

## **Siphenathi Mneno**

### **“Ukubekwa Kophawu, ukuBaluleko kwalo kunye nemvelaphi ka Xhosa ( Nguni).”**

#### Introduction

Ukubekwa Kophawu, ukubaluleka kwalo kunye nemvelaphi kaXhosa is a tactile exploration of the symbolic aspects of the cultural history of the Xhosa (the Nguni people) within South African social and cultural symbolism history, and how it interconnects with my lived experience and observation. Through drawn symbols in the book of Credo Muthwa, “*Indaba My Children*”, the self-created symbols of the ceramicist Andile Dylvane, symbols outsourced on the internet, mundane working tools, and African instruments, I will explore how the cultural, social, and symbolism symbolic narratives within South African history are negotiated.

This will be answered with the use of Inga Somdyal’s article “Ilizwe Lifle”, Credo Muthwa’s book, *Indaba My Children*, as these texts do offer views on these aspects I am interested in and have mentioned above. In this work, I will focus on a consistent personal observation of my culture, accompanied by a collective and explanatory documentation of symbolism and cultural exploration. I will also provide an overview of my personal experiences, which are a driving force for my studio practice and research that I draw from to establish a connection between my writing, research, and practice.

The research I will be looking at is the book of Credo Muthwa, “*Indaba My Children*”, as it explores the themes of African Cosmology and Mythology, The Power of Oral Tradition, The Interconnectedness of All Life, and the tension between Tradition and Modernity. This will allow me to elaborate on how I negotiate my cultural experience and understanding of oral tradition in my culture within the boundaries of the Power of Oral tradition, the interconnectedness of all life, and a bit about the tension between Tradition and Modernity, and labour as a tool of migration. The use of symbolism in my practice will also be explored through the work of Andile Dylvane in his exhibition “ITHONGA”, as this artist's article provides their own personal perspective, experience, and Philosophy of the Nguni (Xhosa) experience, which allows me to differentiate my work from his as we share a common background of culture and philosophy.

## Discovering my work philosophy through culture and perspective.

In the midst of leaving home in the year 2021, after the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, which occurred in the year 2020, I was on my way to University to learn and expand my knowledge in the art field and other aspects of myself, as it was necessary for a young xhosa man like I, to go out into the world and learn to grow. This made me recall how my father and his forefathers before had to do the same, to find work to feed their families, and always the result was to leave home. This was also the first time I had left my hometown, Mthatha, and the Eastern Cape, for the big city, as someone whose life had revolved around a small town and a village I had lived in for about 19 years of my life.

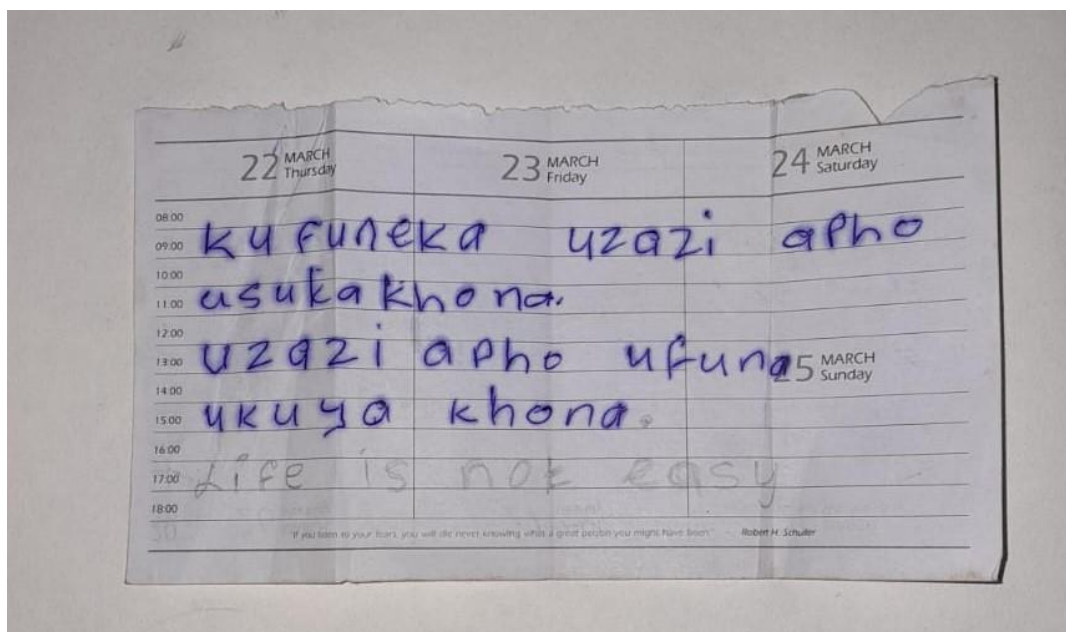
Through reaching Cape Town, I quickly realised the difference between life in the city to the one I had lived before. This allowed me to quickly be aware of how much experience this place will offer me, but I had to pace myself so as not to lose myself in the indulgences and temptations it would also offer.

