

# **It's an African Proverb: Conceptualizing Narratives Through the Use of African Subject Matter**

By

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## **Abstract**

The research by practice is made up of three points of interest that aim to incorporate storytelling into the work with reference to the comic book genre. These points of interest are: experiences of mental health issues from a young man's perspective, a unique autobiographical experience unpacking the young man's mental health struggle and African oral traditions. These three points of interest work towards the goal of using African subject matter to uncover and present a meaningful narrative of a young man dealing with mental health problems and his father figure's ongoing sit-down conversation with him.

This mini-thesis breaks down the different components of the research by practice and analyses each component while drawing from various theorists and artists. The mini-thesis also builds up to the idea of using original African subject matter (e.g. African oral traditions, specifically African objects, subjects, and locations) as a means of cultivating a locus of African identity in the comic book industry. The research by practice intersects with this mini-thesis in that it acts as an example of how I visualise African subject matter being used in the theorising and creation of comic books.

## **Declaration of Originality**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes, positioned above a horizontal line.

N'lamwai Chithambo

26 January 2023

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**N'lamwai Chithambo, 26/01/2023**

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## Introduction


My Master of Fine Art research by practice submission titled *It's an African Proverb, a Biomythography*, is made up of three points of interest that aim to incorporate storytelling into the work with reference to the comic book genre. These points of interest are: experiences of mental health issues from a young man's perspective, a unique autobiographical experience unpacking the young man's mental health struggle and African oral traditions. These three points of interest work towards the goal of using African subject matter to uncover and present a meaningful narrative of a young man dealing with mental health problems and his father figure's ongoing sit-down conversation with him.

This mini thesis breaks down the different components of the research by practice by analyzing each component while drawing from various theorists and artists. Chapter One, titled: *Biomythography and African Oral Traditions*, introduces the issue at hand: a young man seeking recovery from mental health issues approaches a father figure for guidance. It is uncovered that this father and son relationship is based on my developing relationship with my father. This chapter also discusses the implementation of the unique autobiographical framework, called "biomythography", as well as the idea of using African oral traditions for introspective reasons.

Chapter Two, titled: *Dealing with the Unspoken*, confronts the silence surrounding certain aspects of mental health issues and the lack of conversation or support for individuals stricken with mental health issues (particularly young individuals) within families. A closer look is taken at the subject matter within the autobiographical framework and representations in the body of work are also discussed within this chapter. Chapter Three, titled: *Bringing it Together in a Comic Book Format*, delves into the comic book element of the work. It discusses the artists who brought inspiration to the work and seeks to encourage the significance of a

uniquely African-inspired comic book. A comparative analysis of Western, Japanese, and African comic books is made to support this argument.

The research by practice intersects with this mini-thesis in that it acts as an example of how I visualise African subject matter being used in the theorising and creation of comic books. In Chapter Three, the discussion of what makes an African comic book unique leads to the idea of using African subject matter (culture, tradition, folklore, etc.) as inspiration for layered stories. Through the research by practice, I aim to explore how well a painterly comic book can perform the framework of an African comic book that fundamentally draws from local subject matter. This mini-thesis aims to contribute to the transformation and development of African entertainment, particularly art and comic books.



IT'S AN AFRICAN PROVERB,  
A BIOMYTHOGRAPHY

*Figure 1. 7 N'lamwai Chithambo, MFA Exhibition Cover Page (2023), Vinyl Text on Board, documented by N'lamwai Chithambo*

