

**JOHN MUAFANGEJO'S *HOW GOD LOVES HIS PEOPLE ALL OVER THE  
WORLD AS MATERIAL RELIGION*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The artworks produced at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift, KwaZulu-Natal, have been highly appraised and appreciated in South African art-historical circles, not in the least so as African expressions of postcolonial and anti-apartheid resistance. The work of Namibian artist John Muafangejo (1943-1987) is prominent amongst these. In this article, while borrowing generously from the methods of art historical research, our interest is primarily in works of art as objects of material religion. Erwin Panofsky introduced iconology as a way of determining the meaning of art. Iconology wants to enable the seeing of the unseen; seeing the transcendence -- making it most applicable to the study of religion as a cultural practice. This article investigates in a critical way how iconology can assist in the study of material religion, especially as applied to the study of religious art. Because meaning is contextual, the conditions under which religious objects are made and interpreted are as important as the work itself. A discussion of a specific work by John Muafangejo originating from the Rorke's Drift Centre will be conducted by testing the potential of iconology as an analytical tool in this African Christian environment.

**Keywords:** material religion; iconology; meaning; art; John Muafangejo; Christianity

## **Introduction**

Over many centuries, humans have expressed their awareness of the existence of spiritual beings in artistic form. Not only the creation of such visual expressions but also the consequential interpretation of the meaning of such expressions is an ongoing process. In many cases the creators, those with “insiders” knowledge as to the meaning of their works, are deceased, leaving only “outsiders” to determine meaning. Meaning is however not fixed but contextually determined. This study is framed by a theological, social, and political context. Tapping from Christianity, an African-enculturated interpretation is presented to art that arose during a time of political awareness manifesting in the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s.

This article consists of three parts. The first part offers an overview and critical assessment of what material religion entails. In the second part iconology as a way of evaluating materiality in religion is presented. The complexity of utilizing iconology as a Western-constructed methodology applied to an African context is investigated. In the third part these two theoretical sections -- material religion and iconology -- are combined in a practical application when a specific work of art entitled *How God loves his people all over the world* (1973) by John Muafangejo (1943-1987) is evaluated.

## **Material Religion**

For too long in the study of religion, the emphasis for an understanding of religion has been on defining it in terms of belief alone. Numerous scholars have perceived the existence of religion only in terms of beliefs in the transcendent. Houtman and Meyer see the more recent turn to material religion as a “corrective” to the post-reformation

tradition of a one-sided focus on beliefs. Asad points out how beliefs tend to carry with them a claim to ultimate meaning (41). Keane pleads for a shift “away from beliefs and towards practices” (115). Material religion expands the understanding of belief in order to include in the scope of the study of religion “the social life mediated in feelings, things, places and performances” (Morgan 12). The emphasis is on studying expressions framed by the social construction of the sacred. The focus of material religion is then on embodiment and belief (Morgan 13).

David Morgan summarizes the argument against the tradition of only studying the beliefs of religion, as follows: “The idea that belief is the main focus of religion is a Western reductive way of studying religion. Over centuries Westerners expressed their faith visually in images, but studying religion relied heavily on belief” (1). As Christianity had been perceived as a religion consisting of beliefs, over centuries beliefs became the only measure for religion (Morgan 1). Not all religions consist of only beliefs (Morgan 3). Although this might be the way in which scholars had prescribed religion to be studied, one has to consider that even Westerners had over the ages not expressed and experienced their religion through beliefs alone. Focussing on more than utterances of belief would imply that we also consider the following as part of religion: human behavior, feeling, intuition, images. Religion then no longer becomes a symbolic representation but includes symbols and their world of reference (Morgan 5).

According to Morgan materiality refers to more than just concrete objects (8). Materiality is concerned with the relationship of humans with their physical world. It would seem that materiality is concerned with existentialism, reflecting the embodiment of human relations to their surroundings. Keane indicates how, in material religion, recognition is given to the fact that we do not have direct access to

the intended meaning of those expressing religious ideas in visual concepts (114). Humans only have access to ideas once they are mediated by signs which can be repeated. These semiotic forms, once manifest in the public domain, are repeatable and visible. Keane emphasizes that these characteristics do not mean that the signs will necessarily have the same meaning every time or in every context they are used (114).

