

Reading beyond the imagery: interpreting the art of Tengenenge sculpture community

Más allá de la imagen: interpretando el arte de la
comunidad escultórica de Tengenenge | Lendo além
da imagem: interpretando a arte da comunidade
escultórica de Tengenenge

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Abstract:

Zimbabwean visual art has significantly metamorphosed from the pre-colonial era to the present day. Within this period of development, Tengenenge Art Centre has been one of the steadiest visual

art centres that witnessed the evolution of Zimbabwean stone sculpture up to the contemporary era. This paper explores the visual imagery at Tengenenge Art Centre in the context of stone sculpture in Zimbabwe and its interface with African indigenous knowledge systems. Through a combination of visual analysis and ethnographic research, the paper illuminates how these sculptures serve as conduits of history, identity, and socio-economic realities, ultimately illustrating their enduring relevance in contemporary discourse on African art and cultural heritage. Situated within the cultural and socio-political context of Zimbabwe, the sculptures from Tengenenge are analyzed not merely as static forms, but as dynamic expressions laden with deeper meanings and narratives. By delving into the symbolism, techniques, and cultural significance embedded in these sculptures, this study aims to uncover the layers of interpretation that enrich our understanding of Tengenenge art. Data were generated through a series of interviews with purposively selected sculptors, analysis of their work, and observation of the artists in practice. The findings reveal that Tengenenge sculpture community has a rich cultural heritage that is inspired by indigenous knowledge systems and African imagery. Because of cultural diversity among the artists, the sculpture has no overall common visual language. Therefore, Tengenenge is a valuable resource centre for the understanding of social, cultural, and spiritual parameters of Sub-Saharan African aesthetics.

Keywords:

Aesthetics. Heritage. Sculpture. Visual culture. Visual metaphor. Visual imagery.

Resumen:

El arte visual de Zimbabue ha experimentado una transformación significativa desde la era precolonial hasta la actualidad. Durante este período de desarrollo, el Centro de Arte Tengenenge ha sido uno de los espacios de arte visual más estables, siendo testigo de la evolución de la escultura en piedra zimbabuense hasta la era contemporánea. Este artículo explora la imaginería visual del Centro de Arte Tengenenge en el contexto de la escultura en piedra en Zimbabue y su interacción con los sistemas de conocimiento indígena africano. A través de una combinación de análisis visual e investigación etnográfica, el artículo ilumina cómo estas esculturas funcionan como vehículos de la historia, la identidad y las realidades socioeconómicas, ilustrando en última instancia su relevancia duradera en el discurso contemporáneo sobre el arte y el patrimonio cultural africano. Situadas dentro del contexto cultural y sociopolítico de Zimbabue, las esculturas de Tengenenge no se analizan simplemente como formas estáticas, sino como expresiones dinámicas cargadas de significados y narrativas más profundas. Al profundizar en el simbolismo, las técnicas y la relevancia cultural incrustados en estas esculturas, este estudio busca desentrañar las capas de interpretación que enriquecen nuestra comprensión del arte de Tengenenge. Los datos fueron generados mediante una serie de entrevistas con escultores seleccionados intencionalmente, el análisis de sus obras y la observación de los artistas en su práctica. Los hallazgos revelan que la comunidad escultórica de Tengenenge posee un rico patrimonio cultural inspirado en los sistemas de conocimiento indígena y la imaginería africana. Debido a la diversidad cultural entre los artistas, la escultura no presenta un lenguaje visual común generalizado. Por lo tanto, Tengenenge es un valioso centro de recursos para comprender los parámetros sociales, culturales y espirituales de la estética africana subsahariana.

Palabras clave:

Cultura Visual. Estética. Escultura. Imaginario visual. Metáfora visual. Patrimonio.

Resumo:

A arte visual do Zimbábue passou por uma transformação significativa desde a era pré-colonial até os dias de hoje. Durante esse período de desenvolvimento, o Centro de Arte Tengenenge tem sido um dos espaços de arte visual mais estáveis, testemunhando a evolução da escultura em pedra do Zimbábue até a era contemporânea. Este artigo explora a imagética visual do Centro de Arte Tengenenge no contexto da escultura em pedra no Zimbábue e sua interface com os sistemas de conhecimento indígena africano. Por meio de uma combinação de análise visual e pesquisa etnográfica, o artigo ilumina como essas esculturas funcionam como veículos da história, identidade e realidades socioeconômicas, ilustrando, em última instância, sua relevância duradoura no discurso contemporâneo sobre arte e patrimônio cultural africano. Situadas no contexto cultural e sociopolítico do Zimbábue, as esculturas de Tengenenge não são analisadas apenas como formas estáticas, mas como expressões dinâmicas carregadas de significados e narrativas mais profundas. Ao aprofundar-se no simbolismo, nas técnicas e na relevância cultural incorporados nessas esculturas, este estudo busca desvendar as camadas de interpretação que enriquecem nossa

compreensão da arte de Tengenenge. Os dados foram coletados por meio de uma série de entrevistas com escultores selecionados intencionalmente, análise de suas obras e observação dos artistas em sua prática. Os resultados revelam que a comunidade de escultura de Tengenenge possui um rico patrimônio cultural inspirado em sistemas de conhecimento indígena e na imagética africana. Devido à diversidade cultural entre os artistas, a escultura não apresenta uma linguagem visual comum e generalizada. Portanto, Tengenenge é um valioso centro de recursos para a compreensão dos parâmetros sociais, culturais e espirituais da estética africana subsaariana.