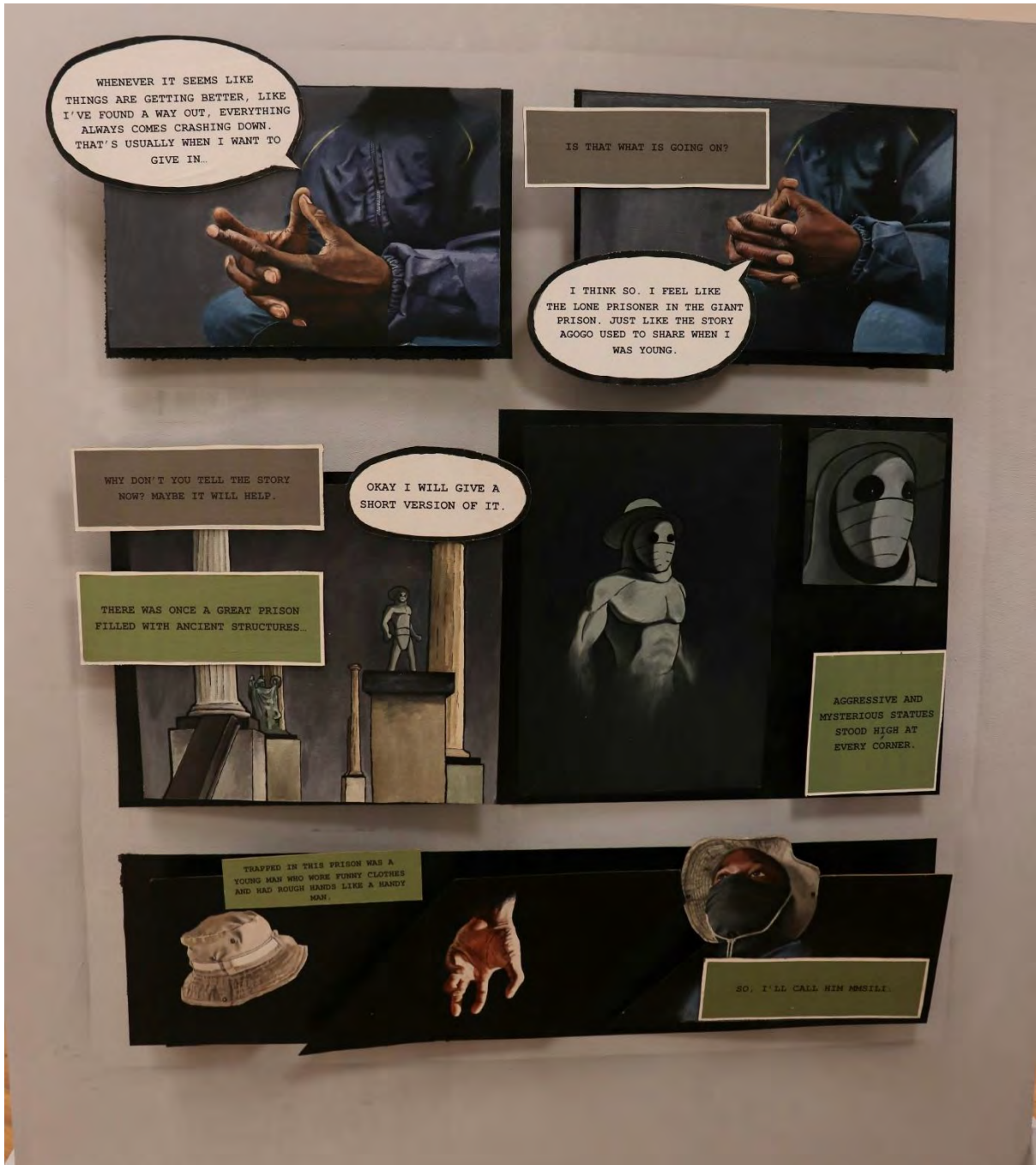


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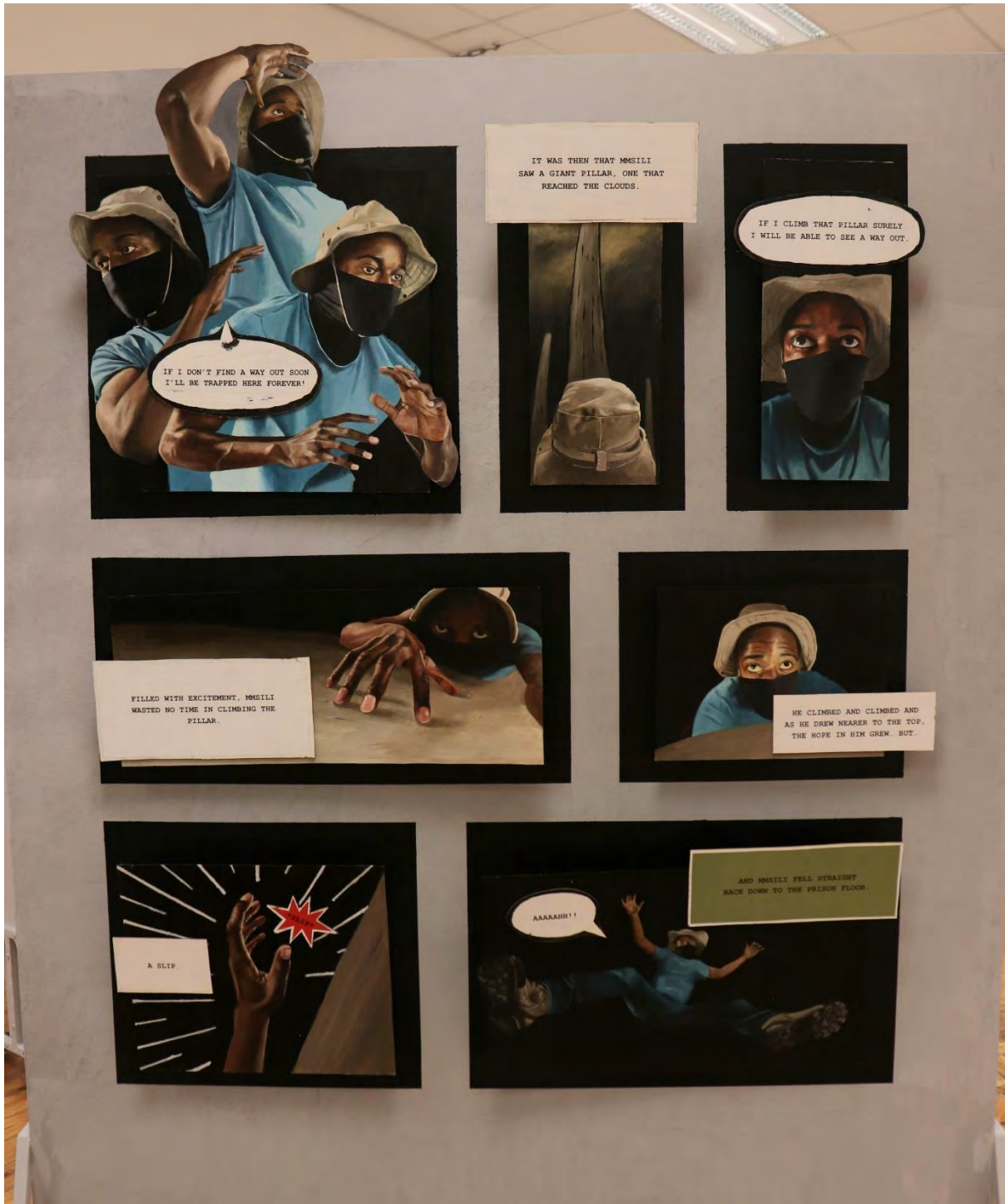


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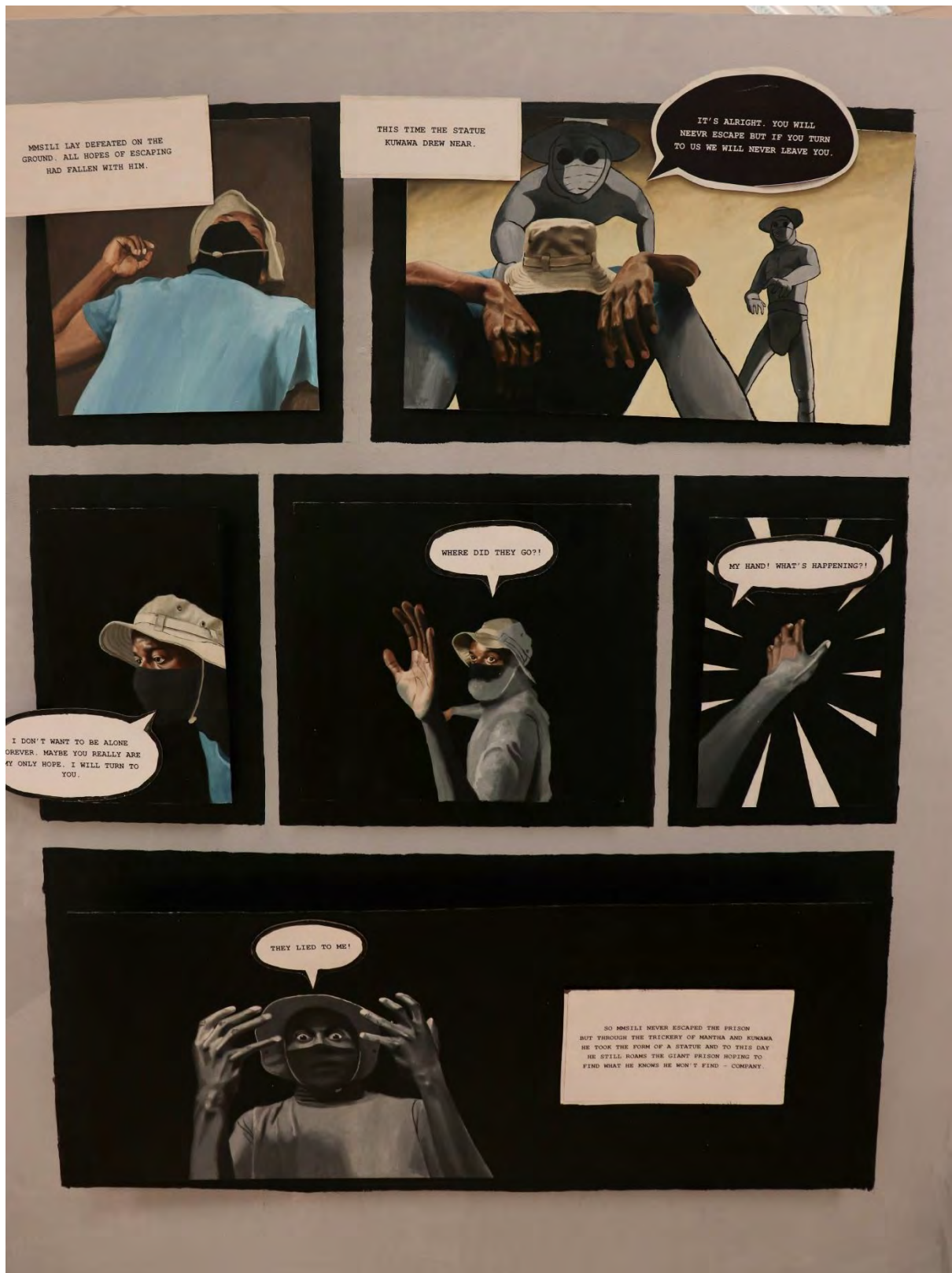


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## **Chapter One: Biomythography and African Oral Traditions**

This chapter introduces the main subject matter of the research by practice; a young man's introspection as he deals with a mental health illness and the process of unpacking this to a father figure. Secondly is the concept of "biomythography" as coined by Audre Lorde (1984). The meaning of this concept, how it is used as a framework within the research by practice and the reasons for choosing such a framework are discussed. The idea of using African oral traditions as a means of discussing introspective issues is then raised while the functions of oral traditions are unpacked.