Following the material turn taken in the social sciences (Hazard 58), scholars studying religion also started reflecting on material elements. This tendency followed criticism that religion is not only that which is captured in texts and doctrines. Religion is in fact most visible and audible in the everyday expression thereof, or as it is popularly referred to as “lived religion” (Hazard 59n2). Lived religion would then refer to actions, emotions, and/or expressions as performed in the daily existence of humans, the form religion assumes outside of the formal institutionalized and prescriptive domain of religion and the way people participate in religion in their everyday existence. As to the origin of material religion, Birgit Meyer, et al., indicate that at the root of material religion lies culture studies and visual culture studies (207), the latter which, as affirmed by Peter Burke, hinges on beginnings in cultural history. With the rise of modernism, over the past hundred years there have been tendencies to relegate religious art and (modern) art into adjacent and preferably not porous compartments. And yet, when taking the longer view into the past, art historians have been studying visual culture associated with religion long before it was called material religion.

According to David Chidester, it was the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach who contributed to the understanding of the indivisibility of humans from objects (“Material Culture”). Feuerbach argued that human beings are human due to

their reciprocal engagement with material objects (4). Humans from the earliest times considered material objects as part of the domain of religion. Archaeological discoveries of ancient burial sites and compounds found material examples of objects that would have been imbued with associative meaning for communities. Stones, shells, carvings, paintings, and utility objects unearthed clearly expressed an awareness of a spiritual realm. Ethnologists and anthropologists have been studying these tangible artefacts for centuries and even based assumptions and deductions about forms of religion on the results of their research. Material religion, therefore, is not as new as we think.

The historian of religions Mircea Eliade introduced a theory on the origin of religion that is relevant to the study of material religion. For Eliade reality is divided into sacred and profane spheres. The key to understanding religion is the way in which the sacred communicates to or manifests in the world. The term “hierophany” is key to an understanding of religion (Eliade 9). For Eliade the sacred is both unknown and unknowable but mediates knowledge through manifestation in space and time. Hierophanies are the mundane objects which become channels by which the sacred is communicated to humans. Hierophanies take on many different forms varying from nature (e.g., trees or mountains) to sacred texts (e.g., the Bible or Qur’an), through visions and dreams and even human beings (e.g., shamans, prophets, or holy people). Discerning the meaning attached to the hierophany requires discernment in order to distinguish the element from its surroundings (13). Hierophanies are captured in myths within traditions and/or are dramatized in rites. Interpreting myths and rites is essential to understand religion (63). Traces of the sacred (the transcendent) are therefore left behind in the mundane (immanent) world.

Religion therefore is the complex of phenomena resulting from the human experience of the sacred.

Eliade's differentiation between the sacred and profane reflects a worldview where segmentation of reality is possible. An African worldview is different: no segmentation of reality is possible. Everything has to do with everything. In this holistic understanding of reality the sacred can be encountered anywhere and any place. Mbiti indicates that African religion can be seen "in all aspects of life" and it "influences all areas of life" (29).

### **Iconology**

When studying materiality there arises the matter of what is to be studied and how it is to be studied. Studying materiality can hardly be reduced to an uncritical phenomenological approach to objects and events. Studying material religion is not restricted to a descriptive activity based on empirical knowledge. The meaning of objects and events is important. Determining meaning, however, is not an easy task. Iconology serves as method for determining meaning. An object may function within multiple contexts with the same meaning, different meanings, or even meanings which vary. The problem is how to distinguish when a different meaning is applicable.

### ***Theory of Symbol***

Emile Durkheim indicates how religions differentiate between two realms of reality, the sacred and the profane (36). Religion is concerned with the way in which humans living in a this-worldly reality relate to a dimension of existence in another reality.

Weber attests to this when he states that the realm of souls, demons, and gods can only be presented in a transcendental existence (404).

The visible and invisible world relate by way of symbols. Symbols become keys for unlocking the invisible world as well as a medium for expressing the relationship with the religious reality. Symbols mostly come from the visible, ordinary world or territory we live in but point to something mysterious and unknown. As Dillistone puts it, symbols connect two worlds: the world of the greater, transcendental, or the ultimate, of ideals, reality, values, convictions, and concepts, to the world of words, objects, actions, rituals, and people (13). Weber indicates how the transcendental world is only accessible through symbols (404). Symbols become the keys unlocking the hidden reality in the religious world, enabling communication between the two worlds.

### ***Panofsky and Iconology***

Iconology is a well-versed method worth revisiting for interpreting materiality. Iconology was originally intended as a valuable method in art history. The German art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) can be labelled as the main exponent of iconography and iconology. Panofsky was influenced by the Warburg School and especially by the philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Panofsky defined iconology as a sub-discipline of art history which is specifically concerned with meaning and not the form of art (3).

