

# Jekisani Hlungwani

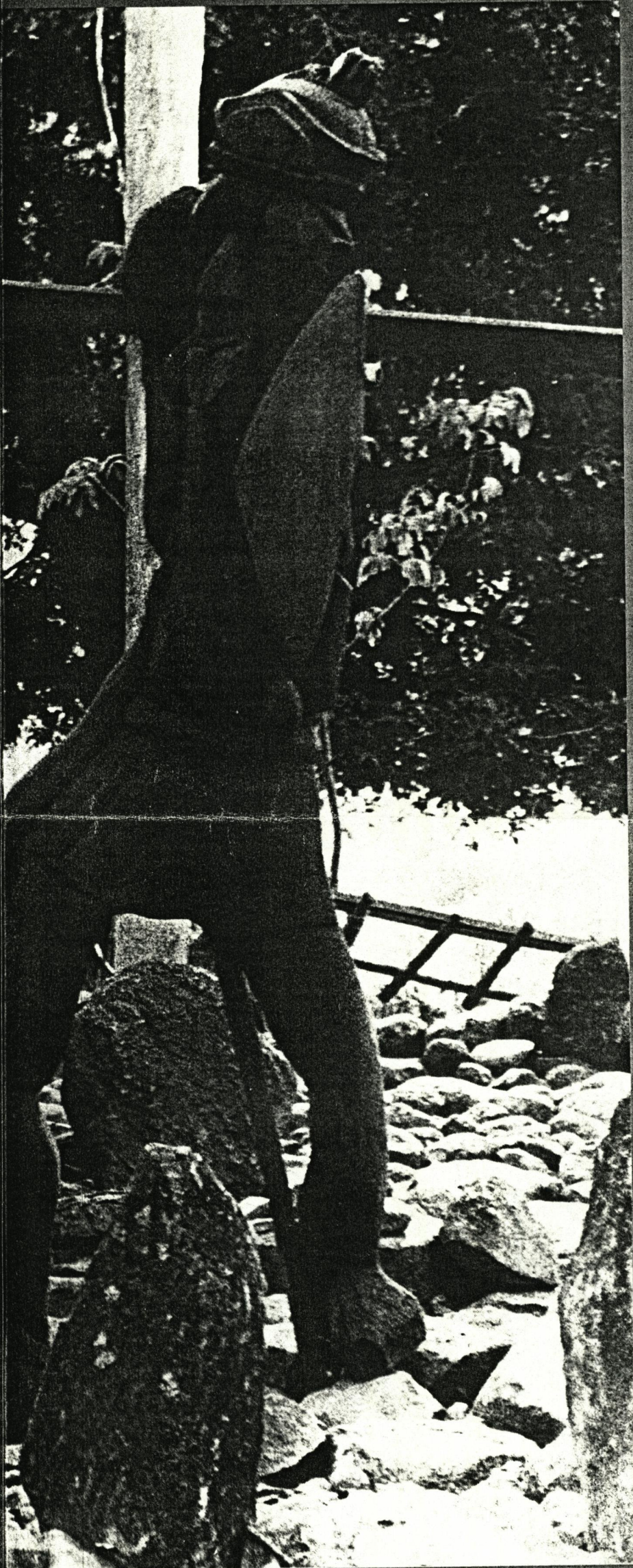
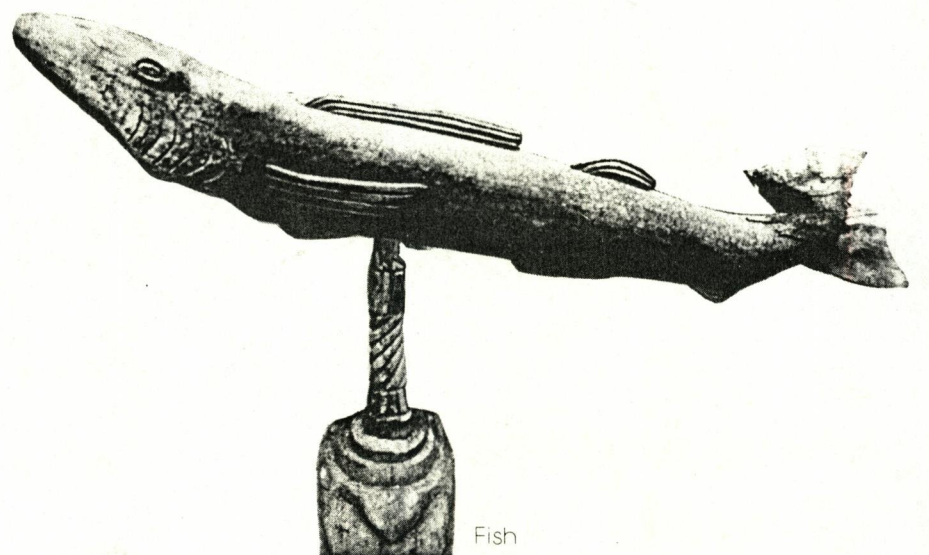
SEEING STRAIGHT