Professional counsellor and author, Joyce Divinyi (1995), poses that storytelling is at the centre of every oral tradition and predates written communication by millennia. It is used "to entertain, to teach, to pass on cultural norms and religious values, to explain the natural and physical world, and to express the aesthetic need for beauty throughout the history of the human race" (Divinyi, 1995: 27). On a more personal level, storytelling can communicate how individuals relate to the world around them as well as make sense of their experiences within their worlds. Barton emphasises this point when he writes, "we are all natural storytellers. Everything that happens to us in our lives is filed at the back of our minds in containers called stories" (Barton, 1986 cited in Divinyi, 1995: 27). Beyond the use of relating experiences and the giving of information or knowledge, however, storytelling also functions as an introspective tool for "self-understanding and healing" (Divinyi, 1995: 27).

This introspective means of storytelling forms the basis of the subject matter within the research by practice component. The premise for the story behind the work goes as follows: a young African man suffering from a mental illness seeks healing and desires to open up and share his traumatic experiences to receive inner comfort and peace of mind. This young man (Mwana) engages in sit-down talks with his father figure (Tate) as illustrated in Figure 1.1. It

is important to note that aside from English, terms from the Chichewa language also feature. Chichewa, a language native to the Chewa people of Malawi and the most widely spoken in the country, is used to act as an imprint of my Malawian identity on the work as elements of the characters and story within the tale are based on myself (a point that will be further discussed later in this chapter). An additional reason for the use of Chichewa is that by using a Malawian language, an element of Malawian culture is brought in as “language is one of the most important parts of any culture” (Holmes, 2016). This supports the idea of incorporating African tradition and culture within African comic books. I discuss this idea in Chapter Three. Tate and Mwana simply mean “father” and “son” respectively in Chichewa. The reason for the names given to these subjects is further explained in Chapter Two.

The research by practice submission is displayed in the format of a comic book and the purpose of this, along with details, is expanded on in Chapter Three. The entire project begins with two paintings depicting Mwana seated. The viewing angle crops out Mwana’s head and lower legs such that what he is seated on is not made apparent. The largely painted hands are the focus of these paintings. The backdrop to these paintings is a solid grey hue. The hands are painted in a way that is intended to depict thoughtfulness but also anxiety, as in each painting the hands change position to illustrate that he is fidgeting. In these two frames, Mwana converses with Tate who is depicted through the speech bubbles attributed to him, and it remains this way throughout the work. The choice not to reveal Tate’s face or physical form is to accentuate Mwana as the central focus of the entire work. Mwana opens the conversation with a short speech, expressing his despair and torment as he battles mental illness. Tate suggests that Mwana indirectly and metaphorically shares what he is experiencing through means of storytelling as it may prove to be a more comfortable and easier means of talking about a complicated and possibly uncomfortable topic. Mwana then begins to share his fictional story which he loosely titles “Lonely Mmsili in the Giant Prison”. The tale is of a character named

Mmsili, meaning craftsman in Chichewa, who is trapped in a giant prison and seeks to escape but encounters mythical characters while trying to do so. These characters are Mantha, meaning fear, and Kuwawa, meaning anguish, who seek to keep him trapped in the prison with them. The reason for a craftsman as the main character is because Mmsili eventually finds himself needing to use his handiwork abilities to try and find a way out of the prison. At the end of Mwana's tale, Tate provides words of wisdom and encouragement for Mwana. This input by Tate is explained in greater detail in Chapter Two.



Figure 1. 7 N'lamwai Chithambo, *Mwana Sitting with Tate 1* (2021), Oil on Board, 60.5 cm x 39.5 cm, documented by N'lamwai Chithambo.

## 1.1 Explaining Mental Health Experiences

The tale told by Mwana is displayed in the style of a painterly comic book (which will be further discussed in Chapter Three). While it is useful to have a visual framework to depict the experiences, it is equally important to have a conceptual one. Although the experiences depicted are fictional, the ideas are drawn from my own experience of mental illness. I have suffered reoccurring mental health issues since the commencement of my university education. It began with a psychological breakdown and ultimately led to schizophrenic delusions. These delusions included hearing noises that were non-existent as well as believing that certain sounds or people's voices were calling for my attention. The research by practice submission

bases Mwana, as well as the tale he tells, on myself and my experiences. The figures within the paintings were painted from photographs I took of myself in various poses. Hence, to link various personal topics within the work, an autobiographical approach called “biomythography” is used. The term “biomythography” is drawn from the book “Zami: A New Spelling of My Name” by poet and activist Audre Lorde (1982). In a commentary on Lorde’s book, Maria Calle (1996: 162) writes that “Zami is both autobiography and biomythography, that is to say, bios or life experiences, graphe or writing, and myth.” The biomythography is used to represent actual events in my life through a mythical lens.

Audre Lorde makes use of the biomythography to narrate the biography of her mother in which she engages in conversation with her black lesbian identity and power structure within lesbian relationships (Britton, 2017). Lorde (1982: 14) opens her mother’s biography by declaring her mother’s uniqueness when she writes, “As a child, I always knew my mother was different from other women, Black or white.” This uniqueness allows for creative myth and metaphors throughout the story. For example, Lorde (1982: 1) writes, “Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos.” Here, Lorde converts the word “dyke” into an innuendo. Although she uses it within the sentence as meaning a barrier “between [her] and the chaos”, it is also used to highlight the lesbian nature of the women she talks about as “dyke” is also defined as meaning “lesbian” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I aim to use a similar technique of double entendre within my research by practice submission, particularly with the two antagonists Mantha and Kuwawa. While in the first instance, the names refer to negative emotions, they also define the characters that personify them.

According to Folaranmi and Oyeniyi (2021: 867), “The human mind is prone to romanticising; it, therefore, produces myths and legends in order to preserve ancient historical experiences or elucidate complicated abstract notions”. By using a mythical autobiography, the two said

functions of myths and legends which are “to preserve ancient historical experiences or elucidate complicated abstract notions” will be considered. Therefore, rather than avoid a sense of over-exaggeration or romanticisation, this approach is used in the tale of the painting. An example of this romanticisation can be seen in Figure 1.2 which depicts Mmsili roaming a great maze in which he is trapped. A bust of the figure is repeated from different angles, implying that he is examining his surroundings, while the black backdrop which surrounds Mmsili from every side aims to give a sense of being trapped with no escape.



*Figure 1. 8 N'lamwai Chithambo, Mmsili Wandering the Prison (2021), Oil on Board, 100 cm x 45 cm, documented by N'lamwai Chithambo.*

The prison acts as a metaphor to illustrate how, during my battle with my mental illness, I felt trapped mentally (that is, in the realm of my thoughts). The act of wandering is another metaphorical representation. While I was ill, I would physically wander around, whether at home or in the hospital, to help achieve clarity. These metaphorical representations and mythical elements of the biomythography are used to portray the obscure nature of the mental illness being dealt with as well as the emotional turmoil experienced. An example of emotional

turmoil is depicted in the work in Figure 1.3. Here Mwana elaborates on how Mmsili makes several attempts to escape from the maze. These attempts are illustrative of how Mwana has made his own attempts to break free from his illness, whether by digging within himself to find a solution or by crying out for help. The work draws from African oral traditions to elaborate on these mythical elements and emotional turmoil in an allegorical way and create a tale that summates the various experiences and representations.



Figure 1.9 N'lamwai Chithambo, *Mmsili Searching for a Way Out* (2022), Oil on Board, 130 cm x 50 cm x 131.5 cm x 30.5 cm, documented by N'lamwai Chithambo.

According to Folaranmi and Oyeniyi, African oral traditions “are various forms of traditional knowledge that the Africans used to teach and educate themselves about their stories, lineage and histories. They also include myths of origin, religious knowledge and practices among the people” (2021: 866). This definition supports Divinyi’s description of storytelling which she also described as being a means to teach, to pass on and to entertain. While Mwana’s tale might be entertaining for the audience, in a theoretical sense, his engagement with Tate aims to illustrate a passing on of knowledge and valuable lessons.