Palavras-chave:

Estética. Patrimônio. Escultura. Cultura visual. Metáfora visual. Imaginário visual.

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1. Introduction

The development of visual imagery in Zimbabwe cannot be discussed without mentioning Tengenenge Art Centre. Established in 1966 by Tom Bloomfield after Ian Smith's (former Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia) Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in the then Federation of Southern, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Tengenenge Art Centre, located in the Guruve District of northern Zimbabwe, was a community of people from Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi. This was due to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland from 1953 to 1963 which allowed free movement of people across the three states of the Federation. The community has become a hub of contemporary African art and visual culture, attracting local and international artists and collectors (Chikukwa, 2013; Zimoyo, 2020; Smith, 2023). Later on, inhabitants from Mozambique and Angola came to Tengenenge due to its fame and proximity. According to Chikukwa (2013), Tengenenge art is considered to be a movement in its own right due to the cultural and aesthetic parameters of style, form, and approach to the subject that are unique in the art world. It reflects Sub-Saharan African cultural epicentre due to its multi-cultural historical origins.

Interpreting the art of sculpture in communities is essential for preserving cultural heritage, fostering education, and stimulating public engagement (Rochovská & Švábová, 2023). Sculptures serve as historical records and symbols of cultural identity, while their interpretation educates the public about artistic techniques and encourages critical thinking (Rochovská & Švábová, 2023). Studying Tengenenge Art Centre through the interpretation of its sculptures is essential for understanding how this unique institution preserves cultural heritage, educates the public, and engages the community. Researching Tengenenge sculptures reveals how historical narratives are presented, which fosters emotional and intellectual enrichment, and drive economic and social development. By analysing interpretive practices at the center, scholars can uncover innovative methods for public art, support artists, and promote inclusivity. These studies not only highlight Tengenenge's role in cultural preservation and community building but also provide valuable insights for future public art projects and educational strategies. Therefore, this study delves into the visual imagery found in the stone sculptures at Tengenenge Art Centre, interpreting these artworks in the framework of Zimbabwean artistic traditions. Two research questions have been developed to explore this main objective, and they are as follows:

- What is the nature of contemporary visual art narratives and visual culture at Tengenenge sculpture community?
- What is the impact of Tengenenge sculpture community on contemporary African art and visual culture?

2. Theoretical basis

Tengenenge, which means the “beginning of the beginning” (Smith, 2023), is an art centre located in Guruve, along Zimbabwe’s Great Dyke. The area is located among infinite deposits of serpentine rocks which are used for stone sculpture (Zimoyo, 2020). The centre was established by Tom Bloomfield, a tobacco farmer and chrome miner in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Bloomfield was inspired by a local sculptor, Crispin Chakanyuka, to start a stone sculpting community, benefiting from the huge serpentine deposits on his land. As a result, Bloomfield founded the art community and encouraged his employees to start sculpting. The centre’s art philosophy was expressionism drawing inspiration from indigenous cultural, mythical, and cosmological themes. The sculptors produced and exported high quality, original serpentine and spring sculptures. At the height of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle for independence, Bloomfield left the art community under the care of a renowned sculptor Josiah Manzi. After independence in 1980, artists returned to Tengenenge and the art community increased significantly in number (Abraham, 2000) to over 300 by 2000. In 2007, Dominic Benhura, a fourth generation contemporary sculptor, became the director of Tengenenge and gained recognition for his exceptional work within the community and beyond. He developed a distinctive style characterized by fluid and elongated forms (Smith, 2023) often depicting human figures and animals, infused with a sense of movement and grace. Benhura’s innovative approach to stone sculpture garnered attention both locally and internationally, establishing him as one of Zimbabwe’s most renowned contemporary artists. This was transcended to the artists at the centre.

Dominic’s involvement in exhibitions and workshops helped promote Tengenenge’s artistic practices at a global scale and contributed to the recognition and appreciation of Zimbabwean stone sculpture as a whole. In addition to his artistic contributions, he served as a mentor and inspiration to younger artists within Tengenenge community (Smith, 2023). Later in 2020 Dominic handed over Tengenenge to the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, the main custodian of arts heritage in the country. This study contends therefore that Tengenenge sculpture community creates and presents contemporary visual narratives through its sculptures, and other artworks.

