

The Revenge of the Minkisi

Pitika ka Ntuli, 2020

I keep asking myself so many questions
How?
How can it be?
How can bones be so brittle
But so enduring
I asked Mrs. Plessis
The old woman at the Cradle of Humankind
She only gave me
A blank stare!
But inside her empty sockets
I caught a slight flicker
Or perhaps a twinkle of laughter.
Now I know
Bones have secrets!!
Ask me!

"The bones are an alternative way of allowing ancestral spirits to have a conversation with a patient through the healer. Reading the bones is a little like unravelling the metaphor of a dream" David M. Cumes

"When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge" Albert Einstein

Introduction

Colonial discourse marginalized African knowledge systems with adverse consequences for the colonized. The colonized ceased to be the subject of his or her own histories and became the construct of the dominant colonizer. During this hegemonic phase the African accepted the colonizers entire system of values, attitudes, morality and institutions. Our history of art became Western projections. Our history became the history of Westerners in Africa. Our sculptures became 'idols' and subject of worship. Even after the attainment of independence the 'independent' regimes and art institutions disdained indigenous knowledge and values. But it needs to be said not all Africans bought into these new Western value systems. The bulk of rural people still continued to live their lives as their ancestors taught them. It is the educated who remain in the vicious grip of 'Coloniality!' It is my aim in this exhibition to push the agenda for 'Decoloniality' to the art and culture space!.

The Duke University group, the 'Walter Mignolos', introduced the 'Decolonial Turn/Option' as a conceptual tool to deconstruct challenges facing education. My reading of their strategy is that they recognise the supremacy of education institutions in their country and advocate 'Epistemic Disobedience'! In Azibuyele Emasisweni no such authority is recognised, hence the need to 'Return to the Source' to gain a better perspective and contribute to the mission of the renewal of African art-making.

It is imperative for us to seek the reclamation of our identities and the identities of our art and culture, and more especially in this time in which the world is being ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the environment destroyed by greed. In the search for new paradigms for reclamation it is crucial that acts of recovery and diversification of sources of knowledge be embarked upon. In other words it is

imperative for us to embark on a project of reclamation of our arts, cultures, our history and our sense of Being. The reclamation project we are suggesting acknowledges that no past can be recovered in its pristine form.

The gestation of the idea of *Azibuyele Emasisweni* can be traced to my time in exile when I lectured at Middlesex University, where I was teaching Postmodern-Postcolonial Intersections to undergraduates. The course dealt with theories from the likes of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Francois Lyotard, Fred Hampton and others. After a year or two this course began to cause me serious conceptual violence. For instance, in the process of teaching Foucault's theory on 'Power/Knowledge Bonding and Truth' I began to ask myself Whose Truth? Whose Knowledge Whose Power? Finally, John Bird, a colleague, and I developed a postgraduate course 'Imaging the Other' in which I began teaching postmodernism from the perspective of the 'Other' whose worldview is characterised by the interconnectedness, interdependence and interrelationships of all things from birth to death.

Homi Bhabha's ideas around mimicry and hybridity were profoundly influential in framing the course. Hybridity theory as a subversion of colonial power and dominant cultures, and mimicry as a metonym of presence which appears when natives in the colony imitate and fully take on colonial culture as their own is central to my thinking. I appropriated these theories in the field of visual art and culture. A question raises its head here: What were we before we hybridised and also became imitators? Was something wrong with our culture, our thinking? This is the central question *Azibuyele Emasisweni* seeks to address.

The Revenge of the Minkisi

"A Nkisi is a name of a thing we use to help a person when that person is sick and from which we obtain health; the name refers to leaves and medicines combined together.....It is also called nkisi because there is one to protect the human soul and guard it against illness for whoever is sick and wishes to be healed. Thus a nkisi is something which hunts down illness and chases it away from the body." Nsemi Isaki, 1900

Colonial logic is predicated on unbalancing other cultures to effect total domination. Balance is central to every aspect of the lives of the colonised. For instance, healing in the true sense of the word is an instrument for balancing and re-balancing of a fragmented society. Contrary to Western thought, African thought perceives of life as a cycle, in which interconnectedness is an essential component of reality: human beings, plants, animals and the universe as a whole form one inter-connected world and our survival on earth depends on how these forces interact with each another.

African culture is marked by rites of passage manifested in a variety of ways. Rituals are performative spectacles that accompany us throughout our lives from birth through initiation ceremonies, weddings, funerals, festivals and many other events. The purpose of the events is to, in the case of African people, to secure the place of humans in the wider scheme of things and these rituals require artworks: sculptures, dances, drama, costume. The African believes that the world we live in is sacred and that humankind must preserve and protect everything in it. For example when the umbilical chord of the child falls off (it is not cut) the spot where it fell is consecrated to create a sense of belonging to the earth. Hence the land question is more than a matter of agriculture, it is a link to the spiritual forces that guide our destinies. Traditional Africa provided a world-view that recognised our sanctity as people, and sought to secure our place in the wider spheres of life. It helped give meaning and form to our strivings for oneness with the universe.