A brief synopsis of the body of work has already been provided, however, a simple breakdown of the engagement between Mwana and Tate goes as follows: Mwana approaches Tate with the issue of his grim psychological and emotional state, Tate advises Mwana to elaborate on what he is experiencing with the aim of gaining understanding and ultimately being able to be

of help, Mwana shares a tale that metaphorically describes his experiences and Tate, having understood the tale, shares a proverb at the end that provides a moral lesson for Mwana and as such, is ultimately able to give Mwana guidance. Therefore, when analysing this engagement, it is evident that there are three forms of African oral tradition at work which are the folklore tale, myth and proverbs (Folaranmi and Oyeniya, 2021; 865). These three forms will now be further broken down and analysed to understand how they each contribute to the work.

## **1.2 The Folklore Tale and Myth**

The tale and myth will both be elaborated on in one argument as myth forms a large part of the tale within the biomythography. The tale is, in fact, an amalgamation of various oral traditions. Elizabeth Ann Wynne Gunner (2020) supports this when she writes, “The riddle, lyric and proverb are the materials that are at the dynamic centre of tales. The riddle contains within it the possibilities of metaphor; and the proverb elaborates the metaphorical possibilities when the images of the tale are made lyrical – that is, when they are rhythmically organised.” Here Gunner explains that each oral tradition overlaps with the next and they connect to form the complete tale.

In addition to various oral traditions, the tale often also makes use of literary devices such as personification. An example of a tale from African literature that does this is one found in Chinua Achebe’s (1959) *Things Fall Apart*. A character in the story, Ekwefi, tells the tale of Tortoise who cunningly achieves his goal of reaching the “great feast in the sky” but falls to his demise when he is caught out in his trickery (Achebe, 1959: 96). I analyse this tale and use it to influence the content of the tale Mwana shares.

In Ekwefi’s tale, personification is evident when Tortoise and other animal characters communicate with each other as well as display human emotions such as happiness (Achebe, 1959: 97). This personification adds to the mythical element of the tale – the heart of the myth

being “the great feast in the sky”. Here we see a fictional setting in which natural and familiar creatures become mythical characters through the device of personification. Within the tale that Mwana shares, this literary device is also used. Similarly to Ekwefi’s story, Mwana presents a fictional setting which is the giant prison. However, atypically to Ekwefi’s tale, the main character (Mmsili) is a human and has no mythical elements about him. The personification is rather seen in the antagonists of the tale. Emotions such as fear and anguish are given the form of aggressive and menacing statues as well as voices that terrorise. This personification combines natural emotions (fear and anguish) with familiar objects (statues) to create mythical characters.

Gunner (2020) writes, “It is the cyclical movement of tales that makes it possible to experience linear details and images in such a way that they become equated one with the other. So it is that the simplest tale becomes a model for more-complex narratives.” I find this to be true as the model of the simple tale told by Ekwefi consisting of a fictional setting and personified mythical characters has provided a means for Mwana to present a narrative that is complex in its meaning and significance.

Another literary device that contributes to the mythical element is the naming device. In Ekwefi’s tale, the characters are simply named after their nature, for example, “Tortoise”. A reason for this could be to place focus on the characteristics of the said character. For example, Ekwefi explains that Tortoise was “full of cunning”. One can imagine that tortoises have to be cunning due to their naturally slow movement. This naming device is similarly used by Mwana in his tale. The main character of the tale is named Mmsili (craftsman) to highlight the characteristics of his nature (namely his ability to craft) that will be of necessity as the tale progresses. Likewise, the antagonists are called Mantha (Fear) and Kuwawa (Anguish), highlighting the nature of the threat they pose.

### **1.3 Proverbs**

Gunner (2020) writes, “When one experiences proverbs in appropriate contexts, rather than in isolation, they come to life.” Such is the nature of the proverb Tate provides to Mwana. Alone, the proverb makes little sense to the reader as well as in Mwana’s context. However, once Mwana tells the tale that represents his difficult experiences, the proverb finds its place as it speaks into his experiences, providing wisdom, enlightenment and a lesson to be learnt. In this way, the proverb supplies a moral. Chapman (2004, xii) writes, “Ancient tales – it is said – enacted, illustrated, and dramatized the moral lessons of communities (e.g., the African oral tale)”. The tale Mwana provides, therefore, dramatizes the proverb that Tate provides.

## **Chapter Two: Dealing with the Unspoken**

As discussed in Chapter One, the idea behind Mwana using storytelling to speak about what he was going through is so that his complex and difficult experiences could be made easier for Tate and others to understand. It is also a means of speaking about things that have previously never been shared or, in other words, speaking about the unspoken. Matthew chapter 13, verses 34 – 35 of the Bible say, “All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet saying: ‘I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world’” (New King James Version, 1982: Matthew 13:34-35). These verses inspire the use of storytelling in the body of the work as similar to how Jesus used the parable to metaphorically “utter things kept secret” pertaining to spiritual matters, Mwana uses the folktale to metaphorically speak about unspoken and unshared experiences regarding his mental health and emotional wellbeing.

### **2.1 Representations Within the Young Man’s Tale**

Apart from the wandering around that the character Mmsili does (as seen in Figure 1.2), the metaphorical representations in Mwana’s tale only begin when Mmsili tries to find a way out of the giant prison. The section of the tale prior to this simply acts as an introduction to the setting and character and builds up to the central drama. There are three main metaphorical representations in the tale: the prison, the statues and Mmsili. The prison represents the mind of Mwana in which he feels trapped, the personified and eerie statues that come to life (Mantha and Kuwawa) within the prison represent the negative emotions such as fear and despair felt by Mwana and Mmsili represents Mwana as well as all his endeavours to recover and flee from his unhealthy mental and emotional state. As earlier discussed, the idea behind the main antagonists was to combine negative emotions of fear and anguish with the familiar object of

the statue, creating a uniquely mythical character. The aim behind personifying these emotions was to illustrate how intensely Mwana felt them – they were felt to the extent that they seemed to have a life and voice of their own.

The painting in Figure 1.3 depicts Mmsili's endeavours to escape the giant prison. The digging, lighting a fire and crying out are all used by Mmsili to symbolise Mwana's striving to break free and find help for his mental illness; whether it was trying to find the solution within himself (symbolised by the digging), calling for attention (symbolised by the lighting of a fire) or literally crying out to others. Likewise, the failure in all of Mmsili's endeavours is congruent with Mwana's failure in the aforementioned. At every instance of failure in the tale, Mantha and Kuwawa (the capitalisation is to illustrate that these are no longer simply emotions but actual characters that have a presence in the tale) appear to Mmsili to terrorise him and appeal to his sense of loneliness and despair by concluding that they are the only form of company he will have within the prison. In addition to the personified statues, another visual metaphor occurs when a part of Mmsili's body is enveloped by a grey hue which is the same hue as the statues (see Figure 2.1). This occurs when he begins to worry and panic about his predicament and it implies that as he worries, he slowly takes on the form of Mantha and Kuwawa, transforming into a statue.



Figure 2. 1 N'lamwai Chithambo, *Mmsili in Deep Thought* (2021), Oil on Board, 53.5 cm x 39.5 cm, documented by N'lamwai Chithambo.

## 2.2 Representations of Malawian Nyau Masks and Their Myth Within the Tale

The appearance of the statues was inspired by Malawian Nyau masks (Figure 2.2). According to Curran (1999: 68) “Nyau is a semisecret men’s mask association of the Chewa people of central Malawi”. The practice involves the wearing of masks by men who are initiated into the association. The major event of the Nyau is the Gule Wamkulu (Great Dance). The Gule Wamkulu is an amalgamation of “zoomorphic constructions, song, and dance” (Curran, 1999: 68). The men create and wear the masks and women sing and clap for the masked dancers. The Gule Wamkulu is performed at occasions such as initiations of boys and girls and at funerals (de Aguilar, 1994: 3). The Nyau society and masks have been shrouded in secrecy for decades. Early missionaries recorded a mask tradition present in Malawi that “predates the coming of European missions in the 1860s.” The Gule Wamkulu is present throughout Malawi, parts of Zambia and even in Zimbabwe due to migrant Malawians who carried their traditions with them (de Aguilar 1994:5).



