
SPIRITUALITY IN ART / SPIRITUALITY AND ART

An innerview between Nduduzo Makhathini (NM) and Rangoato Hlasane (RH)

artistic education
spirituality
Southern epistemologies

by Rangoato Hlasane / Johannesburgo Working Group

Rangoato Hlasane (RH): What is our experience of spirituality?

Nduduzo Makhathini (NM): Let us begin by admitting that spirituality can never be fully articulated in words, hence the birth of the arts and other forms of worship. But with that said, efforts of describing in words, our various experiences of spirituality are necessary. In my native tongue, the closest word that captures the essence of what spiritualism could be is; okukamoya meaning that which is of and belong to the spirit. The word suggests that spirituality is something unseen, belongs to no person and thus cannot be contained. In that way then, it is a kind of 'intangible' experience that anchors us to other forms of existing beyond physicality.

Our attempts to define and comprehend spirituality often arise from a greater need to understand the world, what constructs our ontologies and cosmologies thus informing our value systems, myths and rituals. For instance, among other beliefs, African religions subscribe to the idea of a three-dimensional outlook to existence. That is to say, our network comprises of three worlds; Umvelinqangi (God), abaphansi (the ones from the underworlds or the ancestors) and abantu (the ones that are in the processes of becoming or the humans). The three worlds interact – as human beings our language and mode of communication to the other worlds is spirituality, and through music, dreams, prophesies and visitations messages are sent and received. In that we get a glimpse of what the other worlds look, sound and feel like.

I am particularly interested in how performance can transcend entertainment and become 'inner-attainment' (borrowing [Zim] Ngqawana's term). Siyakha Mnguni on Termites of the Gods: San Cosmology in Southern African Rock Art notes that, the first inhabitants of Southern Africa, the San people – believed in the concept of n|om ('spirit of the Big God) and that during a dance or a performance ritual, the gods joined thus

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allowing humans to enter the spirit dimension (2015). Various cultures throughout the African continent subscribe to similar beliefs, in this way creating a significantly firm context to worship, libations, rituals and the arts. It is therefore crucial that African performance practices are understood within their invocation of spiritual connections.

Now that we have tried to put some context to African modes of spirituality, let us attempt to provide a direct answer to the initial question. I believe that music is one of the most significant tools within which African people experience spirituality. Looking at my own practice as a healer and improviser – it is firmly imbedded in these ontological and cosmological outlooks pointed out earlier.

RH: There seem to be a relationship between dreams and the material world. My sense is that dreams are closest to how we comprehend and/or manifest the link between the spirit and the material worlds. Please share some of your ongoing thoughts and experiences.

NM: I agree with you a lot on this Bafo. In *Zulu Shaman: Dreams, Prophecies and Mysteries* (2003) Credo Mutwa lays some context to the dichotomy of dreams and material world. For instance, he asserts that the word phupha (dream) means to fly and ubuthongo (deep sleep) means to be one with the ancestors. This is to say that, it is through our physical bodies that we attain connectivity to other planes of consciousness. Mutwa's analogy paired with some of my own experiences and observations as a healer, further highlights the centrality of dreams within African cultures and belief systems. In my own journey, I have also encountered overlaps and synchronicities between dreams and the material world. Let me share some of what I believe to be some significant moments in my journey.

Since the age of at least 13 after I had received the gift (ubungoma) from my ancestors, I began to question the distance between the physical and the spirituals worlds, and also the kinds of overlaps possible. For instance, in one dream I had seen some elders that I had never seen in 'real life' before – these elderly women had put me in some form of trance through a ritual that involved intense drumming and chanting. As part of the ritual, they later applied certain oils in some parts of my body. Upon waking up after a long

dream, I noticed something strange; I had blisters everywhere the ointments had been applied (in the dream). Still amazed at what I had just experienced, I went and related the story to my grandmother whom based on the description of what I had seen, could relate to the elders seen in the dream. She said they came from my early ancestral lineage that are gifted with healing powers. In our conversation she could also remember some of their names. Moreover, her descriptions of how they looked, the songs they sung, the types of drums they played, and the entire setting was totally in sync with what had transpired in the dream. These were some of my early encounters with what can be thought of as astral projections (dreams, visitations and prophecies) and the material (life in the physical realm) becoming closely intertwined. This encounter and others that came later in my life, suggests that dreams are forms of realities taking place at another plane of consciousness. Furthermore, dreams also have the power to influence our immediate realities or the material world.

