

Inkaba
Yam

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My work looks at connections to family, ancestry and spiritual leadership looking at this in the IsiXhosa context from the perspective of someone who is led by memory and dreams, which have guided me in the decisions I have made for my practical work. In this regard, I have referred to the work and document of Buhlebezwe Siwani as someone who has been inducted as isangoma and practicing for some time, and who explores her identity as an artist as well as her spirituality through the medium of contemporary art.

There is really no beginning to this project, it is something that has been ongoing in my subconscious mind it is something that kept on building in my mind as I kept on growing in my journey

spiritually and artistically. As soon as I started thinking about art making conceptually, I have

used art as a way of interrogating my identity. My work has always been tied to me exploring my longing for home and the nagging feeling to know more, to talk about and to acknowledge my elders and people that have passed on in my family.

It started taking shape in third year when working on my self-motivated project for the second semester. I got the chance to focus on what it is that I want to say within my art practice and it really set the tone for my journey of self-discovery. My work explored themes of identity, loss, shifting family dynamics and nostalgia. I looked at the concept of home and explored ideas of what home is and

whether it is a physical place or is it found in other people?

An example would be the bead work I did last year in the pattern of the red, blue and white Masigoduke bag also known as the Ghana Must Go bag that in my work, symbolized moving and the courage it takes to pack up and move across borders and into the unknown in search for a “better life” as my parents had done on a rather smaller scale across provincial borders. It also served as a love letter to what I consider to be home with the three different colours, each carrying a different message. Taken from the concept of a Zulu love letter, beaded messages Zulu maidens give to their lover usually in the form of a bracelet, as a token of their love and affection. Red was a symbol of love, blue symbolized longing and white

spoke of the innocence and purity in which I recall my childhood.



*Masigoduke,
2019*

With the work showcased in this body of work I attempt to explore hidden and forgotten histories within my family and our culture. There is hidden knowledge that has been lost due to colonization and westernization and I am finding myself on a continuous journey of self-discovery. I explore my spirituality by allowing myself to be guided, which is something that I have been doing subconsciously throughout the years as soon as I started approaching artmaking conceptually.

Going into my 4th year work, I started questioning why it is that I have such an attachment to home and why we hold onto the past. I came across a poem titled Kenya Conversations [Part 3] by Ziphozakhe Hlobo. She writes about her own experience with longing for home, “I notice whenever I try to write

anything about home I write my childhood, and perhaps my home is my childhood, where I was carefree and happiest”, (Hlobo, 2015). My project was initially about me looking into my feelings of nostalgia towards family and home which I associate with my childhood, specifically attached to my mother’s side of the family. Initially I worked with the idea of going back into my grandfather’s home (which was demolished years ago after my uncle inherited it) and remember the way that it was and activities that were carried out there. The removal of the home as we knew it came with a shift within the family dynamics. The effect it had caused us to not visit as often but I always felt this nagging feeling to return home.

With no photographic record of the house, I could now

only connect with it through memory and conversations with my mother in sharing our memories which proved quite insightful for me as I got to hear stories of what it was like for her growing up there as well as what my late great grandfather was like. It also gave a little context to her ability to intuitively heal others using natural medicine and understand that she is also on her own journey of self-discovery and is now completing her Masters in Homeopathy. My great grandfather was a healer. For some time, I had been curious to know about him and I had no idea that I would later learn this information about him that would shed light on questions that would come up along my own journey of self-discovery. As umXhosa who grew up in the suburbs and find myself far removed

from my culture the only ways I can access my history is through it being passed down verbally.

Through this project I have learned that it takes discovering myself and letting myself be guided ancestrally to tap into that history and access sacred territory within my family’s lineage.

In Siwani's Masters Dissertation, she talks about her exhibition titled *Imfihlo* in which she showcased her work that is comprised of performance, installations and photography. Her work within this exhibition takes into consideration the complexities related to the body. She refers to the body as a medium or vessel (both in the art and spiritual context). Her exhibition also challenges how the performance and exploration of the secret elements of certain cultural and traditional practice through live performance and installation complicate cultural ethics. Within her text she uses the works from her exhibition along with selected works from various artists to relate the role of secrecy in "ideological structures with the trace," (*Imfihlo*, 2015 p24). In the text when Siwani

speaks about the 'trace' she implies both absence and presence. She considers the presence of ancestors within one's body. She also explores the trace that the artist leaves behind: the extension of the performance which becomes the art piece. In her own practice the key medium is photography which serves as a trace of reality.

