

Dungamanzu/Stirring Waters: Tsonga and Shangaan art from southern Africa

Reviewed by Ruth Kerkham Simbao

Nessa Leibhammer, ed. *Dungamanzu/Stirring Waters: Tsonga and Shangaan art from southern Africa*. 2007. Johannesburg: Wits University Press and Johannesburg Art Gallery. R280.00.

A woman known as Nkoma We Lwandle (Cow of the Ocean) and a man, Dunga Marzi (Stirring Waters), are remembered as the first Tsonga diviners. Trained by Nzuzu – a powerful water serpent – they were pulled into a lake for a few months and later emerged as influential healers. Such stories (like the one relayed by Dederen of a young girl, Nsintimuti, who also temporarily disappeared into a lake) represent 'death' and 'rebirth', reflecting Arnold van Gennep's (1909) well-known schema of rites de passage: separation, merge, and aggregation. Separated from daily life, these characters sink into another world where people breathe in water like a foetus in the liquid depths of a womb, evoking impending new birth (p. 171).

According to Leibhammer (p. 10), *Dungamanzu* stirs the waters of the 'already troubled waters of museological discourse',

putting to death old taxonomies of ethnicity in relation to cultural production. Throughout the catalogue, many participating authors consciously strive to expose the constructedness of 'Tsonga' and 'Shangaan' identities, whilst at the same time attempting to redress the lack of Tsonga and Shangaan art in galleries and museums. Not only have museums tended to focus on the art of the Xhosa, Ndebele and Zulu, but due to taxonomic over-simplifications coupled with complex migration histories they have also subsumed some Tsonga or Shangaan work under the label 'Zulu'. Although this catalogue struggles with the almost impossible task of simultaneously deconstructing old nomenclatures and creating new (albeit tentative) taxonomic assertions, it is a crucial reconsideration of the way museums and scholars in South Africa have historically grouped, labelled and imposed meaning onto objects, for as Leibhammer (p. 1) aptly asserts, objects become vulnerable once they have been collected.



African child figure, Tsonga-Shangaan (late twentieth century). Tin, glass, plastic, beads, twine and thread.