3. Research methodology

The study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenology research design (Fuster, 2019) as it focused on artists’ lived experiences of visual art narratives and visual culture at Tengenenge art community. Thus it adopted an interpretive discourse (Wiesner, 2021) positioning the researchers to reflect upon the perspectives of the sculptors toward contemporary visual culture in Sub-Saharan Africa. The sculptors were typical participants who had experience and knowledge about Tengenenge community’s visual culture. The artists offer insightful perspectives on their visual imagery, which helped to create a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of visual culture. Their work provided a window to the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Zimbabwe, and it demonstrated the powerful role that art can play in shaping and communicating cultural values. The curator cum-administrator was conveniently selected because of the domicile of visual practice and the visual culture of the sculpture community.

Ten sculptors were purposively selected from the community. The selected sculptors are actively involved in the generation of aesthetic ideas in their works of art. These were information-rich participants who have participated in national and international art

exhibitions. The curator cum-administrator, Augustine Mbilinyu, and also an artist in his own right, was purposively selected as a participant because of his day-to-day interaction with the sculptors. In addition, the study involved the analyses of sculptures as visual texts that are produced at the Centre.

Data were generated through in-depth interviews (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022) with the selected artists and curator, visual analysis of their work, and observations of the sculptors. The interviews focused on the nature of the contemporary visual narratives and visual culture at the Centre as reflected by the sculptors, how they generate these narratives and visual culture, and how their art impact on the Sub-Saharan African visual aesthetics. Data collection also involved photographing the sculpture work and their subsequent analyses. This authority was given by the curator cum administrator at Tengenenge. Data were analysed using a hermeneutic data analysis strategy- organising dominant themes emerging from the data (Kublikowski, 2023). Interviews were transcribed and analysed using an indexing system in which units of meaning containing similar ideas on Tengenenge sculpture narratives and visual culture were organised into themes. The units were grouped into thematic labels (Naeem et al., 2023) which represented participants' perceptions about their visual art practices and impact on contemporary African visual aesthetics.

4. Results

From the study it emerged that Tengenenge sculpture community has a rich cultural heritage that is reflected in the art produced by the sculptors. Presented in Figure 1 is the general view of Tengenenge Art Centre.



Figure 1. General view of artworks at Tengenenge Art Centre. Source: Augustine Mbilinyu (2022).

There are several themes related to African aesthetics that emerged from the collected data.

The themes emerging from interviews, visual text analysis, and observations of artists are presented in Figure 2. The first theme is the connection between humans and nature, with sculptors blending human figures with animals or plants. The second theme is the spiritual world, featuring traditional Shona spirits, deities, and symbols. The sculptures also depict the passage of time through figures in motion or frozen in time in the third theme. The fourth theme is socio-political positionality, whilst the last theme covered gender and the power of women. These themes are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

