

Mwandale Mwanyekwa: The renowned Tanzania female Sculptor

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The position of women artists in the world has over the last three decades or so become a major concern internationally. The United Nations-sponsored seminar entitled “Creative Women in Changing Societies” held in Oslo, Norway in 1980, for example, examined critical issues of female participation in society and came up with encouraging resolutions. One of such resolutions requested men to get involved in women’s issues “so that all human problems might receive equal attention of men and women” (Davidson, 1982, p. vii). However, despite the increasing global awareness of the role of women in development, in Tanzania very little has been done to evaluate academically the efforts of women artists. Much has been written on the oppression of women, (Mascarenhas & Mbilinyi, 1982) but very little on their achievements, as time has shown. Besides, the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (1993, p.97), a local NGO, agrees that “the field of cultural studies is under-researched in Tanzania and, indeed, in Africa in general, in spite of its obvious significance to women and other disempowered groups, and to the African continent as a whole”. It is against this background that the author wishes to discuss the art of Mwanyekwa and her contribution to the study of contemporary Tanzanian visual arts.

The article traces her early childhood to establish the earliest influences that might have shaped her artistic aptitude. We then discuss her visions in her chosen career and analyse her artworks in the context of her beliefs in the kind of sculpture a woman is supposed to create in society. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the sculpture of Mwandale Mwanyekwa in the context of her belief in art produced by women.

Childhood Art:

Mwandale, who belongs to the Makonde ethnic group, was born in February 1978 in Dar es Salaam but spent her earliest years in Mtwara, southern Tanzania, where she was brought up by her grandmother who was involved in the art of pottery and a grandfather who was a carpenter as well as a sculptor, according to Kabendera (2009, p.12). Here we notice the earliest inspiration that shaped her future. She made clay pots with her grandmother and also created dolls like any other child. She attended Mtunungu Primary School in Mtwara before moving to Mgulani, Dar es Salaam, where she completed her primary education in 1993. There is no record showing that the primary schools she attended had any art teaching curriculum that moulded her passion for sculpture. Her initial art education started in the home environment she was brought up, something that supports the Kiswahili saying, “*Samaki mkunje angali mbichi*”, whose English equivalent would be “*Strike the iron while it still hot*”. Her aesthetic consciousness was fashioned by what she saw while still very young. Some local writers such as Semaya (2006, p.14) Mani (2006, p.13) and Kabendera (2009, p.7) have written that Mwanyekwa used to spend most of her time either playing in her grandfather’s workshop or making

toys and pots out of clay soil with her grandmother. Kabendera further quoted her as saying, “I was living in a Makonde community and so most of the people around me were potters or sculptors and I felt it is something I wanted to do in life. So stopping doing it wasn’t that easy”.

Although it is true that the Makonde ethnic group is renowned for its modern sculpture expressed in highly innovative and creative contemporary styles such as *Binadamu*, *Shetani*, *Ujamaa* (or *dimooongo*), *Mawingu* and *Mandandosa*, the art of carving has for countless generations been confined mainly to men. To many Makonde men, therefore, Mwanyekwa may be seen as a rebel female sculptor. The traditional image of the Makonde woman in Makonde sculpture is well known: She is portrayed as a household helper who fetched water, gardened, cooked and bore children. In short, the sculpture relegates Makonde women solely to handling so-called “women issues”, or put differently, domesticity. But, as Meyer (2008, p. 1) puts it, “Mwanyekwa’s family has never been one for gender stereotypes”. Indeed, even Mwanyekwa’s mother, Maria Chikawe, had ‘crossed’ the line by working as a bicycle technician or *fundi* (Sika, 2011, p. 26).

Mwandale in Sculpture school

Her first reaction after completing primary education was to do secretarial work like many girls of her generation. She, therefore, enrolled at the Dar es Salaam Baptist Centre (1993-95), Magomeni, to study secretarial work but she did not go into the actual work. Instead, she enrolled for sculpture studies at the Bagamoyo Sculpture School (1997-98) founded by a Swedish sculptor, Stanslaw Lux, who had previously been teaching sculpture at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1980s. After his teaching contract had ended, he first went to Mtwara to look for a place to establish a sculpture school but later landed at Bagamoyo where he recruited interested primary school leavers whom he sponsored to study sculpture. The graduates of the school include female sculptors such as Rehema Mjengwa and Zainab Athumani Mdiliko, who were brought to the limelight by Gosciny (2001, p.110). Mwanyekwa seems to be the only female sculptor who has been consistent with the field she had studied; the other two are not frequently written about. This confirms her childhood determination when she remarked that it was difficult for her to stop creating sculpture as it was in her blood.

The Bagamoyo Sculpture School is famous for its “Bagamoyo style” as Gosciny (ibid., p. 112) observes. The style is characterised by figurative female and male busts, sometimes transfigured by a surrealistic composition. Most graduates of the school find it difficult a few years after graduation to break out of the school training and cultivate their own niche to express their individual identities in an innovative sculptural form. The present writer once asked the then head of the school, Zainab Athumani Mdiliko, about the tradition of bust-making among the graduates of the school and her response was straightforward commercial. She insisted that the main objective of the school was to make the graduates self-employed upon graduation. And self-employment was linked to the creation of busts to enable the graduates to produce them for interested patrons in society, especially famous persons such as political leaders. It is not surprising, therefore, that as one enters the town of Bagamoyo, one’s attention is drawn to a display of busts of popular political leaders on one’s left.

