

Noria the artist

In a village in Venda, a woman sits and carves beautiful images out of wood. The carvings she makes reflect life in South Africa. *Thembinkosi Mabaso* visited the sculptor at her home



Well-known South African sculptor Noria Mabasa hard at work at her home in Venda. Through her art she has challenged women's traditional role

It is often argued by traditionalists that women should not be allowed to do certain jobs in a society. The blame is usually laid on our ancestors for being the ones who determine our traditional way of life. Noria Mabasa, a sculptor, challenged this way of thinking and found it to be not true.

SPEAK visited Noria at her home in Tshino village in Venda. Her house is not only beautiful, but shows her personality and success as an artist. At the gate we were welcomed by beautiful clay figures which were skilfully made by Noria.

Despite the heat of the day we found Noria with a chisel and a mallet, sculpting the wood. She was dressed in traditional Venda clothes. The way she worked with the wood proved to us that she is an experienced artist. Noria, a soft spoken but confident person, is used to strangers coming to her home. She has many visitors and art dealers coming to her home all the time.

"I started carving in 1976. It was not easy, I was scared. People laughed at me saying I am crazy and that this was not a woman's job, but a job for strong men," Noria told SPEAK.

In most traditions tasks are divided: women are potters and weavers, whilst men are carvers and blacksmiths.

Weaving and pottery is argued to be women's work



Noria at her home in Tshino village, Venda. Next to her, at the entrance, are two of her beautifully crafted sculptures in the style that has made her famous

because they are closely associated with domestic chores.

Why carving for men? Wood carvers were more than artists in a society. Their carving brought them closer to high priests and linked them to the world of spirits.

It is said that historically menfolk pushed themselves closer to the spirits. Men believed they were the ones who should be in control of the contact between societies and the spirits. In some societies holy places are reserved only for men. This is clear in traditional families where women are not allowed inside the kraal. Therefore, only men were allowed to carve religious symbols.

Today men still command relationships with the spirits. When the beast is about to be killed the head of the family is the only one allowed to talk with the ancestors.

Noria is one sculptor who has proved that women can also communicate with the spirits.

But, it was not that easy for her to accept her career. "Some people said my ancestors were going to punish me for going against our tradition. That did not worry me because I was told by my ancestors to carve," says Noria smiling.

She continued: "As early as 1965 my deceased grandmother visited me in my dreams. She told me to mould in clay. I did not do it because of my belief that men were the only ones who could speak to our ancestors," she said.

Noria went on to say: "I got very sick, and the sickness went away the moment I started to mould."

That was the start of her career. She said her ancestors visited her again. This time, a voice from the "world of the

spirits" ordered her to enter the so-called "men's world" to be a sculptor.

"In the early 1970s my ancestors advised me to carve. I wasn't going to hesitate again, so I gladly accepted their offer. I am now a full-time carver and happy," she said proudly.

It is a blessing for Noria that her family supports and loves her art works.

A famous piece of sculpture Noria calls **CARNAGE** shows her wonderful skill in joining together human and animal forms.

The sculpture is in the form of a circle and shows the relationship between human beings and animals.

Another one of her artworks called **FLOODS**, show the flood disaster in Natal in 1987. During the floods, both people and animals lost their lives. It shows the struggle and pain faced during the disaster.

Today Noria's works are very popular with art collectors in South Africa and in other countries. Her work has been on show in art galleries, and is highly respected by her fellow artists. "She is a brilliant carver," said Dr Phuthuma Seoka, a sculptor from Lebowa.

It is more than ten years since she's gone against "traditional rules". She said her ancestors still visit her through her dreams. "They provide me with inspiration and ideas for my next sculpture," she said.

Instead of being hated, Noria is winning the hearts and minds of the world and more especially the people in her community. ☺