The years in School (at the University of Cape Town) went on as I focused on school and comprehending the skills and teachings of Art, which Michealis offered. This, for me, especially meant I had to focus and always give my best, as I had not done art or any arts and culture subjects in high school, because my school did not offer them. I was a Mathematics and physics student, but I focused on improving my drawing skills by constantly sketching when I got the chance. Other skills I had were either manual labour skills, such as carpentry, brick laying, and using heavy machinery, as my uncles were well-versed in those fields of work. So, I believe that craft and sculpting skills came from that and from helping them in their jobs, which was a common occurrence for boys to help their uncles as they worked, and to learn where I grew up.

The years went by in Cape Town, at the University of Cape Town. I was exposed to an abundant number of experiences, ways of living, cultures, and knowledge that allowed me to expand my vocabulary and perspective in terms of art and academics. This allowed me to notice how I had also been disconnected a bit from my home and culture, as there was a lack of cultural activities and practices, like those that occasionally occurred at home. This was a culture I was already embedded in, and these practices and ceremonies (Iimisebenzi), as they were called, were culturally enriched with aspects of the culture that allowed one to learn and understand about it, which I was already deeply embedded in. These practices (Iimisebenze) were laboured practices, as is the word “Umsebenzi/ Iimisebenzi”, meaning labour or work when translated, were part of the Xhosa and Nguni culture, and part of a cultural experience I was familiar with. The practices involved Male Initiation (Ulwaluko), Female Initiation (Intonjane), Calling to be a Sangoma/ witch doctor (Ukuthwasa), and Birth ceremonies (Imbheleko). These are all ceremonial practices that define the culture and fall under the term “Umsebenzi”.

Through this displacement, culture shock, and identity confusion, I tried to remember and find myself, my identity, and my roots. Through the journey and experience of recollection, I began to use my practice as a way to voice and work through this frustration I had about my experience of my culture, home, and also being torn between living in two worlds. These two worlds were the modern life in the city, which retained the values and experience of learning and improving myself, and the life I had lived back home in the villages, which was enriched with the culture and heritage I was born and raised in, but I am disconnected from at these moments when I'm at school. This is how, in the third year of my degree, I stumbled upon the practice of ceramics and working with clay. Working with clay felt natural and was intuitive for me, and I believe that was because I used the material growing up, as I played with my peers in the crevasses.

My disconnection and displacement frustrations were not the only thing that allowed me to continue my practice in the recollection of myself-worth; my identity, and culture, the words that my grandmother had imparted to me on a small receipt note as I left home the same year. She said, “kufuneka uzazazi apho usuka khona, uzazi apho ufuna ukuya khona”, which means, “know where you come from, and know where you want to go”. With those words in mind, I began my third year's practice with the thought of exploring/ finding out more about my culture and the history behind it. These aspects of thought were not the only ones to evoke this epiphany that led me to work in the practice of ceramics. My cultural and personal experience of the Xhosa culture, and growing up in the Xhosa culture, as a child who observed the culture without comprehension of why certain practices of the culture were done until I was grown enough to explore those practices on my own and understand why they were done, was the driving force.