Mwanyekwa’s current styles

Mwanyekwa has managed to slowly shake off the traditional Bagamoyo style by experimenting with abstract sculpture as her sculpture piece called *Mawingu* (2005), a variant of the *Mawingu* style introduced by Clements Ngalla in the 1960s illustrates. Other abstract styles include *Women* (2007), *A Woman’s spirit* (2007) and *Snake Bird* (2006). Except for *Women* for which the sculptor chose the Jacaranda wood, *mkuruti*, wood instead of *mpingo* (African blackwood) was used. Stylistically, all these sculptures are dominated by rhythm and smooth texture, which was probably the sculptor’s intention. Those who insist that the contemporary Makonde sculptor should continue to create ritual sculpture to be authentic, of course, will be disconcerted. Secular contemporary Makonde sculpture has been produced for over five decades and production is likely to continue to serve today’s aesthetic needs.

The *Mkuruti* wood seems to have been replaced by other types of wood. For example, during the latest group exhibition held in May 2016 honouring the International Women’s Day, Mwanyekwa showcased four of her latest works produced in four distinct types of wood—the male *mkongo*, female *coconut*, female *mninga* and female *mchaaka*, all of them local woods. The group that staged the exhibition is called Women Art Creators led and curated by Mwanyekwa herself. The *CHOICES* exhibition was held at the Alliance Française premises in Dar es Salaam. Her Bagamoyo style was presented in the self-portrait bust called *Isizwe* (generations) done in mixed media, which was the only representational artwork she exhibited.

Mwanyekwa and Gender Issues

Mwanyekwa has often been conscious about gender issues as a female sculptor. She once expressed her feminism by telling a reporter: “When I do my sculptures, I like putting in female elements. My sculptures are talking about women and children” (Meyer, 2008, p.9). For example, she has often been quoted in interviews on her involvement in sculpture, which many see as a man’s occupation. Her responses have been steadfast: She refers to stereotypes with which many women are subjected to when it comes to choosing an occupation. She admits that many people, even in her village, where

she grew up, find her rather strange as a person who does not like to grow up (being a woman), since art-making is associated with child-play and grown men.

People have been conditioned to treat sculpture as a male occupation; therefore, when Mwanyekwa introduces herself as a sculptor she because a centre of scrutiny. This is true elsewhere not only in Africa as Nagawa (2008, p.152) writes:

Identity issues are mostly manifested when Ugandan women artists operate on the global art scene, where they face prejudiced views of their Africanness and womanhood. Rose Kirumira recounted her experience in Hojer, Denmark in 1996 to Sunanda Sanyal. While executing a sculpture at an international workshop, she was met with surprise by viewers who did not expect an African woman to be using power tools, to be sculpting (something deemed masculine) or to be a graduate.

Such then is the general attitude by the public that still treats women as incapable of doing what men do. And Mwanyekwa seems to reflect this sense when she once told a reporter, "I am working hard to be the best female sculptor that I can grow to be" (Meyer, 2008, p.2). Her impeccable stand on gender led to her to found an art association for women only called "Women are Creators" that had been active during the International Women's Day (March 8th – 20th). In the foreword to the 2016 catalogue exhibition, the Head of the European Delegation strongly supports the initiative taken by Mwanyekwa in organising the exhibition: "Over 7 million EUR [14.2 billion TSH] are contributed by the EU in Tanzania to initiatives that address gender equality and empowerment for women and girls... The EU is a keen supporter of arts and culture across the African continent and notably Tanzania." Such encouraging remarks must have delighted Mwanyekwa a.k.a Big Mama as she often calls herself as well as a host of artists in the nation.

Conclusion

Tanzania has quite a big number of women artists involved in painting but very few in sculpture. Mwanyekwa's steadfast engagement in sculptor must be placed and understood in the context of her upbringing. Her grandmother played a pivotal role in her artistic development and the influence has remained indelible throughout her life. She can

hardly discuss her sculptural experience without mentioning her grandfather, grandmother, mother and aunts. The family positive influence on her is intriguing primarily because the family has often been identified by some scholars such as Jengo (2008, p. 2) as one of the causes that interfered negatively with most people's interest in buying artworks. For example, some parents discourage their young children to draw human figures for fear that when they die they will be required to give souls to the drawn figures. This indoctrination based on old beliefs is seen as one of the factors behind many Africans avoidance to buy artworks. Mwanyekwa's grandparents did not hold this attitude and she often remembers them when looking at her self-portrait busts like the one she exhibited during the Women's Day. The following words have been inscribed by the sculptor,, "The whole image has been created from my close relationship with my great grandmother, grandmother, mother and aunt. They still live as part of my make and when I look at this piece I don't only see my own face but [also] many other faces of my ancestors." (Mwanyekwa, 2016, p.2). Tanzanian parents should thus learn from Mwanyekwa's upbringing that has given gifted the nation with one of the most respected female sculptors in the country. And, as students, we must be consistent with what our parents have encouraged us to pursue. Let us end this article with a quotation from Mwanyekwa that she wrote in the catalogue of the Women's Day exhibition: "Making a choice to take every chance you get in life, will lead you to a great change" (ibid., p.2).

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