

# CREATIVE WOODCARVING IN THE VENDA-SPEAKING REGION

## Ancient Roots

The Venda speaking region of the Limpopo Province forms historically part of a much larger cultural area, including parts of eastern Botswana, northern Mozambique and southern Zimbabwe.

There is ample archaeological proof for the existence of a large political entity which based its power on trade with the East Coast. It originated somewhere in the lower Limpopo basin (e.g. Schroda and Mapungubwe) and culminated in the Great Zimbabwe state.

The artistic tradition of this polity has been researched extensively by Wits-based academics Profs. Nettleton and Huffman, who also demonstrated the continuity and the survival of this tradition into the present *court arts* of the contemporary Venda chieftainship.

This tradition included figurative clay sculpture used during initiation and carved royal doors, drums, divination bowls and headrests. Objects of ritual and ceremonial value were decorated with patterns and symbols, the meanings of which were encoded and restricted to a privileged few. The use of diamond patterns, chevrons, triangles, circles, herringbone design and other motifs was shared within a cultural complex encompassing the present Venda, Tsonga, Sotho and Shona cultural realm.

The prolific contemporary carving in the Venda speaking region is often explained with reference to these earlier artistic traditions. It is also assumed that 'Venda' is somehow unique in this respect.

However, carvers with skills, backgrounds, interests and an art production very similar to that of their Venda counterparts exist all over the continent. ✓

In fact, stories of success and failure of individual artists and narratives of the creation and furtherance of a contemporary tradition based on indigenous roots by development agents are very similar throughout the continent and beyond. In other parts of South Africa there was Polly Street, Rorke's Drift, Ndalen ...

The Development of artistic potential is linked with such names as Cecil Skotnes, Peder and Ulla Gowenius, Lorna Peirson. The stories of Mc Ewen in Zimbabwe and Pierre Romain-Desfosses in Congo are similar. Different names, similar sagas.

And Tom Bloom ↙

Jim Dederen, Univen, March 2006