I am interested in the way Siwani's work is centered around the idea of secrecy and how she navigates exploring her identity as isangoma and a practicing artist with secrecy in mind. Within my own work I find myself torn between preserving and revealing certain parts of my journey and should I decide to reveal certain things, I question how I can go about it in a way that does not reveal everything. In an interview with Design Indaba Siwani says her work

"Imfihlo (2015) was about whose secret, why is it secret, and how do you preserve the secret, or how do you reveal the secret without revealing everything about it? What remains hidden and what can we show people? It was just around not saying too much but saying enough, and how you reveal it. (Allison, 2016). I am drawn to Siwani's work and text because of the way she integrates her spirituality with her art practice and uses it as a means to her self-discovery, "my work is about journeys and understanding and liminal characterization of the self. I don't see myself making work about anything other than it for the time being because it is so intrinsic in the way we see ourselves as Africans, you know?" (Samson, 2018)

My body of work explores sewing and weaving as a

response to certain dreams I have had revealing certain colours and traditional garments. Through the different methods of working, I explore themes of identity, coming of age, my lineage and spirituality. In search of *Inkabayam* (my umbilical cord/where I am rooted), my work is not just a representation of my life and my journey but also of those who came before me and have passed on but still walk with me.

Working from memory and dreams in my experience are both literal and figurative. I use the memories I have of my childhood as well as dreams that I have had to inform certain ideas within my project. On the other hand, memory and the act of remembering go beyond just personal memories of my childhood. It's quite a spiritual process which happens on a more subconscious level. Where in the dream realm, one is shown things and given information and insight to the sacred territory I briefly mentioned before. Materials-chosen materials of cultural and biographical relevance- cloth (umbhaco), binding, beads, bread, tea etc.

Led by dreams, memory and oral history passed down from my parents

Initially my process involved working from memory. Working with the memory that I have of my grandfather's house and sketching it out as I remember it. The lockdown and being at home really shifted my process as I adapted to the conditions it pushed me to work more intuitively. I had felt drawn to working intuitively without knowing how I was to go about it. I started working from dreams and having conversations with my family about my family's past and about our ancestry and lineage.

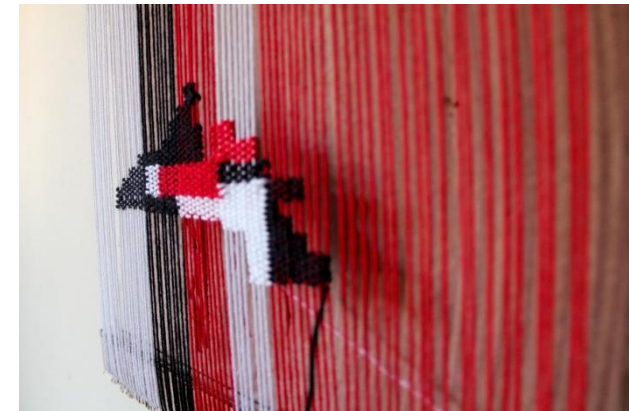
Initially, I found it difficult to produce work and I wanted to have a more intuitive approach to but for a while I found it difficult to find materials I resonate with and wanted to move forward with but I allowed myself to be lead.

Led by dreams and conversations as well as spending time at home has really influenced my process and really allowing the project to unfold in a way

Working intuitively initially came with a lot of pressure as I struggled to let go of my need for structure and to

I realized that intuition is like a muscle you need to exercise in order for it to develop and to be able to hear it better.

My first works that I did working intuitively are the woven tapestries. The wool came from wool I had at home and the colours were inspired by a recurring dream I had had in which the colours would stand out to me. Working on the tapestries intuitively put me in a meditative state where the work was



My mother shared with me about how when her and her siblings were born their umbilical cord was buried in the soil where they are to be raised and that is where they will be rooted and the ancestors acknowledge them. No matter where they go or move to that is where they always go back to. When they were born they were rooted to their ancestors, the land etc. We spoke about how having us born in the city came with a lot of restrictions when it came to cultural practices so a lot of them fell away. Born and raised in the city, I began to adapt to my surroundings and felt pressured into adopting western ways. There was always this nagging feeling in the back of my mind, calling me back home. I ignored it and suppressed it until it was doing more than just merely nagging. It became

clear that this was bigger than me just longing for home or my childhood. I am going through the process of remembering not just on a mental level but on a spiritual level and through conversation and going back into the past I can start piecing everything together.

Through a dream I felt led to make the apron that is seen in Figure 1.

Uniform through colonization and westernization education and religion are seen as an achievement and a sign of upward mobility within western society. It is responsible for the loss of cultural practices because we strive for validation within those field sometimes at the expense of maintaining our own cultures and traditions. Part of that remembering is

to break that generational trap by embracing the journey and taking on the responsibilities that come with it. There's a specific identity that comes with wearing a uniform, a role that one must assume once they slip on that uniform.

Identity not just made up of just you, you are layered, and you are a collective "I" vs "we"/The body as a vessel (Imfihlo, 2015).