Panofsky understood iconography as the interpretation of images through their referral to particular stories and allegories (8, 11, 14). For Panofsky the process of determining meaning occurs in three stages (5-7). The first stage refers to the primary or “natural” meaning (pre-iconography). At this level the interest is in the mere

appearance of forms. Factual meaning is gathered through identifying visual data as experienced: whether it is a rock or a stick or a living organism that is being looked at. The psychological nuances of these facts lead to expressional meaning (Hasenmueller 290). Here the goal is to determine the expressional qualities present in the image, such as a gesture, a pose, or the conveying of a trace of an emotion. The image perceived is identified to represent a motif (factual) and the emotion expressed through the motif (expressional). The experience of the viewer plays a significant role in the process of identifying the factual and expressional. Viewers will only be able to identify and understand the motifs if they have experience and knowledge of motifs and if they are associated with the cultures from which they hail. Once the motifs have been identified the interpretation of the motifs proceeds (Hasenmueller 291).

The second stage refers to the conventional meaning (iconography) that is based on a presupposed knowledge stemming from a shared cultural context (Hasenmueller 290). To pass through the first stage, one has to identify the motifs. Now the motifs are combined to form compositions with themes and concepts attached to them (Panofsky 6). Motifs with secondary meaning are known as images. This second level of meaning differs from the first since, at the second level, the concern is with interpretation, whereas, at the first, it is limited to description (Hasenmueller 290). Such interpretation is only possible when presupposed knowledge of a cultural system is available.

The final stage refers to intrinsic meaning (iconology). This level of meaning seeks essential meaning (Hasenmueller 290). Attaining this meaning concerns identifying the society's underlying principles associated with any particular group, class, gender, time period, or matrix of religious or philosophical beliefs. The stories,



allegories, images, and motifs identified earlier are all expressions of underlying principles which need to be identified (Panofsky 8). The motifs and images are studied in order to find the symbolic values underlying them. The investigation of symbols and their meaning is labelled as iconography at a deeper level (Panofsky 8). All elements are combined in a comprehensive way to create meaning of the separate elements as they relate to one another. In stage three one can start to seek the deeper meaning (iconological meaning) of the image. Here Panofsky's warning about subjectivity needs to be heeded as the meaning is obscure. According to an assessment by Hasenmueller, Panofsky does warn that iconology can become like astrology in the sense that it can be subjective, unscientific, and speculative (291).

Iconology is indeed a method of interpreting and determining meaning in art, but it is a method designed and constructed from within a Western mind-set and within a particular paradigm. From its origin, it is clear that iconology is a method designed within a Western matrix. It has been used and continues to be imposed as a method to ascertain the meaning of objects that have not been made to be "Western art." In other words, one set of elements is used in order to determine meaning, resulting in what we would like to refer to as "collective subjectivity." A cultural environment shared by many serves as the sole matrix in order to ascertain meaning. The method of iconology is thus designed to allow the viewer, also from a Western background, to see only what the method allows one to see.

The resulting problem is that the moment iconology is utilised as a method to interpret art a particular set of (Western-orientated) criteria are super-imposed over an object and meaning is forced to fit the matrix. Cultural knowledge is assumed, an awareness of particular meaning(s) of symbols is taken for granted. Symbolism is interpreted from a single stance, re-enforcing a cultural hegemony. Panofsky's whole

discussion in the introduction to his *Studies in Iconology* of the meaning of two men on a street greeting one another by lifting hats illustrates this concern of cultural hegemony (3-4). This manner of greeting is explained by way of tracing its Western origin. The analysis may be correct, but the application of the symbolism is intransferable. This is not the manner in which men in all cultures greet. If all men in all cultures wore hats, it may not imply a congenial or courteous action when they lift their hats upon seeing one another. This may be true of Western culture but might not apply universally.

We need to pay urgent attention to this warning in our endeavor here to utilize iconology as method applied to the art object made by John Muafangejo. Although it is indeed a Western matrix super-imposed over an art object from Africa, the process of determining meaning is made even more complex when considering that Muafangejo as an African artist was taught by European teachers of art and exposed to European examples of religious art. Which aspects of such an art object would be appropriately viewed through Western categories? In a postcolonial environment, one should be aware that methods arising from one paradigm cannot be applied to art emanating from a different paradigm. This would be similar to using the picture on a box in which one puzzle was sold to build a puzzle that came from a different box.

