

Chapter 10

Christian and Xhosa Ancestral Traditions In Contemporary Visual Art

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the complex relationship between Christianity, ancestral veneration, consciousness, spirituality, and the role of contemporary visual artists. It concludes that a diasporic mindset is emerging from the coexistence of Christianity and ancestral practices, raising questions about the role of art and artists in this context. The chapter argues that these spiritual concepts deeply influence modern consciousness, and visual artists naturally engage with them in their work. Dowling's perspective highlights how art expresses diverse identities and opens conversations about community, acceptance, and individuality. Artists play a key role in raising awareness of spiritual identity, whether rooted in Christian beliefs or ancestral reverence. They also challenge existing ideas, seeking contradictions and connections for spiritual enlightenment. This relationship provides a framework to analyze the works of artists like Viola and Hlobo, with a focus on Xhosa ancestral traditions.

INTRODUCTION THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

If the manifestation of Christianity and ancestral veneration is deeply embedded in the consciousness of contemporary society, it can be concluded that some visual artists will explore and reflect this dialogue in their works. Therefore, to understand the nature of these issues in contemporary society, a discussion of visual artists who have dealt with the subjects of Christianity or ancestral veneration in their work is conducted. According to Dowling art is means to explore identity, to celebrate and promote self-expression and its diversity. Through this expression dialogue is created

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-8716-7.ch010

that speaks to community, acceptance, and the safeguards that are necessary for expressing individual identity in a society (2011:2). This meaning that, through art, artists can explore subjects that can influence society such as identity and spirituality. Their role is to create an awareness of identity in spirituality whether through the Christian faith or ancestral veneration. Artists can also create artworks to challenge these notions and to establish whether there are any contradictions, correlations or even possibilities for integration that can lead to spiritual enlightenment to the worship of God or the ancestors. Every human being belongs to a particular culture which is based on their upbringing. People in a particular society that has adopted a certain belief system based on past practices are, for Boyd the place where art is situated. He explains that all human art indeed takes place within particular cultures or at the intersection of cultures; and no art can be explained without culture, without considering both particular art traditions and the society within which artists deploy them (2005: 71). Therefore, to study art is to study the culture of the artist or the culture which the artist is challenging. This means that art can reflect on the beliefs and practices of that culture according to the meaning, myth, metaphors and symbolism that the culture reflects, as Dowling notes: “many contemporary artists utilize symbolism and metaphor in their art to construct identity” (2011: 7), so to understand the artwork is to understand the nature of identity and the possibility of constructing a new spiritual identity or to question an existing one.

This is in line with the premise of this research. According to Boyd, art, too, is a specifically human adaptation, biologically part of our species. It offers tangible advantages for human survival and reproduction, and it derives from play, itself an adaptation widespread among animals with flexible behaviors (2005: 1). Therefore, through art, the human species can learn to adapt to new ideas, challenge belief systems and cultural identity. Practicing Christianity or ancestral veneration for the Xhosa people and other African societies, is believed to prepare a way to heaven or to receive 105 guidance and good fortune from God or the ancestors. This interrelationship explains and sets up a framework for analysing the artworks of Viola and Hlobo, and opens them up for a discussion according to Xhosa ancestral tradition. The fact that Christianity was introduced by missionaries during the time of colonisation, according to Elphick (in Elphick and Davenport 1997:12) affected the intellectual life of African Christians because they faced the need to “translate” Christian doctrines, values, symbols, stories, and rituals into their own culture. Typically, two distinct modes of translation emerged, reminiscent of the Biblical distinction between putting new wine in old skins, or in new wineskins. An oldwineskin choice in literature has been to praise the Christian God in classic African praise poems; a new wineskin choice to restore to formal, printed poems, plays, and novels. Some African artists used the mode of new wine in old skin to integrate Christian subject matter that is based on the Biblical scriptures by using

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