“Words of motivation were imparted to me by my grandmother,” by Nokhaya sangoni(My grandmother).

I had just begun working within the boundaries of those thoughts and themes. Finally, after a lengthy amount of time pondering these themes, this then evoked a thought, more like an urge, in me to consistently work with clay as a material. This was because clay is a medium and material that was linked to the soil and ground in conversation, just as how my culture and some of its practices are. I also chose this medium because it was a material that evoked a thought of my childhood experience as I worked with it. This decision was intentional as it was evoked by a memory of my childhood, as I used to play with clay, with my peers making trucks, tractors, animals, and garden tools as a young person, playing in the crevasses of the valleys back home. The use of clay in my practice formed a strong connection and feeling in me, because it was a practice I had forgotten but remembered again, and it also felt appropriate as I was also in recollection of my roots.

### The beginning of Ceramics and Symbolism as my practice.

The practice started as pottery vessels that I would carve symbols into, but then, as I slowly refined my skill in vessel making, I was influenced by the practice of painting on canvas. This allowed my work to shift from symbols carved on the vessels to the symbols being painted on the vessels with acrylic paint or glaze. I was content with this shift, and it was a new style I had started to develop for my practice. After working with this style of work for a time, while also exploring and researching to refine my practice, so as not to remain stagnant in it, I stumbled upon Andile Dylvane's ceramic work, Simphiwe Mbunyuza, Zizipho Poswa, etc. While looking at these ceramists' work, I had gotten drawn to Andile Dylvane's works, which also explored the world of symbolism, with sculptural forms that made his work seem instrumental, like or plant-like, which to me was intriguing. I will explain which specific works of Andile's and the exhibition that influenced me even more as I go through this writing.

Through further research and study of his works, my practice evolved to pushing the boundary of vessels to symbols and text forms, while also looking at these symbols as a form of language structure for me, their meanings and significance that were hidden and embedded in them. I shifted from making vessels because of that interest to creating and sculpting these symbol-like, intriguing forms, and making them 3-dimensional forms themselves. I believed that by doing this, it allowed my practice to venture into a new territory and ground for me to explore. The 3-dimensional symbols will be the bulk and the most crucial part of my craft and practice moving forward.



“My third-year work and the initial start of working with ceramics and symbols” by Siphenathi Mneni.

This work continues the themes I explored in my final project from my third year. This body of work is primarily inspired by and deeply rooted in my culture, specifically Xhosa culture. The heritage, rites of passage, spiritual practices, and way of life in the villages of the Eastern Cape have profoundly shaped my identity as a young Xhosa man. This work narrates my journey in understanding the practices of Xhosa culture and the orally transmitted knowledge from my childhood. I am fascinated by how storytelling and symbols convey rich meanings in African culture, serving as vital tools for preserving knowledge. In Xhosa culture, storytelling, including sacred narratives like initiation (ukoluka), and symbols, as I believe they play essential roles in maintaining our heritage.

Ithonga, an exhibition by Andile Dyalvane, which was exhibited in Cape Town in 2020 and in New York in 2020 at the Friedman Benda Gallery, which had partnered with SouthernGuild, which Andile Dyalvane is represented by. The work "ITHONGA", an ancestral dreamscape, is a work that represents the language and messages transmitted through the ancestors. The artist's intention in developing this body of work under the title, "Ithonga", was to highlight the gathering of dreams, situated in the soul, which is held by the spirits of our long-gone ancestors. The symbols in the exhibition were a visual representation of the ancestors gathering, and these symbols were used to harness more effectively the imparted message and meanings in the ancestors' codes, and also the symbols themselves.