We are in need of a postcolonial hermeneutic, a way of gleaning meaning appropriate to the subject matter we encounter.<sup>2</sup> The problem with the art of Muafangejo is that many of his art objects, including the piece under scrutiny in this investigation (*How God loves his people all over the world*), contain religious elements stemming from Muafangejo's background, having been trained within a Christian missionary environment in a Western-influenced education.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore impossible to separate Western from African content or form in the art object. It must

be viewed as an African-infused expression of awareness of Western-inspired Christianity. In this sense iconology can be a valid method, as long as it is being applied with an utter awareness of the Western background of the method. Then, Muafangejo's piece of art, *How God loves his people all over the world*, can be viewed as religious art.

The problem with religious art is made clear by the observation presented by Harry Garuba that the world-view of the one creating art and the world-view of the viewer of the art may differ (283). For Garuba the animist world-view of Africa sees a "re-enchantment of the world" as opposed to Western "rationalization and secularization." "The seemingly uncodified could in fact be highly culturally coded" causing the viewer to be unaware of the meaning of the art viewed (Garuba 283). Rosalind Hackett supports this line of argumentation when she argues that Western scholarly traditions with their quest for "rationality and objectivity ... have not favoured the investigation of the visual arts" (301). Panofsky himself has stated: "iconographical analysis ... does not guarantee its correctness" (12).

The question must be asked whether, considering the limitations of iconology as pointed out above, it may still be viewed as a valid way of interpreting visual culture and specifically art from Africa. A further question would be whether the process of iconology can be applied to religious material, even from Africa. Daniel Louw has suggested a way by having attempted to apply iconology to determine if human beings can see the divine (the transcendental) when looking at religious images. Louw suggested the use of iconology as a way of seeing what he deemed the unsee-able: being able to see beyond the visible (idol) and see the true intent (icon) (*Icons* 13; "Poetic Seeing" 4). This is referred to as "an iconic view," implying a

spiritual metaphysical encounter is realized, possibly resulting in one seeing transcendence (“Poetic Seeing” 10).

### **Interpreting Material Religion Using an Art Historical Method**

Now that the theoretical analysis has been presented we can try to demonstrate how iconology can be applied within material religion. The material object under scrutiny is an artwork by John Muafangejo (1943-1987).

### ***Studying Religious Images in South African Art***

Material religion attempts to study expressions of religious awareness in any material (i.e. visible or tangible) form. Sarah Khan indicates in her evaluation of the publication by Chika Okeke-Agula (2015) that we need to take heed of the warning made by Okeke-Agula: interpreting art, especially African art, can easily end up in the hands of Western art historians, resulting in a colonial interpretation based on Western dominance (77). Rather, the diversity and autonomy of a postcolonial understanding of art in Africa is required.

For quite some time scholars have been studying artistic expression with religious meaning in South Africa. Cornelius identifies the lack of research on visual arts in South Africa which reflect on interpretations of the Bible (254). West indicates how artists in Africa, when considering religious art, tend to use images from the Bible (“Role” 76). The Bible is, however, organic and foreign to Africa. The Bible was introduced to Africa and was interpreted for Africa. In this regard “the Bible inhabits and haunts the arts in Africa” (West and Ngwa 22). It is no surprise that the presence of the Bible in an African context is not the presence of the Bible in African churches but in graphic art in Africa.

The Bible (Christianity) and its meaning was brought to South Africa by (Western) missionaries. The presence of the Bible in Africa manifests in Western-inspired expressions. This mold is broken, however, when African artists take to expressing biblical themes and narratives cloaked in African culture. Artists are not only illustrators of the Bible but become interpreters (Cornelius 254). These expressions have become critiques on colonialism and represent a cultural revolution (West and Ngwa 24). With an indigenous interpretation of biblical themes, the colonial meaning is contested and representations of an understanding in Africa is created.

West and Ngwa illustrate this point by referring to the art of Azaria Mbatha (1941- ) as an African artist who interprets biblical themes in an African metaphor (26). For Mbatha the Bible tells an African story (West and Ngwa 26). It is important to note that Mbatha also studied at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift where he was a teacher to John Muafangejo (Cornelius 257; Leeb-du Toit, *Spiritual Art* 17).