In recent years, I have started thinking and exploring the various ways in which I could be more intentional about dissolving these dichotomies (dreams and the material world), most particularly in my work as an improviser and healer. In 2014, I received my second major dream-life overlap that would again pose questions against conventional perceptions to the kinds of gaps that exist between the seen and the unseen, dreams and the material world. I dreamt of my late father who had left me and my family when I was a kid. In a dream, he appeared facing the opposite direction (read as a misfortune in my culture), I insisted on seeing his face until I had lost my voice and later my sight. The next morning when I woke up, I had lost my voice and, in the course of the day, gradually experienced partial sight losses. Days later, the problem persisted. I then visited an ophthalmologist, after which all diagnostics came back negative. It was concluded that my eyes were healthy and therefore could not be offered any treatment. This loss of sight continued for a while until I consulted with an uncle of mine that also has a gift of healing. He prescribed a series of ritual after which I would receive a dream that would guide me towards my healing. As expected, I received a dream. In a dream I appeared as part of a long queue of creatures, some looked like me and some didn't. I eventually got my turn to speak to the great ancestors (one of which I recall from my earlier dream) and when I woke the next morning I was healed.

Though, this is a common signal towards ukwetwasa (being initiated as a healer), it nonetheless marked a huge transformation in how I perceived life, it also greatly impacted on my approach to music – a pursuit to express something deeper. Following up from this dream and a series of others that followed, and I was then directed to recorded *Listening to the Ground* (2015), which was in itself a ritual, an opening of pathways between our world and that of our ancestors. Through this record I learned to listen to voice of the spirit, ranging from; receiving guidance with choosing personnel, instrumentation, recording studio, composition and to the actual packaging – all came through dreams.

Drawing from recent incidents, last year I had a performance at the Orbit (a jazz club in Johannesburg) and during one of the pieces, an ancestor emerged on the bandstand. It was my great grandmother uMam'uNyandu whom I had last seen as a child, she came and leaned against the piano. Though no one from the audience spoke about this moment, some band members mention a deep presence felt on this particular concert. Part of what I am currently exploring is how do we create a space for our ancestral voices/presence in our performances, perhaps similar to how umlozi (ventriloquism) is invoked in emsamu (a sacred space in a homestead where the ancestors are believed to reside). Ultimately, the biggest question is how we bring these experiences to the fore as significant pedagogical tools towards a postcolonial imagination. I live my life trying to respond to this very question.

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RH: The third question presuppose some kind of a dilemma between spirituality and art/spirituality in art in relation to people of the African world (local or in diaspora) as well as the oppressed of the planetary world. The modes of negotiating the material demands of capitalist industries that exploits cultural work, vis-a-vis the following of 'dreams' and go rongwa/ukuthunywa.

NM: Mfowethu, the dilemma is 'real'. In precolonial times, ancient men had such commitment to the gifts (ukuthunywa), 'talents' and all kinds of cultural works. Such talented beings held a special place in society, and were taken care of by their communities – meaning they did not need to do anything else to feed themselves but follow the calling. I imagine that in our purest state as African people, we were

governed by the concepts of ubuntu, we believed that the greatness of an individual can only be realised in a context of the whole (community). Based on the notion of ubuntu, it is also worth saying that the capitalists system goes against the communal outlooks of Africanism.

We also understand that problems such as capitalism were/are manufactured by the coloniser in order to control and limit productivity of the colonised.

These kinds of dysfunctionalities (especially in an African context) have created major shifts in focus – from moving inward (spirituality) to gravitating towards external things (materialism) and ultimately not reaching an equilibrium. In this way, capitalism has not

only exploited cultural work and reduced our beliefs to primitive superstition but indeed hijacked that which lives within us – our very dreams embedded in these cultural practices to a point where our dreams permanently live in the realm of potentiality. Over the years, Africans in the continent, exile and the diaspora have used tools such as the arts to liberate themselves. In the postcolonial moment when we try to recover that which has been taken from, the arts becomes a necessity to unlock these potentialities. Though it is not unchallenging to transcend the material world, it is indeed possible to at least strike some balance. Some earlier masters and teachers in music such as; Philip Tabane, Bheki Mseleku, Zim Ngqawana, Busi Mhlongo and others, understood their quest (*ukuthunywa*) for spiritual freedom and that this would lead to some form of emancipation from the imprisonments of the material world. These masters among others have demonstrated in various ways the possibilities of unlocking our fullest potential. For instance, guitarists and composer Philip Tabane dedicated his entire life to the malombo practices that were inherited from his ancestors. So is multi-instrumentalist and composer Bheki Mseleku, whom referred to himself as a spirit medium (*umngoma*) through which the ‘holy spirit’ flow. In his journey, Mseleku became deliberate about rejecting material success, he believed that everything that he had acquired was meant to be shared by all. Mseleku’s thinking further invokes the teachings of ubuntu mentioned earlier. As a student and disciple of Mseleku, I experienced his generosity in profound ways. I recall this one time Mseleku had come back from recording *Home at Last* (2003). He had so much cash, and he distributed to all the people around him and in the streets where he walked. What Mseleku and Tabane demonstrate could be seen as artistic ways of realigning our precolonial memories, informed by the ancient philosophy of ubuntu. I see these examples as anecdotes that could be studied to respond to the spirituality against materialist dilemma.