Ithonga "Ancestral dreamscape" by Andile Dyalvane.

My interest in storytelling and symbolism was sparked by this body of work that Andile Dyalvane did. This collection emphasizes gathering of dreams that reside within the soul, and the dreamscape overseen by our ancestors in the ancestral realm, really spoke to me as a Nguni/ Xhosa speaking person. This work highlighted a part of our ancestors and culture that we have a strong belief in. With further study of Andile's work and other symbols in Credo Mutwa's book "*Indaba My Children*", while also looking at other symbols sourced on the internet, I developed a style and body of work that works with these symbols and in ceramics and creating them in 3-dimensional form. My three-dimensional symbol sculptures represent Xhosa words and a lost culture of some South African cultures.

My work, as it is in an aspect of looking at it from a perspective of a language and text, will be forms that inform the notion of orally passed-down knowledge, which gets lost over generations, but here it will be recalled and remembered through this body of work. I will use my symbols as a way to transcribe this knowledge through this body of work, to preserve it and accept it for what it is, how the culture is, to not question it and accept the culture for what it is. This body of work will also inform the heritage and inherited experience that all black people from rural areas in the Eastern Cape and other places around South Africa have/ had to conform to by leaving home yearning to learn, grow, earn, and better themselves for their families, through the act of going out into the world.

Through this inherited migration, I/we as black people or people of colour also end up falling into a cycle of being a labour force for the higher class and race in society, as we are sometimes accustomed to and perceived as the lower working race and class in society. This has been a continuing norm in society, which is also unchanging, but that is not the point of the discussion. This point is to acknowledge that what exists in society to find and establish our own selves, and how the lower class is the labour force, but when looking at it from a cultural or artistic viewpoint, it is not the same. This then allows us to look at labour differently, because when looking at labour depending on culture, as we have (Imisebenzi) cultural practices which require labour during their process, it is not the same as paid labor, but is a way of living, and is spiritual. This can be seen as different from industrial labour and political labour, as it is paid for with the conditions of being strictly monitored, which requires you to be in servitude to an institution, job, or government.