Figure 2.2 Chewa Nyau Mask, available at: <https://www.maskmuseum.org/mask/chewa-nyau/> [Accessed 24/01/2023].

A brief background of the mythology behind the Nyau according to Curran (1999: 68) is as follows:

The Nyau dancers (termed zilombo, or "wild animals") represent the spirits of the animals (nyama) and the ancestors (mizimu) brought back from the spirit world to attempt a temporary reconciliation with mankind in the village. This symbolic spirit world is presented to the village through Gule Wamkulu... The masks portray every aspect of human behaviour... Lust, greed, foolishness, vanity, infertility, sorcery, blind ambition – each has a Nyau counterpart who dances its story.”

It is the essence of the mythology behind the Nyau masks that I aim to capture and present within the statues of the young man’s tale; one that is menacing and fear-inducing. I do not support or believe in the myths behind the practices of the Nyau but rather am weary of them as one whose beliefs are rooted in the Christian faith, hence the depiction of the characters wearing Nyau masks as adversaries. Another point of relevance for the use of the Nyau masks

as inspiration is that I am Malawian myself and the Nyau masks and practices have their origins in Malawi.

### **2.3 A Father and Son Relationship as a Form of Inspiration**

There is a vast number of cultural practices in Africa such as rites of passage, initiations and celebrations. However, one can question the existence of practices that address personal, day-to-day issues experienced by individuals and within families – issues such as depression, mental illnesses or sexuality. On the contrary, it has been noted that there is a prevalence of stigmatisation of the aforementioned issues in an African context. Ritsuko Kakuma et al. (2010: 116) explains that “Stigma plays a major role in the persistent suffering, disability and economic loss associated with mental illnesses. Persons with mental illnesses are often victimised for their illnesses and face unfair discrimination... They are often mistreated by their family and friends, as well as in the community.”

The father-son relationship and the conversation that takes place between them are used as a means to confront the stigmatisation of mental illnesses in an African context. It is a sad reality that many young people find more ease and comfort in sharing traumatic mental health experiences with others, as opposed to sharing them with their own families or caregivers, simply because of stigmas and misconceptions surrounding mental illness. Therefore, not only do I incorporate my own being and story in the tale through the depiction of Mwana, but also the evolving relationship with my father. In recent years, I have been having more open-hearted conversations with my father. And while many of these have been due to issues that have arisen and not necessarily from a desire to initiate these conversations, they have been fruitful. These conversations have ranged from mental health and depression to sexuality. My father often uses proverbs to illustrate his point and as a means to provide wisdom, hence the proverb used by Tate after Mwana’s tale.

The Malawian proverb presented at the end of the tale by Tate goes as follows: “*Adandimangira njoka m’masamba kuti indipweteke*” which when translated means “He wrapped a snake in the leaves to hurt me” (Chakanza, 2000: 17). This proverb refers to friends in disguise, hiding evil intentions. Tate implies that the emotions of fear and anguish act as fake friends in times of trouble as it may seem the best and easiest thing for Mwana to give in to them, however, he also warns that giving in to these emotions will result in the young man’s demise.

## **Chapter Three: Bringing it Together in a Comic Book Format**

This chapter focuses on the comic book element of the body of work. The design and construction of the final exhibition are discussed as well as the reasoning for the inspiration behind the use of the comic book framework. The influences of artists such as Loyiso Mkize and Pola Maneli are then discussed, with a critical look at various important elements of the work. However, the crux of this chapter involves debunking the mimicry of mainstream comic books within the African comic book industry and highlighting the significance of a uniquely African-inspired comic book. Under this subheading, a closer look is taken at the growing comic book industry in Africa and a comparative analysis between various African comic books and Western and Eastern comic books is drawn up.

### **3.1 Constructing the Painterly Comic Book**

The complete body of work is referred to as a painterly comic book. This is because the narrative of Mwana sitting down with Tate and sharing the symbolic tale is all represented in a comic book format with various comic book elements visible. The exhibition displaying the work takes place in the side studio of the Rhodes University Main Fine Art Gallery in Makhanda (see Figure 3.1). The work is divided upon four moving walls, each acting as a page with the multiple paintings on the walls acting as individual panels filling up each “page” as seen in Figure 3.2. The walls are organised in a way that mimics an open book. Text boxes, speech bubbles and other familiar comic book elements are the means by which exposition (whether shared by Mwana, Tate or spoken by characters of the tale) is shared. Instances of onomatopoeia are also used and seen in and around several panels (see Figure 3.2).



Figure 3. 1 Moving Walls in the Side Studio of Rhodes University Main Fine Art Department, documented by N’lamwai Chithambo.

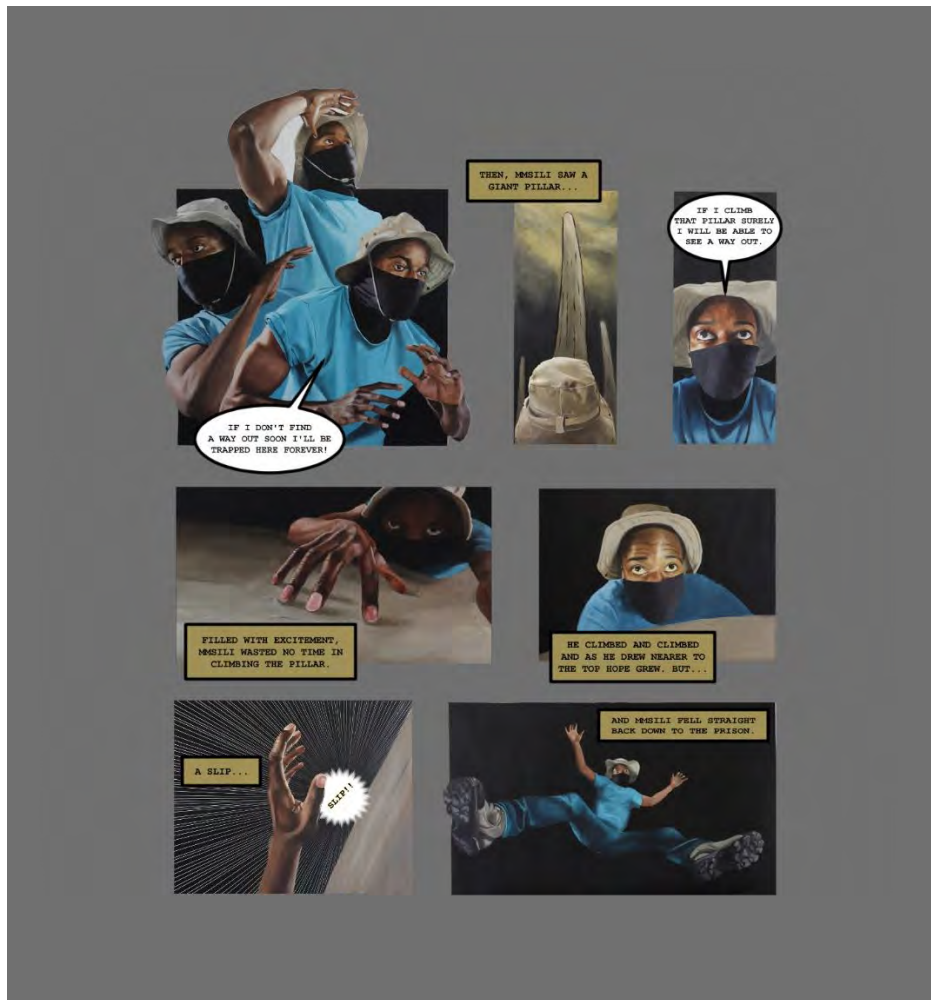


Figure 3. 2 N'lamwai Chithambo, Various paintings with text boxes making up one page, (2022) Oil on Board.