On a wall-wooded hill overlooking the rural settlement of Mbokota, in the Northern Transvaal, the perceptive visitor might notice a strange half-hidden citadel of thick stone walls, intricate passages and round uncovered enclosures, surrounding a few thatched rondavels and an iron-covered humble two-room dwelling. This is the home of Jackson Xidonkani (read Shidonkani, or Chidonkani, i.e. the colt, the young of a donkey) Hlungwani, healer, prophet and wood-carver, the overseer of an African Independent Church called 'Yesu Galeliya One Apostol in Sayoni Alt and Omega.'

Hlungwani's credo, though frequently referring to Jesus Christ as the source of life, makes little use of the central Gospel themes. It centres mainly on a recurrent apocalyptic vision: Heaven and earth are about to be radically transfigured, and mankind will open its eyes. 'His' in-dwelling spirit has shown Hlungwani that the old world of sin and strife is already giving way to the new era of universal forgiveness and brotherhood. On the Mbokota hill, this realization of the last days is signalled by the healing hands of the prophet and the warm fellowship of his Zionist group, bringing hope and well-being to the sterile, the jobless, the sczematous and the insane. The long drummed night vigils of the Apostol in Sayoni people, their incantatory dances, their ritual purifications, in the physical and spiritual safety of Hlungwani's fortress-sanctuary, are challenging and replace functionally the ongoing nightly practices of neighbouring traditional herbalists and exorcists. A touch of biblical shalom has thus become a reality at Mbokota, challenging also the endless barriers and the ongoing estrangements of a 'beloved country.'

Sikheto Daniel Maluleke and Théo Schneider



Jennifer Sorrell

Above:  
Jackson Hlungwani stands in the centre of his stone altar surrounded by the sculptures of CHRIST (left), GABRIEL (centre) and CAIN (right). Also on the altar is a wooden cross and a 10m high metal pole. The pole, covered with numerous reflectors and pieces of shiny tin, is called the Looker. Hlungwani explains that it is a gauge to indicate where truth is. Truth it says is in the east.

Above right:  
Hlungwani's woodcut MAP FOR FIRST COUNTRY, MAP FOR NEW COUNTRY, is a graphic depiction of his apocalyptic vision. Within an all embracing circle the artist has incorporated the symbols of cosmic order around a tree of life "whose leaves are for the healing of the nations".