In the second chapter of her text Siwani goes into more depth talking about the body as a medium. In her work there is a double play on the word 'medium'. The body in performance art is considered as the medium, it is also used in describing isangoma as a spirit medium. Izangoma communicate with ancestors, there is the assumption that izangoma speak to dead people. "However, ancestors

are alive, present and can inhabit my body" (Imfihlo, 2015 p48). It is in this way that she describes the body as a vessel. When she speaks of the body as a vessel, she refers to a body that has many other subjectivities within that body and exists as 'we'. Whenever she performs, she must ask her ancestors to go into the performance with her so they may manifest as one physical being. In her performances she has felt as though she doesn't have complete control over her body, there is the risk of unwillingly falling into a trance or having the work taken over by her ancestors (Siwani, 2015 p48).

The body is a vessel with multiple subjectivities [exists as 'we'] rather than I', 'we' is significant (Siwani, 2015 p.20). In isiZulu when greeting an individual the plural "ninjani" is used to greet. The same

applies in isiXhosa when greeting we say “molweni”. I never quite understood it but used it anyway, especially when addressing an elder as I did not want to come across as rude. This shows the individual exists because of the collective. Implied in this, is the unseen ancestry that is always referred to when defining oneself. In my own practice I explore the idea that I do not walk alone there are those who came before me and have passed but still walk with me. When greeting isangoma one does not just greet the individual, you address the collective.

I think of being on a spiritual journey or finding oneself as a team effort. You dream and you share what you have been shown to those who know more/elders or find a medium/diviner to help you piece everything together.

The apron serves as an acknowledgement that I do not walk alone and working intuitively and allowing myself to be guided within my art making process. It is also a symbol of a coming of age. The apron is traditionally worn by married women or to signify that you are now a woman. In relation to the images of my family members in uniform the apron also serves as a uniform and wearing it symbolizes the acceptance of the spiritual journey as a continuation of what my ancestors had started. It also a form of spiritual armor and reminder that I do not walk alone.



Figure 1: Inkaba Yam Iphi, 2020

With regards to her stills of her immersed in the ocean the ocean Siwani says, "Water becomes like culture, a repository. It is about fluidity, mobility and knowing and not knowing," (Siwani, 2015, p20). She looks at water both as topographical and spiritual space that represents both possibilities of her as an artist and isangoma. In African mythology any body of water is representative of another realm. The way she describes the ocean is similar to the way I view my spiritual journey, the fear of the unknown and uncertainty that comes with the journey can be compared to the ocean as a body of water that has so much life that we as humans have not even begun to uncover. Siwani considers the ocean as a metaphor for secrecy for the same reason that the depth of the ocean in her words, bears

unknown life as well as "the ebb and flow that brings something out into the open but keeps others down, points to the fluid nature of the secret", (Siwani, 2015, p20.). She talks about two stories, one about how people who are spiritually inclined are said to go into a house in the ocean to twasa which is the initiation process for isangoma. The other story is about those who are taken by the water because of refusing to twasa. The risk is in the possibility that one could be pulled in and therefore those who are spiritually inclined need to be wary of the water "as there is a possibility that their ancestors reside in the water

Similarly, my encounter with the water has always been a complex interaction" (Siwani, 2015 p.28). For isangoma the ocean is a birthplace but it is also a place one goes to die.

She goes on to talk about how she has never been able to go into the ocean alone. During her initiation she had to go into the ocean. There were five people her mentor trusted to be able to pull her out should anything go wrong. She had woolen ropes that were tied around her waist and ankles that were prayed for before she went into the ocean. She went in with a chicken in her hand as two people held the ropes, she managed to make it back but returned without the chicken. She mentions a saying that says that a silver coin buys one permission to enter this sacred space as a spiritual being. She says when walking into the water she wondered what possibilities lie underneath the water. "There is an element of risk involved in the performance. There is a different type of life force that

exists there, which is inexplicable" (Siwani, 2015 p.28).

There's something symbolic about her encounter with the ocean for me. Going into a spiritual journey is walking into the unknown, you hear stories about how people go into their spiritual journeys or ukutwasa and do not complete their initiation or have bad experiences. No one really talks about what happens because there's a level of secrecy that is maintained. Even those that make it out successfully do not share about what they had to go through. Through her work Siwani has highlighted the secrecy that is found in African spirituality, in cultural and traditional practices. With her work she as an artist is expected to show and as isangoma she is expected to conceal. With her work she

manages to uncover the
secrecy and maintain it at the
same time.





Tat' omkhulu Thilom (great grandfather). The old house was referred to as Thilom which is translated to 'tea room' this is where he dispensed herbal medicine and had a shop.



Tata, also in the process of reconnecting with inkaba yakhe



Bawokazi noKhulu in relation
to picture series I will be
including in search Inkaba
Yam





As a part of carrying out some of the activities that were done in the home I have made bread with my parents using two different methods. On the left is bread I prepared with my father in which the bread is baked and forms a crusty outer layer because of the coals surrounding the pot. On the right is bread I made with my mother, it is steamed bread.





Print from 3rd year, 2019 on umbhaco of an adaptation of the map of the home



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