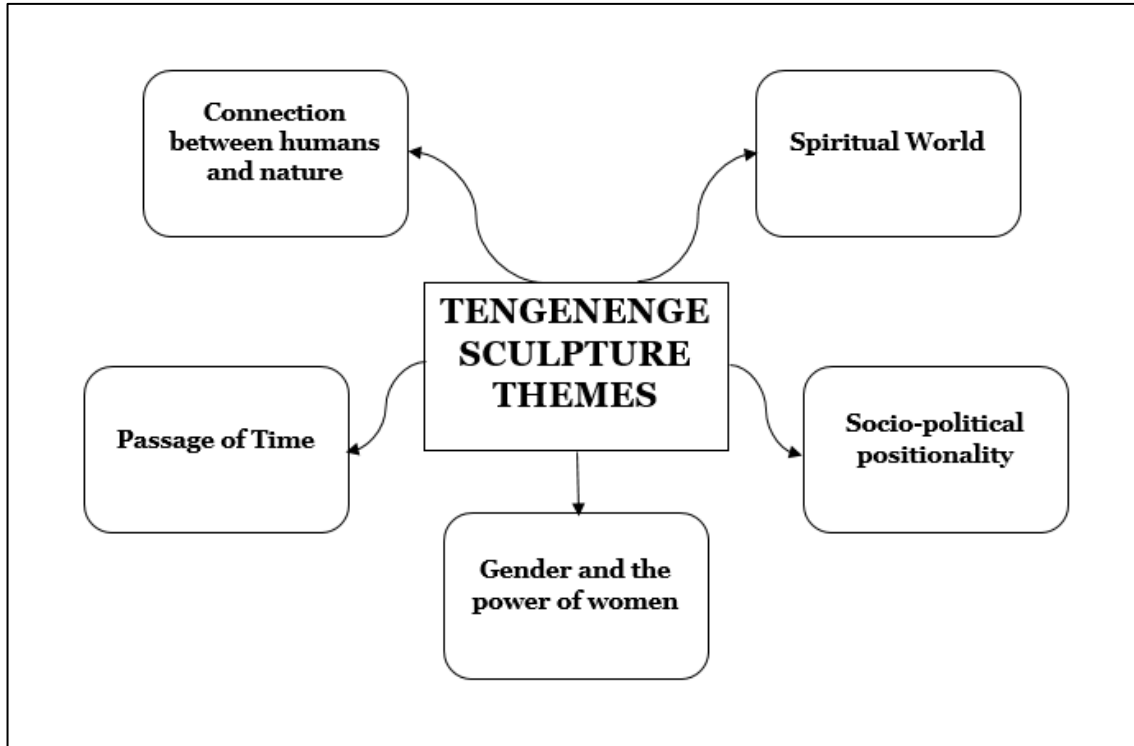


Figure 2. Themes that emerged from sculptures at Tengenenge Art Centre.

Gift Seda has this to say:

“The sculpture I produce, speaks of fundamental human experiences; experiences such as grief, elation, humor, anxiety, and spiritual search - and has always managed to communicate these in a profoundly simple and direct way that is both rare and extremely refreshing”.

Josiah Manzi:

“My source of motivation comes from my head as well as my stories. My style is always absurd, rather abstract in nature which requires the knowledge of the artist to interpret it. My themes in sculpture are all influenced by my religion and culture, I am a Chigure”.

Curator cum Administrator at Tengenenge:

“We mainly focus on the socio, economic, and political contexts. We generate visual narratives mainly by looking at current issues be they social, religious, or cultural, or even pandemics like COVID-19, or disasters like Cyclone Idai”.

4.1. Theme 1: Connection between humans and nature

Josiah Manzi reflects the interdependence between humans and the natural world in works like *The Tree of Life*, depicting human figures emerging from a tree to symbolize growth and life (Figure 3). Mbilinyu also explores human-nature relationships with sculptures like *The Hunter*, representing the complex balance between humans and animals, and incorporates recycled materials in pieces like *The Weaver* to signify transformation and new beginnings. Juja Tembo draws from Shona folklore, creating sculptures such as *The Snake Charmer* that blend human and animal forms to reflect traditional myths. Muhomba intertwines human figures with nature in works like *The Tree Woman*, exploring themes of unity and coexistence. Fernando Biriyo presents a whimsical take on similar themes with *Garden of Earthly Delights*, celebrating life's joys through fantastical elements. Finally, Ali Chitaro captures the essence of motion and stillness in sculptures like *The Moment*, depicting figures frozen in time to evoke introspection and contemplation. themes of exhibitions will be *Humans and the Environment*; and *Identity* which were all motivated by critical contemporary issues. The sculpture I produce, speaks of fundamental human experiences; experiences such as grief, elation, humor, anxiety, and spiritual search - and has always managed to communicate these in a profoundly simple and direct way that is both rare and extremely refreshing.



Figure 3. Family under a tree. Source: Augustine Mbilinyu (2022).

Muhomba's work shows human figures that are intertwined with natural forms, such as trees and plants. One example is titled *The Tree Woman*, which depicts a woman fused with a tree. Muhomba's work is often seen as a commentary on the relationship between humans and nature. Fernando Biriyo's sculptures are often similar to those of Muhomba, with their intertwined human and natural forms. However, Biriyo's work is much more whimsical and playful, and it includes humorous elements. For example, his sculpture *Garden of Earthly Delights* depicts a garden filled with fantastical plants, animals, and human figures. Biriyo's work is a celebration of life and all its joys and absurdities. Ali Chitaro's work show human figures in motion, but unlike Tembo or Muhomba, his figures are often caught in frozen moments. Chitaro's sculptures often evoke a sense of stillness, as if time has stopped for the depicted figures. One example of this is his

sculpture *The Moment*, which depicts a figure jumping in the air. The figure is caught in a moment of weightlessness, as if time has stopped.

4.2. Theme 2: Spiritual World

Tengenenge artists delve into the spiritual world through rich symbolism and mythological imagery, revealing a deep connection between the spiritual and natural realms. Manzi's *Spirit Guide* and Tembo's *Spirit of the Ancestors* use the bird and flames, respectively, to symbolize spiritual guidance and purification. Muhomba's *Guardians of the Past* depicts figures with animal heads, referencing mythological spirits and the sacred role of nature in the cycle of life and death. This theme of interconnectedness is further explored through hybrid figures and natural materials in works like Tembo's *The Keeper of Memories*, which features an elephant-headed figure symbolizing wisdom, and Mbilinyu's *The Guardian of the Sacred Grove*, depicting a lion-headed guardian protecting a sacred space. Jealous Chatsama also explores resilience and strength in *The Survivor*, portraying a figure standing firm amidst flames, while Jaisi Muhomba's *The Family* emphasizes community and unity. Collectively, these sculptures reflect Tengenenge artists' belief that the spiritual world is intricately linked with nature, promoting cultural values of wisdom, resilience, and environmental preservation.