Traditional African society and other societies in the so-called Third World and Fourth World hold a view similar to quantum theory. The view that an individual is no more important than a community

in as much as a particle is no more important than a wave flow is central to African thought. They attest to their mutual interdependence. They demonstrate the principle of complementarity. The civilisations that our fore parents created were premised on the maximization of human potential. Initiation ceremonies sought to help the initiates to order their lives in line with the dictates of the universe they inhabit. To influence it in ways that will ensure life, continuity, stability and prosperity for all. They existed to reinforce group cohesion where today we see only wanton violence, death and destruction. It is this spirit of mutual benefit and co-existence that we must midwife the rebirth of African art and culture to help foster the interrelationship and interconnectedness between humans, nature, spiritual beings, and ancestors.

In all societies the beginning and meaning of life lies within the world of myth and that these myths are given form through rituals. And these rituals involve costume, sculpture, dance, colour, music and craft. In other words, for rituals to be effective, dances and other cultic acts are performed and art objects created to give form and potency to the ritual.

In traditional African knowledge systems it is believed that there are unseen forces or spirits at play that both manage and guide our lives. Indigenous African art is an instrument through which spiritual values are transmitted. To visualize these spirits songs and prayers are composed and sculptures carved! For thousands of years, African art has served as a potent tool in healing practices. The creation of Minkisi - the strategic object popular in the Kongo is central to this healing. That is why colonisers 'arrested' captured and deported some of these objects/artworks to the colonial mother country. The Minkisi are also medicated ritual instruments. Azibuyele Emasisweni can be viewed as 'The Revenge of the Minkisi!', as part of an ongoing debate about colonialism and coloniality, and about decolonisation and decoloniality in the Art-Space!

I am a healer: I throw bones to divine the State of the Nation in the season of anomie!

In my mind I count every bone
Of everyone who died
In massacres across the globe
Those who died in exile
In concentration camps
Each of their bones and the spirits
They carry
Are part of our commitment
To see justice done
Love celebrated!
The bones of blacks who died
In police custody
On streets where others walk and laugh
Across the US
We know our pain and our memories too!
We unleash these bones
We throw these bones
To divine trajectories of our healing dreams
For a better world!

Azibuyele Emasisweni

"In indigenous communities' diviners identify fault lines in the community, families, and/or in people. To do this they use bones. In Nguni culture specifically, to 'Throw Bones' means to divine the state of

things, to help in the healing process. Izangoma (African healers) are central to African spirituality and bones are major agents in the carrying out of their duties in the community. Bones are vital to healing as well as for the process of divination. I am a healer. I throw bones to divine the State of the Nation in the season of anomie! As a sangoma/healer I see divination bones as sculptures imbued with multiple meanings. I believe that bones have spirits and consciousness, and it is that that I seek to reveal in this exhibition”

Bones have always fascinated me. Their durability, their power and that they can exist for millions of years is mind boggling; that we know that humankind has been in existence for millions of years is through evidence left by bones. Their resilience is astounding! There is also something very spiritual about bones. Azibuyele Emasisweni comes at a time when the entire world is caught in the grips of a deadly pandemic the like of which has not been encountered in the modern era.

For the past three years I have been working towards *Azibuyele Emasisweni*, my first solo exhibition to comprise solely works sculpted from bone. The Exhibition includes 45 bone sculptures (elephant, rhino, giraffe and horses) and each with its praise song/poem. While the dominant material used is Bone - beads, shells, chains, computer circuit boards, pins, animal skins, and marbles are integrated in the works, a deliberate act of ‘picking up’ interrupted African creative traditions. The exhibition addresses relationships among art, secrecy, knowledge, and power in African settings. It hopes to help the viewer appreciate and connect with the depth and wisdom of African indigenous knowledge systems and African spirituality in the quantum age, and it explores the healing potential of African Art.

The notion of Relational art which suggests a theoretical and practical point of departure from the usual and calls for the importance of social context and human relations as central to art creativity seem to me the nearest example of art practice that approximate my notion of art.

Mary Nooter Roberts curated the powerful exhibition ‘Secrecy: African Art th(at) Conceals and Reveals’ for The Museum of African Art in New York. She captures my idea of African art, when in a 2018 interview, she referred to it as: *“objects of aesthetic brilliance and achievement made by artists, but they were made for other purposes: for education, or healing, or governance, or spiritual mediation. I always say they are more than art”*. She reminds us that Western definitions of art are not sufficient to encompass an African perspective. When a Westerner and an African speak of art they could just be speaking about two different things. Westerners generally see the world from a Newtonian worldview of binary opposites, in which everything is predicated on the mind/body split hence: Head Office, Head teacher, Headlights etc. African worldviews are more in line with the quantum mechanics of interconnectedness, interrelationship and interdependence, and it is this worldview which underpins my exhibition.