The method of production is as follows: strips of hardboard are cut out into the different panel shapes, the artwork is painted onto the cut and primed panel. Woodcuts of different sizes are drilled together to form hooks. One or two hooks (depending on the size of the painting – the larger paintings have two to three hooks attached to them while the smaller ones only have one attached) are then glued to the back of the painting and hooks are also drilled onto the moving walls. The paintings are then placed onto the moving wall with the hooks on the painting latching on to the hooks on the moving wall.

The comic book format was particularly chosen for three reasons. The first reason is that I have had a growing interest in comic books since the idea of incorporating aspects of them in my work was first conceived in 2019. The second reason is that the comic book industry is becoming “increasingly popular” in Africa and as such, the comic book can prove to be a creative means of contributing to transformation and development throughout the African continent (Chapman, 2016). The third reason for the use of the comic book format is that it extends the fictional and mythical aspects of the tale Mwana tells as comic books are typically understood to depict fast-paced action, drama, adventure and fiction. By using an untraditionally shaped board as the substrate which acts as a comic book panel, Mwana’s tale is displayed in a vivid and gripping manner. Using conventional rectangular canvases could limit the sense of pace and excitement created by the animation that follows along with Mwana’s narration.

### **3.2 Artist’s Influences**

One of the main artists who brought inspiration to the idea of a painterly comic book is South African visual artist and comic book writer Loyiso Mkize. Apart from the visual aspects of Mkize’s paintings, it is also the general subject matter which flows throughout his work that falls in tandem with and brings inspiration to my own ideas. As an artist, my interests lie in the

day-to-day struggles that challenge the consciousness/consciences/identities of African individuals, particularly, but not limited to, black African youths. Many of these complexities are observed through the autobiographical lens (as evidenced by the use of the biomythography in my work) of my own perceived identity as a foreign national. In a description of Mkize's *Kwezi*, a comic book and one of his leading artistic endeavours, Wright (2018: 2) writes, "[The comic book] is invested neither in critique of the postcolonial order nor in articulating desires for political change; rather, its preoccupations are with the vicissitudes and complexities of contemporary black identity." This description bears several congruencies with my own artistic interests as described. Wright's statement also goes beyond the subject matter of *Kwezi* and stretches over Mkize's various other works. One such body of work is a painting titled *Missed Me* (Figure 3.3) which acted as a point of reference for the painterly comic.



Figure 3. 11 Loyiso Mkize, *Missed Me* (2019), Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, available at: <https://eclecticacontemporary.co.za/portfolio-items/loyiso-mkize/> [Accessed 14/01/2021].

Mkize's artwork *Missed Me* displays a profile view of a black male in urban style clothing placed within a diamond-shaped frame that acts as a comic-like panel. Behind the figure, bullets fly in cartoon-like fashion with an onomatopoeic description of bullet sounds displayed. Above the figure to the left is a text box with the words "Suspect fits the description". Below the figure to the right is a speech bubble with the tail of the bubble drawing from the figure and holding the words "Miss me with that b.s."

The apparent concept and message of the work, which may be alluding to police brutality against black individuals based on prejudice, is very powerful. My body of work draws from the way Mkize incorporates themes/details from the comic book genre such as the text box or onomatopoeia and combines them with the painterly realism of the subject to produce a unique pop-cultural piece. I mimic this style in my own paintings, as seen in Figure 3.4. In this painting Mmsili is depicted searching for a way out, however, rather than simply paint him in one particular posture and include a text box explaining the situation, I make use of a feature that is often used in cartoons and comic books: multiple frames of a character in multiple postures placed one on top of the other to suggest a swivelling action. By incorporating a cartoon-like element, the realism expressed through the painterly style of the character becomes more dramatic and exaggerated. This supplements the concept of fiction behind the young man's tale and the work as a whole.



Figure 3. 12 N'lamwai Chithambo, *Mmsili Desperately Looking* (2022), Oil on Board, 65 cm x 73 cm, documented by N'lamwai Chithambo.

However, not all the characters are painted in a realistic style. For example, Mantha and Kuwawa (Figure 3.5) are painted in a way that mimics the caricature form as is seen with many comic book characters. This was done to reinforce the idea of the mental health occurrences as having a fictional nature. Mmsili is painted in realism to imply that he is the logical being within the maze. Similarly, Mwana, apart from the mental illness, can be considered logical and rational. However, Mantha and Kuwawa who represent the chaos of a mind in a negative state of mental health, are irrational as such is the nature of the symptoms of a mental illness (e.g., delusions, paranoia, etc.) and so they are depicted in caricature form which is contrary to realism.



Figure 3. 13 N'lamwai Chithambo, *Mantha and Kuwawa Approach (Detail)* (2022), Oil on Board, 61 cm x 34.5 cm 71.5 cm 45 cm, documented by N'lamwai Chithambo.

Inspiration for the caricature forms of Mantha and Kuwawa was drawn from South African illustrator and graphic designer Pola Maneli whose work has featured in Mail & Guardian and SA Creatives. Maneli's work *Mountains III* (Figure 3.6) is an example of his capabilities as a cartoonist. In the print, a group of twelve black individuals is placed in an almost choir-like fashion. However, each individual in the group is seemingly occupied with something independently of the next. According to Hlelethwa (2020), this work by Maneli presents "his personal notions of how capitalism does not have the same effect on all [South African racial groups]." What drew my attention to this piece is the line work that produces a stylised and caricature-like theme.



Figure 3. 14 Pola Maneli, *Mountains III* (2019), Print media, available at: <https://www.behance.net/polamaneli/projects> [Accessed 04/10/2021].

### **3.3 Significance of a Unique, African-Inspired Comic Book Among Mainstream Comic Books**

In addition to the already mentioned reasons for using the comic book format to display the narrative of Mwana’s tale, another reason that fuelled the idea was the desire to argue for the significance of having a unique African comic book that stands apart from Western and Eastern comic books. Catherine Chapman (2016) writes that “stories for Africans by Africans are now on the rise with the presence of trade events such as Lagos Comic Con and Free Comic Book Day in Cape Town, South Africa.” Despite this, there remains the concern that many African-produced comic books are, in fact, a mimicry (in style and form) of the Western pop cultural art form as well as Japanese-styled Manga comic books. Thabiso Mofokeng, a South African illustrator and co-founder of the African Comic Creators Community, explains that “aesthetically speaking, [the African comic book style] is still very much taking cues from how

the West do comics... To say that an African comic book is as unique to Africa as Manga books are to Japan [is far-fetched]" (Chapman, 2016).

One can question whether there is any significance to a unique, African-inspired comic book. Theorists such as Stephen Folaranmi and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o assist in unpacking this discussion. In discussing various international forms of English and the topic of African originality, Wa Thiong'o (1998: 9) raised a critical question: "why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way?" Although the main concern in this section of text by Wa Thiong'o is in the field of linguistics, I find a link between his statement and the approach to comic book production. This is because rather than there being a unique African voice within the comic book industry, there has either been a lack of representation of African themes within popular culture, or a representation that is erroneously portrayed.

In their commentary and analysis of films such as Lion King, Tarzan, and Madagascar, Folaranmi and Oyeniya (2021: 869) posit that "these films have also been intensifying Western notions of Africa as a 'wild' place filled with animals and jungles and (strangely) lacking humans." Although this is heavily evident in the film industry, lack of representation and realism of African cultures, characters or societies can also be concluded to be apparent in the comic book industry as many of the animated as well as live-action films originate from mainstream popular comic books. Despite these issues, mainstream comic books and their films remain highly popular and sought after by African audiences. However, according to Blake, "we must study the history of Africa through African eyes and for its own sake" (Folaranmi & Oyewole, 2021: 866). I argue that whilst the appropriation of the Western style of the comic book may be popular in an African context, it is important that the stories contained within them are told from a lived African experience rather than a projection from the West on the nature of Africa.