4.3. Theme 3: Passage of Time

At Tengenenge, the passage of time is a prominent theme explored through symbolism and mythological imagery. Many sculptures feature figures frozen in time, suggesting life's continuous transformation. For instance, Josiah Manzi's *The Passing of Time* uses abstract shapes to convey time's cyclical nature, while Gift Seda's *The River of Time* contrasts the river's steady flow with the figure's varying experiences of time. Juja Tembo's *The Eternal Dance* and Jaisi Muhomba's *The Circle of Life* illustrate time as both cyclical and linear through dancing figures and a circular form, respectively. Augustine Mbilinyu's *Time Will Tell* presents time as a personal and subjective experience through a figure with a hidden face and a watch. Augustine Mbilinyu's *Mind Over Time* sculpture represents the subjective and personal nature of time, exploring how our mental state and perception shape our experience of it (Figure 4). Themes of nostalgia and impermanence are also explored; Manzi's *Yesterday* and Tembo's *Memories* evoke reflections on the past, while Muhomba's *Nothing Lasts Forever* and Seda's *The Ebb and Flow of Life* express the concepts of decay and renewal. These ideas are communicated through organic forms, textured surfaces, and contrasting emotions, suggesting that time encompasses both loss and growth.



Figure 4. Mind Over Time. Source Augustine Mbilinyu (2022).

4.4. Theme 4: The Socio-Political Positionality

Many of Tengenenge sculptors explore socio-political significance through their work and experiences in the early independence years. One example is Manzi's sculpture *The Cry of the Nation*, which depicts a group of figures with their hands raised in protest. The sculpture is a reference to the political protests that took place in Zimbabwe in the 1980s and 1990s, and it highlights the importance of freedom of expression and the right to protest. Mbilinyu's sculpture *The Struggle for Freedom* depicts a figure with a broken chain around their neck. The sculpture is a reference to the fight for independence from colonial rule, and it highlights the importance of freedom and self-determination. Such sculptures often express a sense of hope and optimism for the future. The sculptures explore the theme of cultural identity, as many of the figures are depicted wearing traditional dress or carrying traditional objects. This highlights the importance of preserving and celebrating the unique culture of the African people. For example, Muhomba's sculpture *The Keeper of Traditions* depicts a figure carrying a traditional drum, which is used in African traditional ceremonies and celebrations. Many of the sculptures explore the theme of gender roles and the experience of women in Shona society. For example, Gift Seda's sculpture *The Strength of Women* depicts a group of female figures with strong, powerful poses. The sculpture highlights the important role that women play in African society, both in the home and in the community. Seda's work explores the experiences of women, and he uses his sculptures to advocate for gender equality. It is interesting to note how Tengenenge sculptors use their art to explore and comment on important social and political issues. The sculptures can also be seen as a form of protest art, as they often address issues of injustice and oppression. For example, Mbilinyu's sculpture *Unspoken Truths* depicts a group of figures whose mouths are covered with cloth, symbolizing the silencing of voices in society. This sculpture highlights the significance of speaking out against injustice and speaking the truth to power.

4.5. Theme 5: Gender and the Power of Women

The representation of gender is an important aspect to consider. While there are no official records on the gender distribution of the artists at Tengenenge, it is generally acknowledged that there is a gender imbalance, with more male than female artists. However, there have been some efforts to address this issue, such as the establishment of a Women's Co-operative in the community. The proportionate representation of women at the community and their contribution to the artistic practices are depicted in the subject matter (Smith, 2023; Doe, 2024).

Some sculptures challenge traditional notions of beauty and femininity. For example, Mbilinyu created a series of sculptures that depict women with strong, muscular bodies. These sculptures challenge the idea that women should be slim and delicate. By depicting women in unconventional ways, the sculptors challenge traditional beauty standards and suggest that women can be beautiful in a variety of ways. In addition to exploring traditional notions of gender roles, the sculptors also explore the impact of gender inequality on women's lives. For example, Gift Seda's sculpture *The Burden* depicts a woman with a heavy load on her back. The sculpture highlights the physical and emotional burdens that women often carry as a result of gender inequality. It suggests that women's lives are often characterized by a lack of choice, opportunity, and resources. The sculpture invites viewers to consider the ways in which gender inequality can affect women's lives and well-being. Another example is Mbilinyu's sculpture *The Servant*, which depicts a woman carrying a tray of food on her head. The sculpture suggests that women often perform domestic labour without recognition or compensation. It also suggests that domestic labour is undervalued, despite the fact that it is essential to the functioning of the African society. The sculpture invites viewers to consider the role of women in the home and the broader implications of unpaid domestic labour.