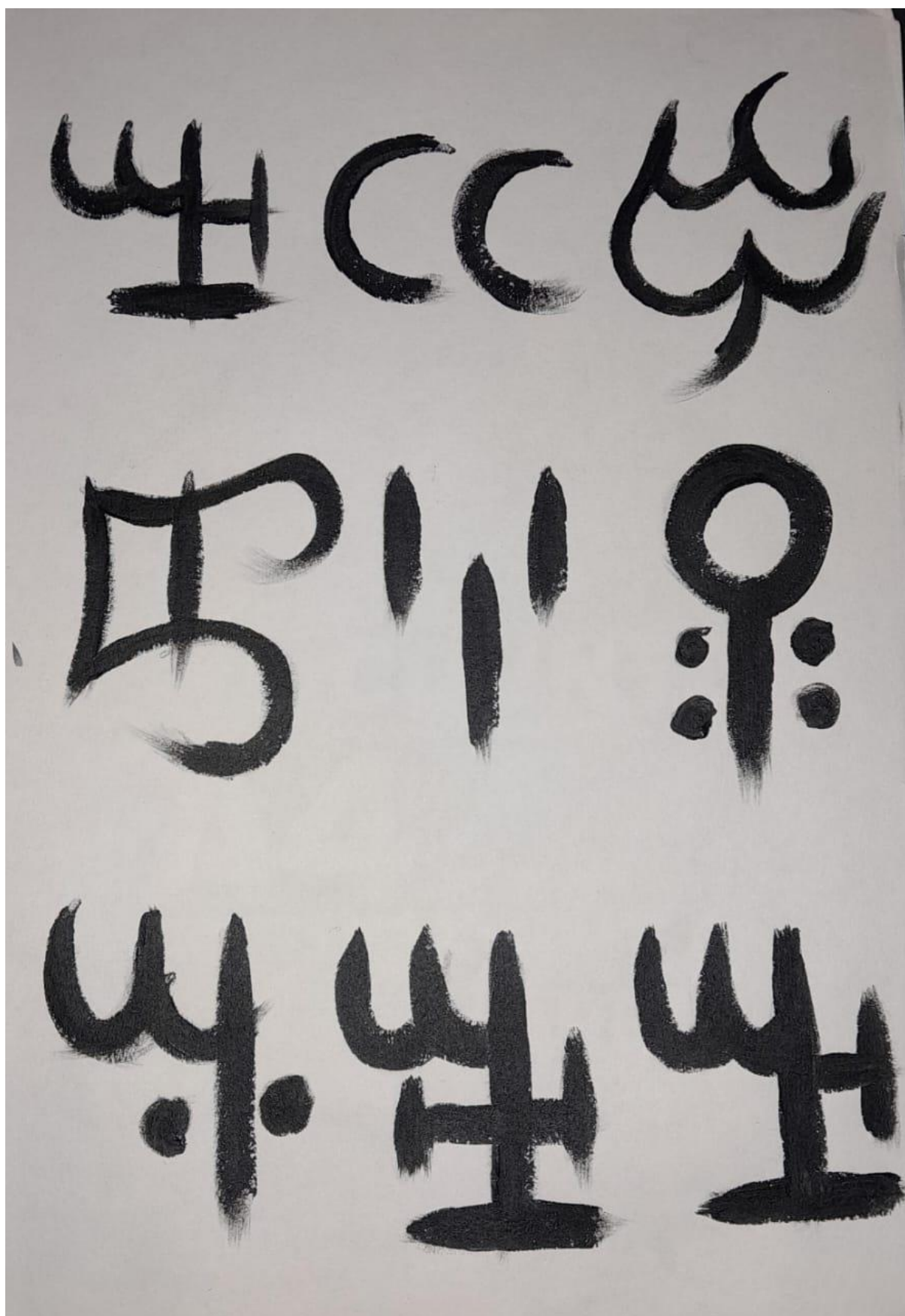
This body of work also informs parts of my culture, as these symbols can be used to structure and construct words, which is what I have done in this project. The words I have chosen are (Isithathu), the number 3, as it holds a large significance to the culture in a sacred and significant part of the practice of (Ulwaluko) Male initiation. The number 3 stands for significant knowledge comparable to the Holy Trinity. The following word is (Imvelaphi), which can be translated to background, culture, and heritage. I believe these themes, grounded by the word "Imvelaphi", also speak to recalling one's past and culture, which allows me to centre and bring my conceptual thought to the exploration and understanding of my culture, as is the point of this work. The third word is (Inkosi), this word translates to King or Chief, and I decided to use it as to draw back on my heritage, as I am from a chieftain family in the Xhosa culture, this then allows me to establish my identity and further



Speak of my heritage, and also my culture, since chieftain families inherit from their ancestors the history of the Nguni culture. These aspects and themes described above are the themes that will be communicated through this body of work.

Though the work may be vague throughout the work and may not portray what I speak of here, that is also the intention of the work. I say this because my goal with this project is to address the misunderstandings that many individuals, including myself, who feel disconnected or displaced from their cultural experience, while also addressing how I view labour as an artist, in juxtaposition with a Xhosa man whose part in his culture is to perform labour during the ceremonial practice (called Umsenezi/ Imisebenzi). Further more I will also speak on how we as black African children inherit this labour and migration from our previous generation, going down through history I want to demonstrate that it is possible to overcome these feelings without distancing ourselves from our cultural practices. Most importantly, I hope my project conveys how we can bridge the gap that institutions often have in understanding the cultural experiences and practices of all Black students and students of color.