### ***John Muafangejo***

John Muafangejo was born in Angola but grew up in Ovamboland in Namibia. From an early age he was simultaneously exposed to the traditional African customs and culture as well as influenced by Christianity. Sundermeier refers to the growth of Muafangejo as a Namibian artist (18). Muafangejo attended an Anglican missionary school where an American missionary, C.S. Mallory, identified his artistic abilities and assisted him in applying to attend the Art and Craft Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church at Rorke's Drift in what is today the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. Muafangejo arrived there in 1967 as an immigrant from Namibia. The

Centre at Rorke's Drift was established in 1962 by Swedish missionaries. Here at Rorke's Drift, Muafangejo was schooled in different forms of art: weaving, pottery, and sculpting. Muafangejo excelled in etching and linocutting.

Meanwhile, back in Namibia the Anglican churches supported the political struggle and became the voice of the oppressed of Namibia. Several students attested to how at Mapumulo and Rorke's Drift political and theological debate dominated the conversations and discussions (Leeb-du Toit, *Spiritual Art* 17). In 1968, Muafangejo received distressing news from Ovamboland.<sup>4</sup> He was denied permission to interrupt his studies at Rorke's Drift to return home and subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown (Cole 8). He was treated for depression in the Madadeni Hospital in Newcastle, Natal. After being released from hospital in 1969, he completed his studies at Rorke's Drift. From 1970-1974 he was an art teacher at a mission school in Namibia. In 1977 he moved to Windhoek to pursue his career as an artist. In 1987 he died of a heart attack. He had several international art exhibitions: London (1969), Sao Paulo (1972), New York (1976), Helsinki (1980), and Bonn (1987) (Offringa 121-123).

His work produced while he was at Rorke's Drift consisted mainly of biblical images, but after leaving Rorke's Drift his work started focussing on church activities and persons, while also addressing reconciliation due to church influence.<sup>5</sup> Leeb-du Toit points out how biblical and Christian symbols and dogma were mixed with topics of political and social abuses, resulting in the political oppositional role of sacred themes (Leeb-du Toit, *Spiritual Art* 17). The work we are viewing dates from the time after Muafangejo had left Rorke's Drift and is called *How God loves his people all over the world*. This is an etching produced with black ink on white paper (405 x

314 cm) completed by the artist in 1974. The three stages of discerning meaning through iconology as introduced by Panofsky will be applied.



**Fig. 1** Image 'How God loves his people all over the world' from Levinson 1992.

A first description of the primary meaning of the image leads us to discern fifteen small figures of equal size, all male, embraced by one larger male figure, clothed in white and with a long beard. All figures are facing forward. The smaller figures are arranged in three rows of five each, huddled closely together, almost similar to a choir formation. The smaller figures have different hair styles, facial hair, and print patterns on their clothes. It is unclear if racial differences are intended as all facial surfaces are represented by an absence of color, the ink markings shaping the mouths, noses, eyes, eye brows, and hair.

Each figure in the first row has one hand (either left or right hand) in front of him. Only one figure in the second row has an extended hand not in front of him. The larger male figure has large hands and embraces all fifteen smaller figures. There are no figures unattached to the event taking place. All present form part of the scene. The background is in black, forming a natural arch. A banner in the arch announces: “How God loves his people all over the world.”

On the expressional level we can identify that no obvious emotion is visible on any of the faces. Some seem sad, even somber, others pensive; several reflect a meekness, but no one is laughing. Only two figures, one in the middle and one in the back row, seem to present a faint smile or at least a kindly expression. The larger figure seems the most austere of all. The image appears almost like a formal group photograph, capturing figures in the presence of one another.

The words in written text provide a clue as to the secondary meaning of the image. The image seems to suggest God embracing fifteen men representing all the people from all over the world. The fact that the scene is depicted under an arch, widely recognized as symbolic of a gateway between two dimensions, affirms that the immanent and the transcendent are meeting in this work of art: the visible world of men and the invisible world of God converge through the symbol as mediator (*metaxu*).

As to the context of the image the following can be said. This particular print was made in 1974. Levinson comments that Muafangejo’s art tended not to represent biblical motifs or narratives in the same way as the work of many of the other artists at Rorke’s Drift did (307). Compare, for instance, the storytelling of his teacher, Mbatha, in the form of storyboards (Cornelius 255; West and Ngwa 26). Muafangejo preferred to present social and even political critiques through his art, often criticizing



colonial rule (Cornelius 258). Due to the immense influence of the church on his life, biblical themes are “typical of his work” (Cornelius 258). Muafangejo’s stay at Rorke’s Drift coincided with the restrictive Apartheid laws in South Africa as a result of which people were excluded from privileges and rights in society. Yet, as Levinson also indicates, Muafangejo’s work tended to be autobiographical and many of his works speak of his appreciation for white individuals who had stood up for him so that he could pursue his art and his wellbeing. This image must be seen against this background.