Other sculptures explore the power of women in more subtle ways. Juja Tembo's sculpture *The Wise One* depicts a woman with a serious expression, gazing off into the distance. The woman is depicted as being thoughtful and reflective, and her expression suggests that she has a deep understanding of the world around her. The sculpture highlights the wisdom and insights that women often possess, even when they are not given the opportunity to express it. Many of the sculptures challenge traditional notions of gender roles and suggest that women have much to contribute to society, both individually and collectively. By exploring this theme, the sculptors invite viewers to consider their own beliefs about the role of women in society and to reflect on the power and potential of all women.

4.6. Theme 6: Impacts of Tengenenge on contemporary African art and visual culture

From the study, it is clear that Tengenenge Sculpture Community has had a multifaceted impact on contemporary African aesthetics and visual culture. The Tengenenge community has left an indelible mark on contemporary African art and visual culture, weaving a rich tapestry of creative expression and cultural significance. Through their work, they have not only preserved their cultural heritage but also engaged their community, pushed artistic boundaries, and sparked crucial conversations. These intricate carvings serve as a testament to the community's commitment to honoring their past while embracing innovation. The experimental approach to sculpture embodies artistic freedom, as they fearlessly combines unconventional materials like wire and fabric to create thought-provoking pieces. This boldness has inspired a new generation

of artists to explore uncharted territories, expanding the possibilities of contemporary African art. Gift Seda's and other artists' fusion of traditional stone sculpture with modern themes like urbanization and technology exemplifies the community's ability to integrate tradition and modernity. By blending the old with the new, the artists at Tengenenge create visually striking pieces that resonate with audiences worldwide. The sculptures, which explore colonialism and identity, demonstrate the community's commitment to sparking crucial conversations about cultural heritage and social justice. Through their art, they facilitate cultural dialogue, encouraging viewers to confront complex issues and reflect on their own experiences.

The economic empowerment of the Tengenenge community through art sales has had a profound social impact, providing a sustainable income source and improving living standards. This success has also inspired other communities to explore creative entrepreneurship, fostering a spirit of innovation and self-reliance. They also highlight women's experiences and perspectives, offer a vital platform for underrepresented voices. By amplifying these stories, Eneresi Manzi contributes to a more nuanced understanding of African culture and society. The use of unconventional materials like recycled metal and plastic challenges conventional notions of African art, inviting viewers to reconsider their assumptions about creativity and resourcefulness. This innovative approach has inspired a new wave of artists to experiment with unexpected materials and techniques.

The data were aggregated into themes that are presented in Figure 5.

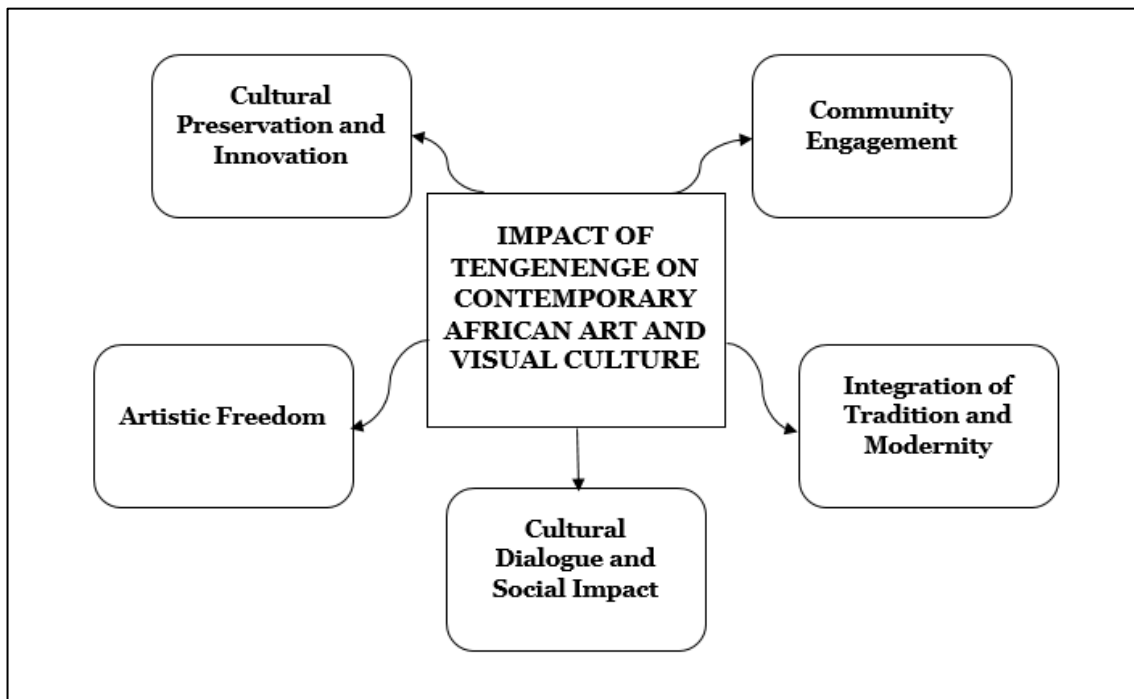


Figure 5. The impact of Tengenenge Arts Centre.

