

## Nduduzo Makhathini the Sonic Shaman: The Throwing of the Bones

*A Meditation: A Creative and Sonic Response to Pitika Ntuli's Exhibition  
Azibuyele Emasisweni*

For many years, I have been interested in the intersections between *ubungoma* (healing) and improvisation. That is to say how sound cultivates be-ing. As a practicing *sangoma* (healer), it became apparent to me that the journey of being an improviser (often in a jazz context) was to become an extension of the work of healing. Since these thoughts reached my spirit, I then felt it was necessary to meditate and think through how these two expressions hang together.

It is important to note that these two, at an epistemological level (or at least in the way I hope to explore in this text) are often not viewed as being organically linked. Most of the seminal literature on jazz and improvisation here in South Africa has talked about the link between jazz and politics under apartheid. This is indeed the truth, especially when reflecting on sounds that were produced in the 60s, 70s and 80s both in South Africa and by South African musicians in exile. Here I am thinking about groups such as the Jazz Epistles, Blue Note, and Soul Jazz Men among others. These groups (and individuals) were responsible for creating a deep political awareness about what was taking place in South Africa during apartheid. This is the period that produced songs such as 'Mannenberg' which in the 80s became an 'unofficial national anthem', 'Stimela' and 'Khawuleza' among others. These tunes collectively became a soundtrack in the story of apartheid in South Africa and beyond, a place a refuge for a lot of us growing up under the heavy hand of the apartheid regime.

But there were also other musicians who were exploring particular perspectives that sit on the edges of this art form. These musicians were exploring a spiritual path. Often in existing literature, there is a way in which 'spirituality' is employed as a backdrop. Here I am proposing that we think of 'spirituality' not as a backdrop but as a frame that informs the articulations of sound. I am also not suggesting that the musicians mentioned above did not explore these frames and vice versa, but I am suggesting that the artists I am about to mention (including my own practice) emerged from a space of seeking spiritual paradigms within their sound. These artists include: Philip Tababane and Malombo who placed the concept of *malombo* (Venda healing ritual) at the center of their work, Bheki Mseleku and Zim Ngqawana who both explored various spiritual influences as a way of giving sound its identity; and Busi Mhlongo and others, who were initiated *sangomas* and used their music as an outlet or a response to their ancestral calling.

I am giving this background in order to situate my own journey and artistic practice as manifested in the two compositions 'Amathambo' and 'Umthakathi' that were selected by Pitika Ntuli to accompany his exhibition, 'Azibuyele Emasisweni'. Both these pieces were part of my 2017 album, *iKhambi* (a concoction of healing herbs). The record revolved around the idea of sound as an instrument for healing. In this album I was proposing that improvisation, in jazz, could be viewed as a method of gathering sonic concoctions, similarly to a *sangoma* in the wilderness gathering herbs.

*iKhambi* also aims at positioning blackness beyond definitions of the oppressor, remembering the pure state of our people, our dances, songs and religious practices in our pre-colonial state,

a time when our ancestors viewed sound as an integral part of being and healing. Through song I wanted to contribute to the restoration of black pride and promote self-love, a crucial step in our healing and in the emancipation of our people. I believe we need to look to indigenous African knowledge systems and explore how they can contribute in the processes of decolonization today, and ultimately how Africa as a continent has contributed and continues to contribute to a universal consciousness.

I must stress that this is not a new idea. As mentioned above there are jazz musicians and improvisors have explored these connections before me.

On *iKhambi* I was also exploring sonic relationships between memory and performance. I reference memory in the context of my ancestors, upbringing and the centrality of song in ritual. Growing up in the rural areas, and later in the townships of Pietermaritzburg, Kwa Zulu-Natal meant I had to learn a lot about community, ritual ceremonies and the church (the Zionist Church in particular). That also meant learning various repertoires as a way of experiencing spirituality in the context on my village.

For instance, 'Umthakathi' (a witch/wizard) reflects on the mystical nature of a witch/wizard. Growing up we heard so much about Umthakathi although we had never really seen them? As a young man desperately searching for the truth, I developed my own imaginative vision of how a witch looked based on the particularities of the stories told by the elders, but also on the things I had seen in my dreams.

#### *Umthakathi*

On my album *iKhambi* I explore the presence of 'Umthakathi' in three movements. 'Umthakathi', 1st Movement: In the last hours before dawn, a young mother who had been trying to nurse her newborn baby (Ajana, who is later to become king) to sleep sees a witch through the window. Ajana's restlessness is roused by the spiritual presence of *umthakathi* in the neighborhood.

'Umthakathi', 2nd Movement: As the witch tiptoes through the darkness, dogs suddenly break into a piercing howl that wakes the villagers from their slumber. And the witch is captured. 'Umthakathi' (3rd Movement): The elders gather by the river do conduct a cleansing ritual for the witch. The ritual is interrupted a heavy storm and the diviners are invited to chant to the rain Goddess Nomkhubulwane until the storm is over.

#### *Amathambo*

'Amathambo' explores what lives in the liminal space. The idea for Amathambo emanates from a space of divination (the throwing of the bones) and how this offers us a window into the unseen worlds of our ancestors. Grappling with the idea of 'improvisation' I found the 'metaphor' of the 'throwing of the bones' as the most insightful way of thinking about my work. I am constantly moving from the known, to the unknown, and arriving at a new kind of knowing. Like a *sangoma* (in a traditional sense) who utilizes objects (*amathambo*) as a tool of extracting meaning from a metaphysical dimension to elucidate significance and interpret it in the physical sphere in real-time. This I what I call 'ritual technology', which is a theme I explore

Commented [MOU1]: Are the older women killed as witches not umthakathi?

in more depth in my album work *Modes of Communication: Letters from the Underworlds* (2020).

'Amathambo': A troubled man whose hopes have turned to ash at the height of perilous times visits a *sangoma* and discovers a new method of divination through improvised music. This suddenly connects him to the unseen realm of his ancestors that he had been seeking for decades. Soon after the ritual his troubles are stilled.

Thokoza  
Nduduzo Makhathini (Artist, Healer and Improvisor)