### 3.4 Imagining a Better Africa

There are a great number of invented stories pertaining to or inspired by Africa in the world of storytelling. According to Ute Fendler (2022: 237), many of these stories find their origin “in the long history of narratives about the ‘other’ seen from a European perspective”. These are narratives such as “the dark and dangerous continent where archaic forms of life appear and reappear”, “the place of the threat of unknown pandemics” or “the continent of nature and therefore of unexplored resources and living space” (Fendler, 2022: 237). In any of these scenarios, we see Africa as the space for “projections of imagined worlds” (Fendler, 2022: 237). However, in the right context and from a correct perspective, alternative imagined African worlds can, in fact, be a positive driving force for the African continent. Fendler (2022: 238) writes that “the need for local heroes and imaginative scenarios for the future has become integral to discussions about imagining and conceptualising the future settings for and from the continent. Imaginaries are important in that they are breaches opening up to a different vision of contemporary modes of living.” Therefore, alternative imagined African worlds can advance transformation within Africa by drawing up possible future settings.

Another popular narrative is that of Africa as the enigmatic place in which a mysterious character’s backstory occurs. One such example of this in the film industry is seen in the American Marvel Comics superhero, *Black Panther* who has, in recent years, developed a large audience due to the widely acclaimed film *Black Panther*. In the film *Captain America: Civil War* (also developed from Marvel Comics and set in America), a mysterious character never before seen in previous Marvel films appears seemingly out of nowhere and initiates a fight and chase scene with several other characters (Knight, 2022). This mysterious character wears a full black costume with a black mask featuring pointed ears, such as that of a cat. It is later discovered that the character’s superhero alias is *Black Panther* and finds its origin and backstory in the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda. The film *Black Panther* is largely set

in Wakanda. *Black Panther* quickly grew in popularity due to its representation of an Afro-futuristic African nation, unscathed by colonialism and subsequently poverty, amongst other societal issues. Wakanda sets itself apart as a “secret, semi-magical black country of skyscrapers, flying trains, a magical metal, shaven-headed female warriors, upgraded battle-suits, and leopard-skin accessories” (Nasson, 2019: 26). A point of attraction for the film could be the normality of prosperity and cohesion within the kingdom that has not had to undergo radical revolutions in order to overcome oppressive regimes or eras such as colonialism and Apartheid (Nasson, 2019: 27). Rather, the abundance as imagined in Wakanda is self-propagating as though to make the bold point of “this is power that Africans hold and have always been capable of”.

Considering these points of the Wakanda kingdom, *Black Panther* can be considered to be a positive representation of an imagined Africa. The ideals within the film and the imagination of a nation “created by African traditions and indigenous scientific wonders” by Africans for Africans make it a positive image of the possibilities of African life (Nasson, 2019: 27). Although *Black Panther* is not a locally developed story and therefore cannot be claimed by Africans as a positive self-representation, the film encourages African writers, artists, filmmakers and other creatives to take the mantle of producing positive self-representations of African imaginaries with the hope of inciting real transformation across the continent. What are some of the stories created by Africans that hold positive self-representation? Three comic books developed by African authors that portray positive self-representation will be analysed within the following subheading.

### **3.5 Comparative Analysis of Western, Japanese and African Comic Books**

Comic books do not find their roots in Africa, however, a comic book in an African context can still possess elements of originality. For example, subject matter, storytelling techniques,

character design, etc. can all be influenced and inspired by African culture, tradition or dress which are not found anywhere else outside of Africa. These elements are just a few that one can consider. Through a comparative analysis of Western, Japanese and African comic books I uncover the uniqueness within each variant.

### **3.5.1 Western Comic Books**

The Western comic book industry has been dominated by the widely known American Marvel Comics and DC Comics franchises. According to Rudi Wicomb (2003: 19) Detective Comics or simply DC Comics is the “oldest and largest comic book company in the US.” It owns two of the most recognised comic book characters ever made, namely, *Superman* and *Batman*. Marvel Comics, created by Stan Lee, owns many other well-known comic book characters such as *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *The Avengers*. These highly popular comic books are characterised by the theme of costumed superheroes and fast-paced action and adventure. DC Comics has typically been noted by fans as having a dark and explicit nature. This may be because of two pivotal figures within the 1980s comic book scene, Frank Miller and Alan Moore. Wicomb (2003: 20) writes that Miller and Moore “took their respective antagonists into the deepest, darkest recesses of the human psyche, exposing their weaknesses, pathologies, fears and violent tendencies. Their work echoed the social and political feeling of the time and painted a bleak picture of the future.”

Batman, along with Superman, is one of the most iconic fictional characters in storytelling. *Batman* is the tale of a masked vigilante who has dedicated his life to “warring on criminals” in the name of his murdered parents (Misiroglu, 2022). Set in the fictional city of Gotham, the tale sees the hero, draped in a bat-like costume, brutally dispatching villains. Misiroglu (2022) records the masked antagonist as having “tossed thugs off rooftops and executed a vampire by shooting him with a silver bullet.” The grim storylines in *Batman* are accompanied by dark-

themed visuals within the comic books. As seen in Figure 3.7, Batman is very often poised with deep set shadows and as he is a hero who operates primarily at night, dark, long shadows contrasted with vivid streetlights and night-time scenes set a serious but visually appealing theme throughout the comic books.



Figure 3. 15 Frank Miller, Cover Image for Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder Issue 1, (2005). available at: <https://www.ign.com/articles/2015/11/24/7-ways-frank-miller-changed-batman-forever> [Accessed 06/11/2022].

### 3.5.2 Japanese Manga

Manga simply means “comic” in Japanese. According to Wicomb (2003: 22) Manga “have a particular artistic and thematic style that is immensely popular and utterly unique.” Like Western comic books, manga has also transitioned into television over the years in the form

of anime (the Japanese word for “animation”). Anime is a worldwide genre with shows like *Pokemon*, *Digimon*, *Dragon Ball Z* and *Naruto*, to name a few, having developed fanatics of all ages (Wicomb, 2003: 22). Classic Anime such as the aforementioned examples started out as manga before taking to the screen. The appeal of manga is in “the dynamic, kinetic style that Japanese artists have given their works” which is very “eye-catching” (Wicomb 2003: 22).

Anime series such as *Dragon Ball Z* have inspired me to draw since my early youth and to collect manga. As mentioned, anime typically begin as manga and so did the anime *Dragon Ball Z*, which began as a manga titled *Dragon Ball*. This manga, which was created by Akira Toriyama in 1984, is the tale of a young boy named Son Goku who travels the world with his friends on quests to find and collect mystical orbs named dragon balls. The tale is filled with epic fight scenes and quippy humour.

At first glance and when considering the bold and flashy nature of Western comic books, panels in the *Dragon Ball* manga have an apparent minimalistic design (see Figure 3.8). For example, the character that is being focused on in a panel often stands alone within a panel with no real detail in the background and little bodily shadows to add more definition to the character. Yet, with action scenes, the artist uses a variety of drawing techniques to add a sense of drama and dynamism. For example, in Figure 3.8 (taken from a *Dragon Ball Z* manga) we see a character named Vegeta flying. What allows the reader to perceive that Vegeta is in motion are the series of streaking lines that extend from his body that imitate a blur effect. In addition to this, more angular streaking lines provide the backdrop that illustrates more dynamism, movement and direction.



Figure 3. 16 Single panel from Akira Toriyama's manga Dragon Ball Vol. 4. available at: <https://www.rightstufanime.com/Dragon-Ball-Manga-Volume-4-Volume-2nd-Ed> [Accessed 06/11/2022].



Figure 3. 17 Single panel from Akira Toriyama's manga Dragon Ball Z. available at: <https://comicsalliance.com/akira-toriyamas-dragon-ball-is-full-of-laughs-and-action-that/> [Accessed 06/11/2022].