My symbols for the body of work I am working on

## Conclusion

Ukubekwa Kophawo, ukubaluleka kwalo kunye nemvelaphi kaXhosa is a tactile exploration of the symbolic aspects of the cultural history of the Xhosa (the Nguni people) within South African social and cultural symbolism history, and how it interconnects with my lived experience and observation. Through drawn symbols in the book of Credo Muthwa, "*Indaba My Children*", the self-created symbols of the ceramicist Andile Dylvane, symbols outsourced on the internet, mundane working tools, and African instruments, I will explore how the cultural, social, and symbolism symbolic narratives within South African history are negotiated.

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## Bibliography and Citations

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*Indaba, My Children: African Tribal History, Legends, Customs, And Religious Beliefs* by Vusamazulu Credo Muthwa.

Ithonga "Ancestral Dreamscape" exhibition by Andile Dyalvane.

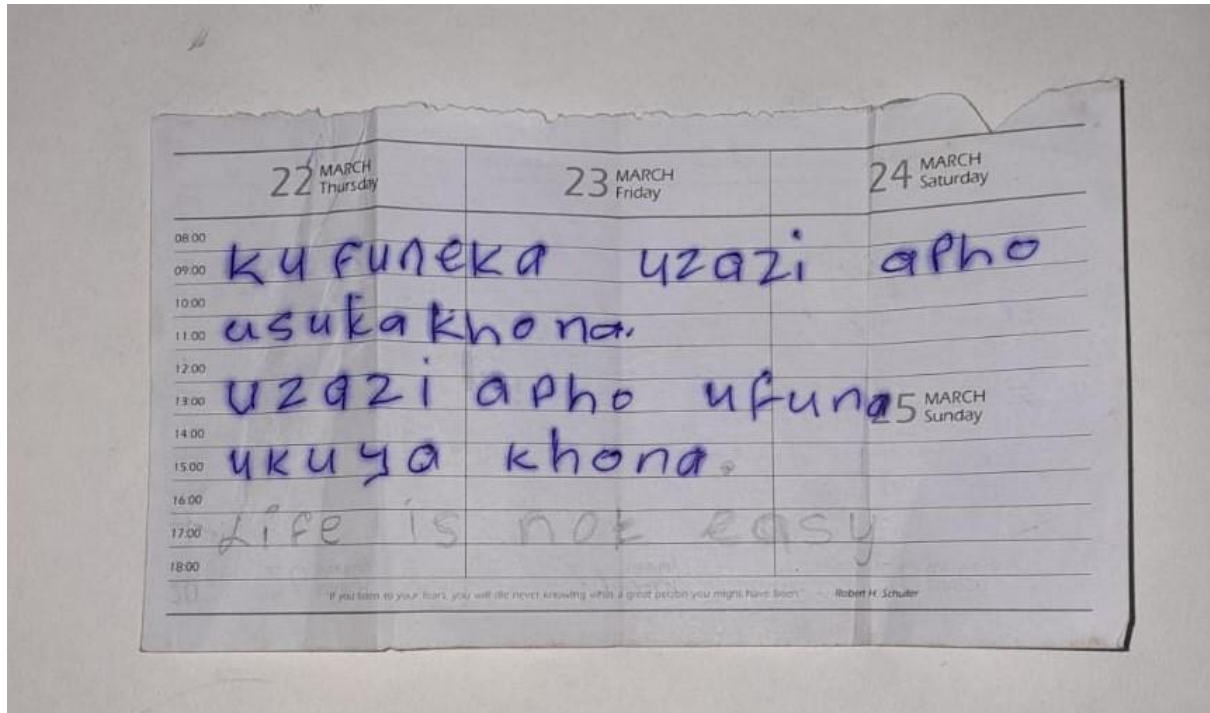
Images that will be present in the full Documentation.



Ithonga “Ancestral dreamscape” by Andile Dylvane.