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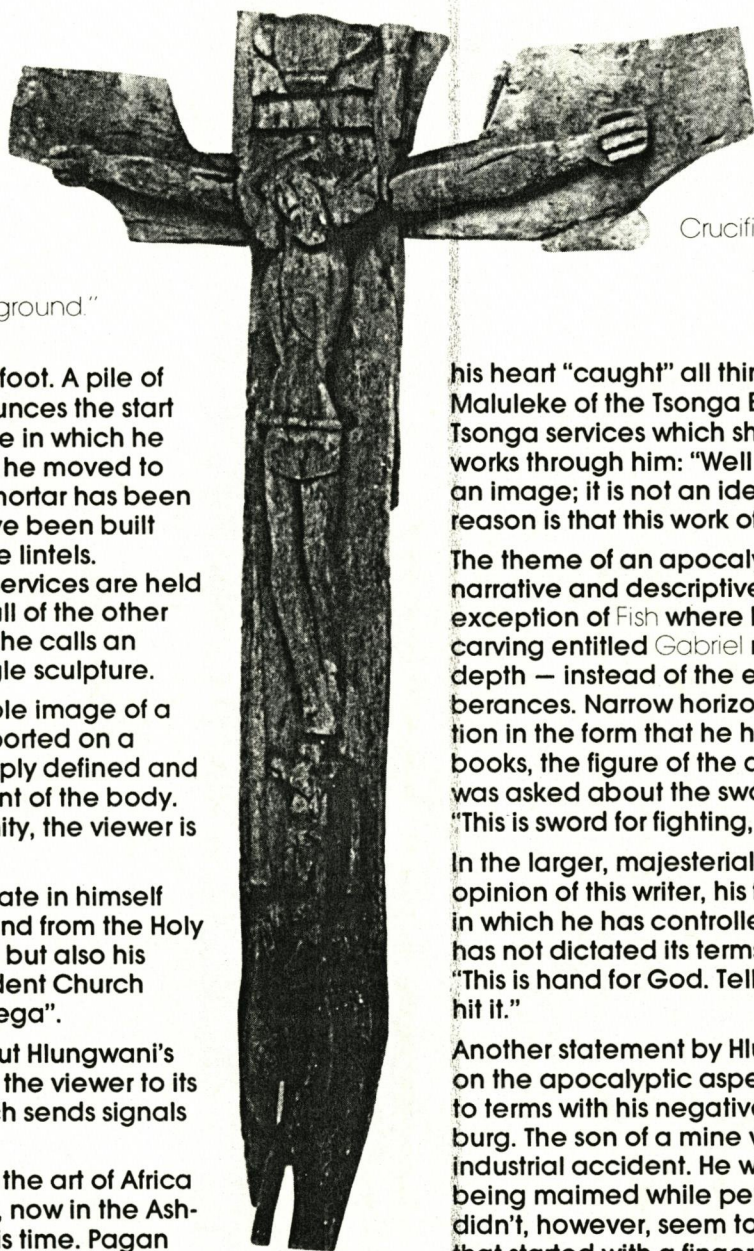


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Crucifixion

"The struggle for culture is the struggle for the high ground."  
Theodor Adorno.

**J**ackson Hlungwani's residence can only be reached on foot. A pile of abandoned carvings leaning up against a wild fig announces the start of a path which leads up to the ruins of the Karmi structure in which he has been living, and to which he has been adding since he moved to the area from Mashampa nearly two decades ago. No mortar has been used in the meticulous stonemasonry, even windows have been built without the help of mud or clay to support the large stone lintels. Although a rough thatch covers his Church building, his services are held outdoors in a large stone circle fronted by an altar. Not all of the other enclosures are used, but one of them has become what he calls an "office" and at the time of my first visit, it contained a single sculpture.

Closer inspection of this sculpture reveals an impenetrable image of a whale-like fish swimming easily with the current and supported on a carved axle. Ventral, pectoral and dorsal fins are all sharply defined and have parallel grooves which follow the twisting movement of the body. Since there are no streams, never mind rivers, in the vicinity, the viewer is left wondering as to the sculpture's meaning.

Jackson Hlungwani has said that his work does not originate in himself but that "it comes from God Himself, and from The Lord, and from the Holy Spirit." The work he is referring to, is not only his sculpture, but also his evangelical work as the overseer of an African Independent Church called "Yesu Geleliya One Apostol in Sayoni Alt and Omega".

Works like his *Fish* make an impact in any environment, but Hlungwani's placement of this piece, in a chapel-like structure, alerts the viewer to its symbolic overtones. However, it is the fish form itself, which sends signals most stridently.

The motif of the fish has been used as a plastic symbol in the art of Africa since at least 3500 BC. A clay fish lying on a square plate, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, came from Egypt at about this time. Pagan cults of the fish in Western Asia probably had their origin in ceremonies designed to assure a bountiful catch and the image of priest as fisher predates its Christian counterpart.



Seeing Straight

The fish as a Christian symbol came into existence before 100 AD. Cara Montgomery cites Paulinus of Nola's letter on being baptised: "I have become one of those fishes that pass through the paths of the sea. I shall remember you not only as my father but also as my fisher. For it is you who have let down the hook toward me, to draw me out of the deep and bitter folly of the world."