Below are excerpts from artists that show the impact of the centre:

Gift Seda: "The community's commitment to artistic freedom and exploration has been profoundly influential. Tengenenge embrace abstract forms and symbolic expression in sculpture has

encouraged me to push boundaries in my own abstract paintings, allowing me to experiment with new techniques and concepts."

Josiah Manzi: "Tengenenge has redefined what it means to be a contemporary African artist. Its philosophy of integrating community and art challenges the idea that art must be isolated from daily life. This approach has pushed me to consider how my mixed media works can be both personal and communal, reflecting broader cultural narratives."

Augustine Mbilinyu : "Tengenenge's focus on community and cultural preservation has influenced my performance art by encouraging me to create work that engages with the audience on a deeper level. Their community-centered approach has shown me how art can serve as a tool for cultural dialogue and social change."

Curator cum Administrator: "The impact of Tengenenge Sculpture Community is substantial, attracting many new artists and significantly contributing to the gross domestic product through art tourism. Stone sculpture plays a key role in tourism and cultural promotion, offering insights into both past and present. By supporting art and artists, Tengenenge fosters art tourism and economic growth, which is essential for achieving Vision 2030's goal of an upper middle-class economy. To succeed, it is crucial to engage with initiatives like the Zim-Bho mantra from the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority to boost tourism further."

5. Discussion

Interpreting sculpture in communities is not just about understanding individual artworks but about engaging with broader cultural, historical, and social narratives. It enriches the community by fostering a deeper connection to the past, encouraging dialogue, and supporting both artistic and communal growth. This multifaceted approach ensures that the art of sculpture remains a dynamic and integral part of communal life. By embracing these aspects, communities can fully realise the potential of sculpture as a medium for education, connection, and cultural expression. Sculptures exploring the connection between humans and nature often engage with how humanity relates to the natural world. This theme might be expressed through representations of natural forms or the integration of natural materials in the artwork. Sculptures can depict human figures in harmony with natural elements—such as trees, animals, or landscapes—symbolizing our deep-rooted link to the environment. By emphasizing organic shapes, textures, or the cyclical processes of nature, artists can evoke a sense of unity between human existence and the natural world. This dialogue might reflect on how humans both impact and are nurtured by nature, underscoring a mutual dependency and the need for environmental stewardship.

The connection between humans and nature is a central theme in the work of Tengenenge sculptors. In many traditional African cultures, there is a strong belief in the interconnectedness of all things, and this belief is reflected in the sculptures. Many of the sculptures depict human figures fused with animals or plants, representing the idea that humans are part of the natural world, rather than detached from it. This is often explored through the use of organic forms and materials. For example, many of the sculptures feature human figures with arms or legs that have been transformed into branches or leaves. Another way in which this theme is explored is through the use of texture. Many of the sculptures feature smooth, polished surfaces to represent the human form, while the natural elements are depicted with rough, textured surfaces. This contrast between smooth and rough, polished and unpolished, creates a sense of harmony and balance between the human and natural worlds.

It was also interesting to observe the exhibition of sculptures that explore the spiritual world. These often aim to evoke or represent the intangible aspects of human

experience—such as faith, enlightenment, or the divine. Zimbabwe and Southern Africa communities are profoundly immersed in a rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual beliefs that shape their daily lives and traditions, reflecting how deeply these beliefs influence their worldview, social practices, and rituals. The sculpture works at Tengenenge incorporate these beliefs showing a connection to a higher reality or the metaphysical realm. Through their forms and compositions, these sculptures encourage viewers to reflect on their own spiritual beliefs, explore existential questions, or seek a deeper understanding of the universe. The theme of the passage of time in sculpture was addressed through representations of aging, change, or the fleeting nature of human existence at Tengenenge.

The theme of the passage of time in Tengenenge sculpture is multifaceted and deeply rooted in both the material aspects of the artwork and the cultural context of the local people in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. Through their choice of materials, artistic techniques, and symbolic content, Tengenenge sculptors express complex ideas about time's effects on the physical world and human existence. Their work serves as a reminder of time's relentless flow and the ways in which it shapes, transforms, and preserves cultural and spiritual truths. By exploring these various dimensions, we gain a richer appreciation of how sculpture at Tengenenge represents time not just as a chronological sequence, but as a profound and ever-present force that influences all aspects of life and art. Sculptors might explore time by depicting subjects in various stages of life, or through abstract forms that convey transformation and impermanence. Techniques like weathered textures, dynamic poses, or the juxtaposition of past and present elements can visually articulate the flow of time. This theme might be used to comment on human mortality, the endurance of memories, or the impact of time on both individual lives and broader historical contexts.