As to the topics Muafangejo chose, Kentridge indicates that Muafangejo can be described as one of the best anti-colonial linocut artist of his time in Africa (*Six Drawing Lessons* 62). The argument Kentridge presents is that Muafangejo learned the art of linocut from the Swedish art teachers at Rorke’s Drift. The art he was exposed to and used as examples were German and Swedish linocuts. By giving an African interpretation to biblical topics, Muafangejo presented acculturated expressions in his artworks. Added to this the social comment and critique characterizing Muafangejo’s work, a comprehensive picture of the anti-colonial character of Muafangejo’s work is evident. The context in which Muafangejo produced art is that of political turmoil, with the influence of Christian and biblical themes as interpreted from an African perspective. Leeb-du Toit indicates how this interaction invigorated art as well as culture: “Biblical themes and influence often revitalise tradition and vice versa” (*Spiritual Art* 18).

As to the typical topics chosen by Muafangejo, Sundermeier indicates that Muafangejo told the story of his life (16). His life was one of tension between white and black inhabitants of Southern Africa. Muafangejo, however, cannot be labelled a political revolutionary artist. He did not try to analyze and unmask the oppressive

political structures of his time. Rather, he spoke “softly” about it and told what he saw and experienced (Sundermeier 18). The main themes in his work can be identified as traditional town and family life, personal accounts, churchly events, and biblical themes (Sundermeier 19). Muafangejo’s choice of Christian imagery can be ascribed to the fact that Christianity permeated so many cultures and is therefore accessible to large numbers of people worldwide (compare to Von Veh 6).

Muafangejo felt loved in his Christian surroundings. In his religious community, his Anglican and Lutheran family included individuals from many different parts of the world, like Southern Africa, the United States of America, and Nordic countries. If this image shows “how God loves,” Muafangejo may have had himself as well as members of this faith community in mind. The meekness, and yet also austerity, depicted on the men’s faces not only suits the political severity and uncertainty in Southern Africa in the 1970s, but also resonates with the artist’s personal situation at the time. This etching was produced in 1974, the same year in which Muafangejo was invited back for a residency at Rorke’s Drift. However, suffering another breakdown as in 1968, he was again admitted to hospital for psychological treatment (Offringa 122). His mental breakdown in 1974 was related to the death of his mother and the fact that he was unable to attend her funeral in Angola, owing to the hostilities between his country of origin and the South African government. Under these depressing conditions, it is not surprising that the people of the world in need of God’s loving embrace in his 1974 etching do not appear particularly elated. Indeed, the gaze of the men do not resemble the “vacant, catatonic states” of the mentally ill patients Muafangejo had depicted in a linocut dating from his stay in the Madadeni Hospital in 1968 (Cole 8). Rather, the expressions of the fifteen men in the 1974 etching range from reserved, serious, or sad, to pensive and meek. Having depicted

fifteen vulnerable little men in need of care, Muafangejo was perhaps trying to indicate that all people from all over the world can and may take refuge in the embrace of a powerful and protective God.

What lies beyond the visible? The simplicity of the image belies the complexity in determining the intrinsic meaning of the work. The deeper meaning attached to what is presented requires scrutiny. The symbols are so clear to see that they can easily be missed as symbols: note the images of men and the images of hands. The men symbolize people -- and according to the caption, all the people of the world, not only males. Drawing on Christian cultural norms, with each man in the image symbolizing humanity in some way, we may argue that each can be considered as representing a household or family. Implicitly, then, the man symbolizes the one standing for the family, the one responsible for taking care of the household. This leads us to the prominence of hands in the image. Hands are symbolic as instruments of giving: giving protection, giving care, giving wellbeing -- love in the Christian sense of *caritas* and *amor*. However, hands are also instruments that can take and receive. Hands can connect. In this image, the fifteen little men in their meekness seem to crave protection, care, and wellbeing rather than possessing a capability to provide these things. They seem in need of receiving these from someone else. And in the artwork, the two giving hands come from above. The larger male figure has the most prominent hands: hands capable of giving to all the smaller figures with an enormous all-encompassing embrace. His hands give the love that can be passed on by and connect those whose hands have received it.