### 3.5.3 African Comic Books

As previously mentioned, *Kwezi* is a comic book created by South African fine artist Loyiso Mkize. *Kwezi* is the story of a young African man who “casts himself as a brand of superhero new to the streets of the [fictional] Afropolis, dispensing justice and dispelling villains in the style of his North American precursor Superman” (Wright, 2018: 1). Wright notes that *Kwezi* is a “‘primordial’ superhero figure drawn from various South African ethnic traditions yoked to a narrative technique – the comic strip – imported from North American popular culture” (2018: 2). Whilst the comic book makes use of a narrative and visual language understood to be American, I argue the subject matter in *Kwezi* is more than just a localisation of this form, and, in fact, creates a story that is distinctly rooted in South African traditions.



Figure 3. 18 Cover of *Kwezi* (Collectors addition, Volumes 1 - 3). available at: <https://newafricabooks.com/products/kwezi-1-3-collectors-edition-loyiso-mkhize?variant=32109543292964> [Accessed 07/11/2022].

*Kwezi* draws from various South African ethnic groups such as Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa amongst others. These are represented in the comic through attire, speech and even landscape. For

example, the character Azania (as seen in Figure 3.10) wears “isicholo”, a traditional Zulu woman’s hat, representing her Zulu heritage (Smit, 2018). Another character is named Khoi and wields a bow and arrow, indicating his Khoisan identity. The opening stage for *Kwezi* is “Gold City”. The name is a referral to Johannesburg which is nicknamed eGoli (meaning place of gold) and is “South Africa’s economic hub” (Wright, 2017: 7). While the visual elements and storytelling techniques may be inspired by the Western-styled comic books, the themes and content within *Kwezi* are inspired by a South African context.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Nigeria has been a leading force in the African comic book industry. One company at the helm of this force is Comic Republic based in Lagos, Nigeria. Comic Republic was founded in 2013 by comic book artist Jide Martin (Fendler, 2022: 240). According to Fendler (2018: 93), “Comic Republic was meant to create high quality comics that could compete with Western ones while offering local content.” Characters within Comic Republic comic books frequently find their characteristics based on Yoruba mythology which results in a “West African universe inhabited and led by African gods, supernatural powers and heroes” (Fendler, 2018: 93).

An example of a comic book under Comic Republic that uses Yoruba mythology as subject matter is *Írétí Bidemi* created by Michael Balogun. *Írétí Bidemi*, who is originally an archaeology student in Lagos, is revealed to be the incarnation of the Yoruba goddess Írétí and so she acquires supernatural powers from this unique identity which she uses to fight crime (Fendler, 2022: 244). Like *Kwezi*, the visual aesthetic of *Írétí Bidemi* is predominantly taken from European and American styles of comic books but the twist, again, is found in the subject matter of the comic book. Where *Kwezi* focuses heavily on creating identities that are inspired by local traditions and culture, *Írétí Bidemi* draws from local myth to create characters as well as to explain the world these characters dwell in (Fendler, 2022: 248).

Another highly popular comic book company that has emerged from Nigeria is YouNeek Studios. YouNeek Studios was founded by web developer turned comic book artist, Roye Okupe in 2014 (Betancourt, 2016). Like *Black Panther*, Roye Okupe's stories are highly fictional with complex, imaginative narratives. However, Okupe aims to depict a more "authentic African feel" in which plights such as war, famine and even terrorism are apparent (Betancourt, 2016). The positive response to these realistic struggles is of course found in the heroes that emerge to save the day. While Comic Republic's main delivery centers on ideas of modernising African mythology and developing heroes out of these existing mythologies, YouNeek Studios uses life, the past (ancient times) and the present in Africa (typically West Africa), to inspire new myths or fiction in which new heroes are drawn up. Examples of this in action are in the comic books *E.X.O: Legend of Wale Williams* and *Malika: Warrior Queen*, both created by Roye Okupe.

*E.X.O: Legend of Wale Williams* is the story of a young man, Wale Williams, the son of a rich Nigerian scientist, who dons a mechanical power suit left for him by his father and uses it to fight off human and robot villains (Williams, 2016). The setting for this sci-fi, adventure story is Lagoon City, which is regarded as a "futuristic Lagos" (Williams, 2016). In terms of its narrative and storyline, *E.X.O: Legend of Wale Williams* follows conventional narrative styles that come out of Western heroic tales. The comic book includes characteristics that you would find in a typical coming-of-age storyline such as the missing parent which offers a purpose or quest for the hero to pursue, loyal friends and sidekicks, a "villainous mastermind" and a love interest (Williams, 2016). Although this comic book may simply appear to be another rendition of a hero in a costume, *E.X.O: Legend of Wale Williams* subtly draws from existing socio-political topics present in Nigeria to produce a highly layered story. An example of this could be on the topic of a resource in the story called "clean energy" which may, in fact, be a play on "Nigeria's recent history of oil-fueled boom and bust" (Williams, 2016).



Figure 3. 11 Cover art for E.X.O: Legend of Wale Williams, available at: <https://brittlepaper.com/2016/05/superhero-africa-review-roye-okupes-exo-joshua-williams/> [Accessed 24/01/2023].

As the title suggests, *Malika Warrior Queen* is an action-packed tale that follows the rule of a mighty queen named Malika. The setting for this story is the fictional empire of Azzaz based in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Africa. A point of interest in this comic book is how the many locations and characters are inspired by real, bygone ancient African civilisations. Akin Ogundiran (2021) writes, “The fictional Azzaz empire encompassed most of what is now Nigeria and its friends and foes spread across West and Central Africa and as far as East Asia.” Malika herself is modeled after the famous Queen Amina, who ruled the Hausa city-state of Zazzau around 1576-1610 (Ogundiran, 2021). Okupe successfully forges a fictional ancient world that is fundamentally inspired by real world history. This form of world-building allows Okupe to insert his imagination into existing African history as though it were a chronicle or legend that has been lost or forgotten with time, such as the lost city of Atlantis in Greek mythology.



Figure 3. 12 Page taken from Roye Okupe's Malika Warrior Queen Chapter 1 (2017).

## Conclusion

The fundamental goal of the body of work titled *It's an African Proverb, a Biomythography* was to incorporate African subject matter such as oral traditions within a painterly comic to create a unique way of communicating my negative mental health experiences in recent years. The biomythography allows for the viewer to delve into these mythical yet truthful experiences. I believe the biomythography was the correct method to use to explain these experiences as it enabled me to explore the mythical nature of mental health.

The painterly comic book was the means by which I was able to combine realism with abstract styles. Placing realistically painted figures of Mmsili, representing the young man called Mwana, and the abstractly painted setting that represents Mwana's mind, allowed me to portray the nature of ill mental health that I experienced. Rationality is represented by realistic painting and irrationality is represented by an abstract painterly style. I enjoyed creating those representations as well as other details such as Nyau masks as inspiration for the appearances of the mythical antagonists. This body of work also allowed for the exploration of personal relationships to inspire fictional ones such as in the case of Mwana and Tate who are based on myself and my father.

Bringing the entire idea together in the form of a comic book was a fruitful endeavor and allowed an exploration of the comic book industry for multiple sources of inspiration. Artists like Loyiso Mkize and Pola Maneli played a pivotal role in guiding my ideas. For example, Loyiso Mkize's technique of painting realistic figures on abstract-expressionistic backdrops added fuel to the representations of a realistic figure in a mythical setting within the work. A discussion of various Western, Japanese and African comic books allowed me to analyse different forms of the genre and to argue that there is significance in having an African-inspired comic book. In conclusion, culture, tradition, mythology and folklore in Africa offer African

comic book artists and storytellers a wide array of unique subject matter to draw from as inspiration. My body of work presented in the exhibition successfully performs the framework of an African comic book that draws from local subject matter.

Although it may seem as though African comic books are merely a localised rendition of Western and even Japanese comic books, their unique takeaway lies in the layeredness of the stories they tell, as well as the conceptual build-up that draws from the many traditions, cultures, folklores, and mythologies in Africa. Simply put, life in an African context offers a rich source of inspiration. If the last decade (in which Comic Republic, YouNeek Studios and *Kwezi* were birthed) can be seen as the early stages of the African comic book industry then there is a lot to look forward to in the future of African comic books.

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