The Duke School of the ‘Decolonial Turn/Option’ appear to be focusing on epistemic challenges. *Azibuyele Emasisweni* seeks to carry decoloniality into the visual and performance arts. Mignolo et al call for ‘epistemic disobedience’ because they are constrained by Western thinking and recognize those they seek to disobey as their leaders. In *Azibuyele Emasisweni* the intention is to pick up our interrupted traditions of art making and praxis in an African way, hence ‘return to the source’. The exhibition seeks to encourage young artists to paint, sculpt, write poetry and drama based on their realities and responding to their urgent needs for self-expression.

Secrecy is a sine qua none of African art which is why I leave traces of secrets in each piece I carve. Some of my sculptures are infused with Umhloniyana, others with Uzifozoneke (herbs that have been used for centuries in Africa to mitigate colds and viruses), while others are washed with Intelezi. Professor Jabulani Maphalala has spoken about the use of Intelezi for protection in many Zulu wars

including the battles of Isandlwana and Ncome (Blood River). Herbs were sometimes mixed with gun powder for effective protection. My sculptures are fortified instruments of war against the pandemic! 'Inside the Elephantine Womb', the 'Medium on Fire' and 'Under the Shadow of a Flywhisk We Dream to Heal the Land' are all fortified!

Azibuyele Emasisweni also pays tribute to the bones that form a bridge from the Africa to the US; the bones that lie at the bottom of the Atlantic as a result of the Middle Passage when millions of black people died; the bones of African people transported in very traumatizing conditions; the bones of those who died and were thrown overboard by the slavers. 'Sao Jose Paquette Africa' was a Portuguese slave ship that sank off the coast of Cape Town drowning almost 500 black people in 1794. The Amistad was a Schooner owned by the King of Spain. When sailing from Cuba to the USA in 1839 there was a slave revolt. Captive Africans took over the ship and directed the two captains to sail it back to Africa. But during a storm the captains tricked the slaves, and ended up taking them to the USA. *Azibuyele Emasisweni* pays tribute to all black lives lost through racism and police brutality.

Some wealthy individuals go on safari, especially in Africa, to shoot rare and precious animals, stuff them, and display them in their offices and dens to show how much they think of them! For Africans these creatures are our totems, our ancestors and it is our ancestors and totems that hunters are treating thus! The exhibition aims to honour the spirits of these animals shot and killed by the powerful like Theodore Roosevelt so that their spirits may be reunited with their ancestors!

"I enter a game reserve and am witness to a brilliant display in the sky: silhouettes of vultures hovering in the air, swooping, diving, gliding, and below there is an animal restaurant where the dead are delivered. Scavengers and those too old to hunt eat there. When the bones are clean and fleshless there I come! Some of the skeletons are from rhinos killed by poachers for their horns, others from the remains of corpses killed by predators, and yet others from animals that died of natural causes. According to Yoruba culture God sent certain animals to bring down to earth Ashe! /Ase'- the power-to-make-things-happen! I collect all kinds of bones. Big bones. Small bones. Horns and skins! Before I pick any bone there are rituals to be performed. I must burn imphepho - a sacred herb used to open the ears of ancestors, who read the smoke. I perform a prayer for the spirit of the bones explaining to my ancestors and the ancestors of the dead animals why the bones are being taken and what they will be used for."

Some pointers to secrets in my bones! I have selected just four sculptures to frame and suggest ways of beginning to read these works.

Marching to the Gates of Spirit

This work is made of bone and skin. The skin is riveted to the bone. Once you look carefully at the images of this piece you will see a tiny face with glittering eyes that is not easy to see unless looking for it!

Pregnancies of the Mind

This is an elephant bone suffused with pregnant memories of the mind, opening doors to consciousness of being and becoming. The work is made of bone, horn and metal. Sculpture is about mass and volume. A sculpture punctuates space and to me the spaces created are as significant as the form. Looked at carefully the head is a map of Africa! What bone is being used, is it a shoulder blade, a tibia or fibia, and what would that symbolize?

Pregnant Possibilities

It is possible to create a work of art pregnant with love, emotion, desire, and ecstasy; and hatred of

evil corruption and greed! We dream of possibilities pregnant with meaning! I am interested in the spaces created by my sculptures because in them, as you move around the work more images emerge! Placed outside in the sun, or through use of light the shadows cast become black and white drawings!

Inside the Elephantine Womb

Elephant pelvis, ribs and beads! Looked at from the front, on the left shoulder are a series of circular beads that speak to cyclicity as an organizing principle in African thought. In the villages when we drink we sit in a circle; when we worship we sit in a circle; cattle byres are circular. Even in a disco when black people dance, inevitably we will end up in a circle.

Conclusion

I invite you to the unravelling of the metaphor of my dreams that come to me day and night! Let us go then you and I to visit our Ancestors in the pregnant womb of creation and return to the source! Sibuyela Emasisweni!