If it is accepted that the larger figure represents God, the question arises whose image of God this is. It appears as if the figure has Caucasian characteristics (i.e. hairstyle and complexion). Is this the way Muafangejo pictured God? How was he

influenced in his understanding of God? In his context, raised at an Anglican mission and guided by Swedish teachers and Lutheran missionaries at Rorke's Drift, it was most likely that Muafangejo would create an image of God as European, because that is what he observed.<sup>6</sup> Still, his interpretation is infused with his African heritage surely presented to him by his teacher, Azaria Mbatha. Mbatha wanted to read the Bible within his own context and apply the biblical narrative to a South African context (West, *Academy* 105). Cornelius emphasises how Muafangejo in his art wanted to reflect the African mind, following his teacher's example (258). Leeb-du Toit discusses in detail Mbatha's use of biblical themes to address social and political matters of his time (*Contextualizing* 147). Cornelius mentions the remark made by Hobbs and Rankin on the works by Mbatha and Muafangejo as being truly iconographic of South African society.<sup>7</sup> The influence of Mbatha on Muafangejo is visible in the way in which Muafangejo presents biblical themes in an African form. Although Muafangejo portrays God as coming from a European background, He embraces people from all over the world. He is portrayed as an all-inclusive God, a God for all. The emphasis here is on unity and community, an expression of the African concept of Ubuntu. Masango indicates that the Zulu word Ubuntu expresses something of the identity of Black Africans: a human being is nothing without humanness or Umuntu (the Zulu word for human) (930). This finds expression in respect and caring for one another. This concept is, according to Masango, shared among many African tribes (930). Cornelius identifies Ubuntu as a central element in the art of Mbatha (257). It can then be assumed that Muafangejo would also emphasise the closeness of people to reflect Ubuntu. In this work by Muafangejo, the proximity of the fifteen figures emphasizes the unity as well as sense of belonging among the figures, alluding to Ubuntu now with the addition that Ubuntu is not only

experienced among humans but also when humans are in the proximity of God. Ubuntu is here presented not culturally but theologically embedded. God constitutes unity. This unity is further not limited to cultural boundaries but extends universally, to “all people over the world,” as the heading of the artwork states. This is a plea by Muafangejo for unity and equality constituted in a theological frame during a time when inequality and division characterized societies of Southern Africa.

The figure identified as God-the-loving-Father is dressed in a long white coat. Did Muafangejo deliberately represent God as wearing a long white coat as medical doctors in a healing facility would? Is Muafangejo depicting God as a Healer based on his experience of the healing powers of doctors wearing white coats at the psychiatric hospital where he was treated? Is God then also depicted as the Great Healer? Or is the coat white because the image is an etching and only two tones -- black and white -- are discernible in an etching? It is important to note that figures such as prophets and leaders in the South African Christian Churches, especially members of the Nazareth Baptist Church (also known as the Shembe Church), traditionally wear long white coats during worship (compare to Brown 229). For members of the Nazareth Baptist Church the color white is a symbol of innocence and purity (Brown 233). The color white in the case of Muafangejo does not necessarily carry any deeper meaning. It may merely be intrinsic to the medium in which Muafangejo is working. And yet it is enticing to perceive Muafangejo’s God as a Healer giving wellness and wellbeing with his loving hands.

The larger figure identified as God is also depicted with an excessively long beard, at least a beard longer than any other beard on the image. Is there any deeper meaning to this? It would appear that a long beard is a sign of old age. Cornelius interprets another artwork by Muafangejo (*The Creation*; see Levinson 22), noting

that Adam is identified by his beard as being a patriarch (258). In 1972 Muafangejo had produced a linocut entitled *The Ancient People had a long beard* (Cole 48). A long beard can also be interpreted as a sign of wisdom. God is then characterized in terms of his longevity and wisdom, linking up with the interpretation of God-as-Father figure. It would appear as if Muafangejo is giving commentary on his immediate environment. All other social structures and figures with authority may come and go, but God remains eternal, caring, and wise.<sup>8</sup>

The three stages of iconology lead to seeing the un-see-able. In this way, making sense of the image by Muafangejo, leads to a deeper understanding as to what the artist was trying to communicate. Where at first glance no outstanding symbols could be discerned, an understanding of the political context at the time, as well as the artist's immersion in Anglican and Lutheran versions of Protestant Christianity, may lead the viewer to discern "man" as paterfamilias, a symbol which in the Christian context encompasses all human beings, and "hands" as symbols of giving and receiving, linking and connecting, holding together, embracing, loving. How does God love? He loves as a healing, loving father figure, his hands holding together all the "smaller fathers," strengthening their hands.