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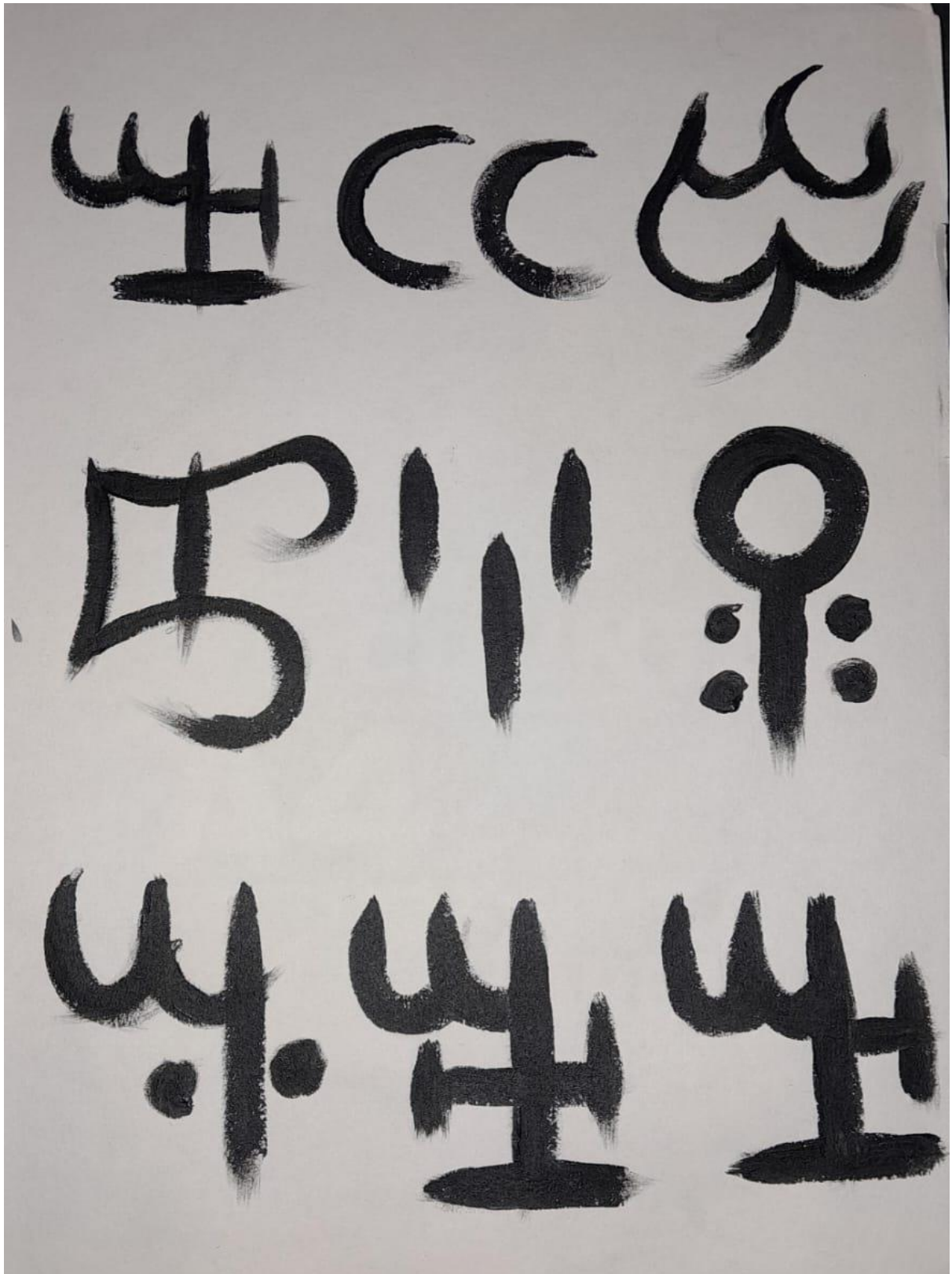
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