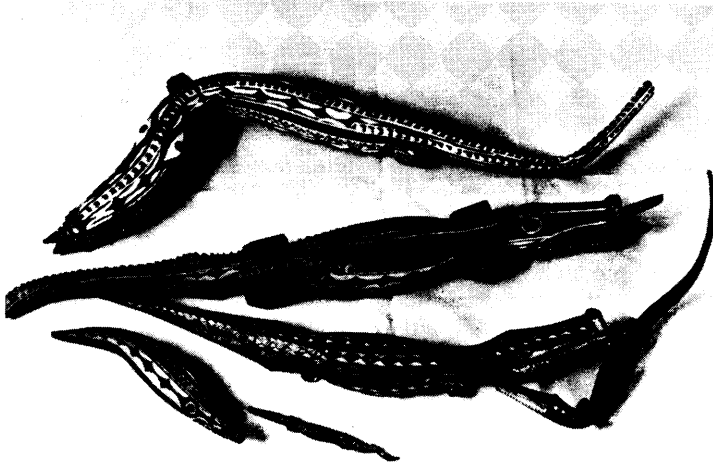


Mozambique's "White Wood" Artistry

A typical artistic expression of South Mozambique, Psikhelekedana refers to artifacts made from the so-called "white wood"



Crocodiles: a pervading theme in this brand of artisanship

Psikhelekedana is a corruption of the English word crocodile, as transliterated into one of the national languages of South Mozambique. In the early days of the colonial "pacification" undertaken in the beginning of this century, South African colonists and visitors used the word to designate a vast range of artifacts where crocodile shapes abounded, but which were soon to diversify into many other shapes and objects.

The word caught on and is now currently used in South Mozambican bazaars and streets where artisans peddle their newly-made souvenirs. Its meaning is now so generic that the word applies both to utilitarian objects, such as wooden spoons, and artistic sculptures representing the human figure — of which the most ubiquitous is "King Zulu".

Those who make a distinction between art (sculpture) and

artisanship are forced to admit that both are present in Psikhelekedana. Either in individual shops or cooperatives, the same sculptors/artisans produce all sorts of objects, ranging from mass-produced artifacts to fine sculptures where the personal touch of the artist is clearly visible.

Origins

The origins of this type of work are difficult to ascertain. Artifacts believed to date from the beginning of this century were recently assembled in a Psikhelekedana exhibit in Mozambique. Henrique Junod, a renowned anthropologist who dedicated considerable attention to South Mozambican culture (*"Bantu Usages and Habits"*), refers to artifacts in the Psikhelekedana style, though he does not use the word by which they were to become generally known.

The earliest forms of sculpture and artisan work in Bantu societies were typically functional. Thus spoons, mugs and other household articles were soon beautified and ornamented, acquiring an artistic quality that has been preserved to this day. Other artifacts had a magic and religious value, and were used in initiation rites or wedding ceremonies and in the liturgical practices of witch doctors. Even though they have lost their original purpose, these artifacts have survived as artistic and decorative objects that are now sold to domestic and foreign tourists.

The original forms were soon joined by others, possibly to fill mercantile needs or simply intended for household use by South African colonists. Communal artists thus increasingly became professionals. At present, Psikhelekedana comprises essenti-



ally three kinds of artifacts: domestic utensils, animals, and the human figure.

Domestic utensils

It is in this area of Maputo art/artisanship that one can more directly establish a connection between household utensils and traditional, magic/religious values. A case in hand are wooden spoons, many of which have an obvious ritual purpose.

At the very early stages, artists ornamented their spoons with various decorative elements (especially friezes). Though wooden spoons are still bought for mere utilitarian purposes, they are increasingly decorative, as artisans explore all possible ways of rendering them visually interesting.

One of the most curious artifacts from an artistic viewpoint consists of two spoons held together by a chain of rings. Henrique Junod informs us that these were used to consecrate an alliance between

two community members, the rings being placed around the men's necks while they shared a meal. Apparently this social purpose has disappeared over the years; for many artisans we contacted in Mozambique, the only significance of the piece lies in the fact that "it is difficult to make" (if one ring breaks, the work is rendered useless).

Psikhelekedana includes many other domestic utensils, such as gourds, which were traditionally ornamented with glass beads and made exclusively by sorcerers or by *madodas* they entrusted with the job. These gourds were filled with honey used in traditional "medicines". On the other hand, clubs and ornamental bunches of feathers, now seldom produced, were made for use by sorcerers and witch doctors. Whitewood "pillows", which are among the earliest objects, often ornamented with trophies, were originally intended for use by tribal chiefs.

Animals

Though ancient animal sculptures can be found in African artwork, the study of anthropologists and historians suggests that they were mass-produced only in recent times, coinciding with the arrival of colonists in Mozambique. Quick urbanization contributed to increasing the number of the animals depicted. Birds (toucans, quails, wild fowl), crocodiles (certainly the most frequent theme), snakes (usually in association with other animals), elephants, hippos, turtles and monkeys are often found. These animals are often related to communal ceremonies, beliefs and taboos. Because of their size, elephants, for instance, are believed "to fetch and carry the spirits given up by villagers" with the mediation of witch doctors.

Hippos are associated with abundance. The act of catching a hippopotamus is believed to



Luis Souto-Foco

presage abundant food. Crocodiles, the real leitmotiv of this type of artisanship/sculpture, are related to several beliefs. The number of stones found in the animal's stomach has to do with the number of years the village chief is expected to live. Thus the animal's body is quartered in his presence. The chief will also keep any metal objects eventually found in the crocodile's entrails, which it may have swallowed as it killed peasants bathing in or crossing the river. There is a taboo against eating the animal's head, which must be burned to ashes.

The human figure

Next to domestic utensils, depicting the human figure seems to be one of the earliest forms

of art in South Mozambique. Human figures were apparently the first products of this peculiar type of sculpture/artisanship that were completely devoid of any functional purpose. A projection of artisanship into art, they were intended merely as sculpture work. Some of them are associated with everyday objects, such as walking sticks, but are not known to have any magic-religious function.

*King Zulu*¹ is the most common and widely known. The figure is usually carved out of a single whitewood block, to which the typical warrior's objects – often disproportionated and obviously symbolic – are then added.

Sometimes the shapes and emphasis seem to derive from the artists' inward universe and to have found inspiration in such visual deformities as occur in

dreams. Somehow they are reminiscent of *makonda* art (particularly those in black wood) and of foreign influences.

It is in this southern art that the first attempt is made to reproduce the figure of the colonist. African sculptors try to depict their foreign models as carefully and faithfully as possible. This type of work is mentioned by anthropologists and historians, but has now practically disappeared. Such images of the white man are highly valuable pieces of art, both because of their rarity and fineness of detail.

Masks are also a special kind of representation of the human figure. They are believed to be of merely commercial origin, though masks are common in all Africa. At present they are produced in large quantities, often poorly finished, and are the most widely marketed artifacts.

A peculiar artistic expression

Psikhelekedana has not enjoyed the same fame as other forms of Mozambican art, nor has it been the object of such minute studies as have been dedicated to sculpture work from other parts of Africa. One of the reasons for this is that the raw material employed is cheaper than that used in other areas. Indeed, the commercial value of whitewood is considerably lower than that of rosewood or sandal, to mention only two examples.

Yet Psikhelekedana is a peculiar expression of the cultural universe of African man in general and of Mozambican art in particular. (*Sol Carvalho*) ●

¹ Zulus are well-known for their pugnacious spirit, and King Zulu symbolizes the resistance struggle so dear to Mozambican memory.