Thus Christ is both Divine Fish and 'fisher of men'. Reborn through immersion, the convert swallows the Eucharist, thus affirming salvation. For Jung the motif of the fish operates not as a sign, but rather in the true sense of a symbol, that is, as a way of describing something that is not completely knowable.

A form of totemism was widely practised. The Babylonian priests, for instance, wore fish skins over their heads or fish tails down their backs. They ate fish and threw their dead back into the sea to feed fish in turn. Eisler, in his *Orpheus the Fisher* believed that they regarded themselves as fish re-incarnate.

A statement by Hlungwani draws attention to certain similarities. Asked about the meaning of this carving, Hlungwani replied: "Oh my name, I'm fish." Asked if he had ever seen a fish he replied that he had not but that

his heart "caught" all things. Theo Schneider and Sikheto Daniel Maluleke of the Tsonga Bible Translation Project recorded one of his Tsonga services which showed that Hlungwani fully believes that God works through him: "Well this work of mine, what I am doing now, is not an image; it is not an idea, it is not a fairy-tale. It is truth itself. . . . The reason is that this work of mine does not originate in me."

The theme of an apocalyptic social transformation is taken up in narrative and descriptive form in all his major works with the possible exception of *Fish* where he relies on an embedded symbolism. His carving entitled *Gabriel* makes use of the stylistic device of reversed depth — instead of the eyes being recessed, they are shown as protuberances. Narrow horizontal cuts detail the pupils. There is no suggestion in the form that he has worked from illustrations in religious handbooks, the figure of the angel Gabriel is unmistakably African. When he was asked about the sword his tone of voice became chrestfallen: "This is sword for fighting, but we don't want fighting no more."

In the larger, majestic carving of *Cain* the artist has produced, in the opinion of this writer, his finest work. Here there is no hesitation in the way in which he has controlled volume, even the original form of the wood has not dictated its terms. Once again there is a depiction of a sword: "This is hand for God. Tell us — No more fighting. If we try to fight, myself I hit it."

Another statement by Hlungwani leads one to believe that his emphasis on the apocalyptic aspects of Christianity stems from a desire to come to terms with his negative experiences as a migrant worker in Johannesburg. The son of a mine worker, Hlungwani lost his finger and his job in an industrial accident. He was upset at not receiving compensation after being maimed while performing a skilled job at unskilled wages; he didn't, however, seem to mind losing his job, saying that any machine that started with a finger could easily end up demanding an arm, "so I must come home, work for myself and make my soul better". This was in 1944. In 1946 he was ordained as a priest in the African Zionist Church; he had found a way of sublimating poverty and oppression:

"Indeed, the world in which we live has become a new world, a new Jerusalem, which is influenced by Christ, the Lord Jesus. The rules of the old world are no longer valid, such as to fight, to steal, to tell lies, to hate one another. The new world requires us to work in harmony, until God comes here on earth. We must build new homes, a new way of life must be apparent in our behaviour and in our work. This will invite God to come down from heaven. If we fail in this task, all those who follow the old way of life will perish, their generation will completely disappear, and a new one arise."

Sublimation is also evident in the small carving *Seeing Straight*. For many years, Hlungwani has been plagued by a rodent ulcer on his left leg. Although he has been treated at the nearby Elim Hospital, his complaint has not cleared up and he has reverted to treating his lesion at home with fire. This necessitates him sitting with his leg outstretched next to the coals of a fire, night and day.

This affliction has entered his consciousness to such a degree that ball shaped lumps rise symbiotically on the lower left leg of this, as well as a number of other, sculptures. The idea that events in the real world can be affected by making effigies, is by no means a new one in African art. In Jackson Hlungwani's case he has latched onto the Christian idea of substitution, (Christ dying so that man/woman may be reborn) with such absolute conviction that he sees no distinction between his *Crucifixion* and real events in history.

In a way, *Seeing Straight* is an idealised self-portrait. We see a man pointing forward with his whole body. Hands with long, outstretched fingers guide the man's gaze forward, like the blinders on a carthorse. But the real exhortation to "see straight", derives from a curious protuberance of raw, unworked wood which rises from the subject's head. This, according to Hlungwani, is the "map" by means of which people must live their lives. It is not a concrete representation of abstract thought, but life prefigured.

GAVIN YOUNGE