From other cultural contexts (including one's self-identifying as equally Christian, Anglican, and Lutheran as Muafangejo did), the strong patriarchal representation in the etching will invite criticism. The God-image represents a conspicuously bearded-masculinity. And while one may still speculate about the race of the fifteen small male figures, there is no visual representation of any women or children amongst the "people all over the world." The iconological reading, however, aims to meet the artwork in the cultural world of the maker, to discern what had been "naturalized" in his frame of reference, in order to discern how he had made meaning

in that particular context. Seen in this light, the particular kind of masculinity depicted in the image may be scrutinized. In Muafangejo's cultural context men symbolize the ones bearing the responsibility of representing humanity, they are the owners of the hands that are expected to give care, to hold everyone safely together and to keep them from harm.

In his particular cultural framework, this artist depicts fifteen little men as meek, concerned, empty-handed, with weak hands, in need of the loving embrace that can be received from God's caring hands. As such the image is political in as far as it speaks to the challenges posed to African maleness in a racialized modernizing economy where growing populations are becoming increasingly dependent on cash income, even though opportunities for decent wage labor -- not to speak of creative work -- were limited and often required migration to places far away from home.

Von Veh indicates how Christian art was appropriated into Black consciousness in order to critique an oppressive South African social structure (6). The Africanized Christian churches played a role in providing Africans a place to express their African identity and to cultivate a sense of Black consciousness in fighting oppressive social structures. It is uncertain to what extent Muafangejo participated in these church activities, but through his art he contributed to a Black identity and Black divinity. In this way Muafangejo fits the description of an African artist using biblical teaching as a vehicle for struggle (Von Veh 6). It becomes clear that one cannot interpret African art isolated from the socio-political frame in which it originated.

In Muafangejo's world, if the men and their hands could be held in the loving hands of God's healing embrace "all the people of the world" would be touched. And

this, interpreting Muafangejo, is how God loves. In the language of material religion, this is how the work of art serves to make the viewer “see” transcendence.

### **Conclusion**

A significant number of John Muafangejo’s art works were inspired by religious experience. They lend themselves to religious interpretations and relate to the practices of the Christian religion. They can be identified as objects of religious art as well as material religion. The question arises whether art history and the study of religion have the capacity, each within themselves or both separately, to do justice to the experience and the interpretation of Muafangejo’s work. As such, Muafangejo’s work calls for a reconsideration of the boundaries between scholarly disciplines and fields of study and shows a receptiveness to the interdisciplinary bartering possible between demarcated fields of study. In this “no man’s land” (the hinterland of the cultural historian), iconology turns out to be a most usable, “portable” toolkit, offering a scope for interpreting past meaning and imagining past experiences.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article emanated from a paper presented at the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa (ASRSA) conference, 15-16 August 2018, UKZN, Durban. Attendance of this conference was made possible through funding by the NRF.

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, see the discussion by Gerald West on hermeneutics below.

<sup>3</sup> Compare in this regard the remarks on his training made below.

<sup>4</sup> American missionary, Bishop Robert Mize, who was much loved in Ovamboland, was deported by the South African authorities who then ruled over Namibia, and at the same time Muafangejo also learnt about the death of a relative he had been very close to.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Rankin confirms that there exists a link between the works by Muafangejo and Mbatha with their mission background, is evident in the choice of "biblical subject matter" as well as the "nature of the narrative which suggests a visual equivalent of the didactic approach of Protestantism" (45).

<sup>6</sup> “Mission station culture facilitated Muafangejo's education and development as an artist, but also circumscribed his vision” (Ozynski 27).

<sup>7</sup> 259. Panofsky differentiates between iconography and iconology. Iconology was the interpretation that went beyond the articulate, while Iconography was articulate (compare with Hasenmueller 291). Iconology was more interested in the symbolic values and accessible through subjective understanding while meaning based on an iconographical understanding was based on the decodable and conscious knowledge, like the conscious knowledge of language helps decipher meaning from a text.

<sup>8</sup> In his work *Zimbabwe House: This is St Mary's Mission Foundation Lukege's*, produced in 1972, Muafangejo referred to the South African government as “Master Nobody.” See Cole 56 for a discussion of this linocut.