Sculptures at Tengenenge also represent the socio-political positionality of Zimbabwe. This is particularly important as they address issues of power, justice, and identity. Artists have created works that both critique and celebrate political movements, social changes, or cultural identities. This theme was explored through representations of leaders, protests, or symbols of resistance and solidarity. The artist's choice of subject matter, scale, and form can make statements about political structures, historical events, or social inequalities. Through their art, it seems that sculptors at Tengenenge challenge viewers to reconsider their own roles in societal dynamics and engage in discussions about justice, equality, and human rights.

The last but certainly not the least theme, was that of gender and the power of women. Sculptures at Tengenenge that explored gender and the power of women depicted powerful female figures, celebrating feminine qualities, or addressing gender inequalities. The sculptors used symbolism, form, and material to challenge traditional gender roles and elevate women's voices. Works addressing this theme aim to redefine or reframe perceptions of femininity, offer commentary on the historical marginalization of women, or celebrate the strength and achievements of women throughout history. This exploration can provoke conversations about gender dynamics, equity, and the evolving role of women in society.

Tengenenge Sculpture Community has had a significant impact on contemporary African aesthetics and visual culture. By blending traditional stone carving techniques with modern themes, the community has fostered cultural preservation and community engagement. Its emphasis on abstract forms and collective creativity has inspired artists to explore their heritage while pushing artistic boundaries. Tengenenge's model demonstrates how art can drive cultural dialogue and social change, offering a successful

example of merging historical influences with contemporary practices. This approach has encouraged innovation and experimentation among artists, shaping the future of African art and visual culture.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, Tengenenge Sculpture Community in Zimbabwe exemplifies a distinctive fusion of African imagery and indigenous knowledge within the realm of contemporary African art. This vibrant center not only celebrates the rich cultural heritage of its members but also serves as a pivotal space for the advancement of modern African visual culture. The artists at Tengenenge use various techniques and materials to create sculptures that explore human experiences and societal issues, focusing on the connection between humans and nature and promoting environmental stewardship. Spiritual themes are also prevalent, with artworks functioning as vehicles for spiritual expression, meditation, and exploration of divine and metaphysical beliefs. Additionally, Tengenenge's sculptures reflect the transient nature of life and the passage of time, inviting contemplation on personal and collective histories. The community's art further engages with socio-political commentary, offering insights into justice, resistance, and identity, while also addressing gender and empowerment. Sculptures at Tengenenge celebrate feminine strength, challenge traditional gender roles, and emphasize the significant contributions of women to art and society. Through these diverse themes, Tengenenge Art Center demonstrates that sculpture is a dynamic and versatile medium for dialogue and reflection on human experience and societal issues.

Tengenenge sculpture community has become an inspirational center for the development of contemporary African art and visual culture. Tengenenge has become a key center for local and international artists and collectors, fostering idea exchange and preserving African heritage while positively shaping the image of Africa and advancing contemporary African art and culture. The community's historical and political context, representation of gender, artistic techniques, and materials, response to globalization, education and training, and conservation and preservation efforts are all important factors to consider on the community's impact. The community's approach to sculpture, which is rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and African imagery, challenges Western-centric interpretations of African art (Smith, 2023). Lessons that can be gleaned from Tengenenge include the development of sustainable art communities in Africa. The artworks have gained international recognition and are sought after by art collectors, galleries, and enthusiasts worldwide. The sculptures are often exhibited and sold at major art hubs in Europe, North America, and Asia. Additionally, the rise of online platforms and e-commerce has facilitated the global reach of Tengenenge artworks, allowing collectors from around the world to purchase sculptures directly from artists (Chikukwa, 2013).

The growing economic opportunities provided by Zimbabwean contemporary stone sculpture have also had significant implications, as many artists have been able to support themselves and their families through the sale of their sculptures. The industry has also created new jobs and income streams in the region (Smith, 2023). Overall, Tengenenge sculpture community has played a significant role in preserving and celebrating the African way of life, and has helped to keep the culture vibrant and alive.

Tengenenge art has expanded its scope by incorporating found objects and recontextualizing artworks with deep cultural backgrounds and richness. Tengenenge sculpture community fosters social, racial, and cultural harmony, representing diverse African mythologies and making significant contributions to the promotion and

preservation of African cultural heritage (Mpofu et al., 2024). The sculptures serve as a powerful form of social commentary, reflecting both the struggles and triumphs of the past while also calling for a better future. These works are personal yet universal, addressing relevant issues and sparking conversations that inspire action. In essence, Tengenenge sculptures function as a collective visual metaphor and storytelling medium, weaving individual artist experiences into a broader narrative about the human condition.

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