At least from around 2007, I joined late saxophonists and composer Zim Ngqawana’s group under the umbrella Zimology Institute. The institute was both a commune and a mobile school, and was aimed at aligning the connections between African cultures and improvised music – today this initiative can be thought of as a response to the larger decolonial discourse. Ngqawana was concerned about the totality of things, his own words: “That’s why you have to see the whole thing in context: you have to see the drummers, the dancers, and the song. Then you understand that we’re dealing with totality”. This strikes some resonance with what [Sello] Galane wrote about malombo; “it is a sociocultural institution that comprises of song, dance, dramatic elements of performance, religion and a way of thinking” (2010). In another instance, speaking about his compositional process Mseleku says: “But I think another part of us lives in a realm that is not affected by any outward things that are happening so it’s always still and peaceful. I try and tune in to this part hence I try sometimes to play things that move gentle and harmoniously” (Bheki Mseleku in *The South Bank Show*, 1994). These teachings put together inform some of what I think and believe.

My own thinking is deeply influenced by these teachers. Most of my current work in the industry and the academia, is towards efforts of the appropriation of the arts (in an African context) and further aligning the role of artists in society. Perhaps the answer to this dilemma is to see our gifts in the totality of our existence and tune in with the greater cosmic music.

RH: My friend Alejandro Cevallos, based in Quito, Ecuador shared with me this: “In the Andes of South America, there are colleagues who have spoken about a spirituality that cannot be thought disconnected from the concrete tasks of reproducing life, mainly to sow, harvest, cook, eat; that is, spirituality is connected to the hands, to work the earth, to eat; that relationship with the earth is a conversation with the world and its cycles of re-creation. That conversation is many times [a] ritual. In short, our spirituality is profoundly materialistic.” I find this notion directly resonant with some spiritual practices here in Southern Africa. Here I am thinking about the relationship with domestic animals, in particular the goat and the cattle (ox), or, rainmaking music such as Kiba/Dinaka and how the festivities follow the agrarian cycles/rituals/patterns. In this way, Kiba/Dinaka is not merely an ‘entertainment’ activity. Rather, it is connected to ancestry, libation/prayer, acknowledgement/thanksgiving and recreation. What are some of your thoughts, experiences and examples on the understanding of ‘materialistic spirituality’?

NM: The concept of ‘materialist spirituality’ is quite an interesting one to me, I have honestly not thought of it this way. Considering some of the work by [Credo] Mutwa, [Masizi] Kunene, [Kofi] Agawu and [John] Mbiti’s literature on African religions, I do see how this concept functions. Pertaining rituals, I believe that through rituals it becomes possible to realize that which reside in the realms of potentiality. This is to say, when potential becomes realized it can be projected through a series of physical manifestations. In various contexts, Africans perceive God as the creator of all things – involved in the operations of the universe as opposed to an abstract being, therefore he/she is able to influence physical change through rituals and other meaningful modes of communication to him/her. Another common belief among African people is that, God works closely with the living dead (idlozi), hence the rituals are often channeled through them with the hope that the message reaches God. Some African cultures also believe in the divinities as mediums, for instance, Unomkhulwane (the Zulu rain goddess) believed to be responsible for festivities.

In most of my work, I have been thinking about the kinds of sonic representations to such concepts. In 2015, I received a dream where I was instructed to record and release an album Matunda Ya Kwanza (celebration of the first fruits) for Nomkhulwane as part of the December - January festivities (Umkhosi Wekweshwama). Within a couple of days, I was in studio, recorded and released the album weeks later. These are some the responsibilities that as a messenger (isithunywa), you often have to go against the conventional confines to fulfill the work of the ancestors towards a greater cosmic work.

RH: Lastly, perhaps we can speak about the intersection of healing, (art)making and education. Can we (in this geopolitical context) consider teaching and learning spaces as sites of healing? How can we teach spirituality and healing in the formal education system?

NM: I definitely see connections between healing, art making and education. Again, if we look at it from an African perspective, we realise that these were never really separated. Thus I believe that a significant amount of work ahead of us as a people, seekers and artists lies in the restoration of the holism that resides in African concepts. Further linking to the idea of totality mentioned earlier. For instance, our ancient traditions see no separation between healing, art making and education. The challenge in formal education systems, is how do we forge context based curriculums, that will respond and speak to cultural patterns that surround them. In other words, how do we bring in the to the academia the kind of knowledge that exist in our communities. Part of what I have been thinking through and exploring, are incorporations of African songs, proverbs and storytelling methods (under which most Africans at least of my age and back were brought up) as pedagogical tools. I find this approach to be significantly useful not only for me but also for the learners, in that a lot of our healing resides in us telling our stories, singing our songs while making meaningful art that essentially becomes educational tools.

Recently, I came across something really interesting by Andrew Croucamp, it spoke about divination (often seen by the west as superstition) as 'ritual technology'. Croucamp argued that similar to other kinds of information technologies, the throwing of the bones (ukwebhula) is a way of knowing in that it 'accesses and organises information'. It is a way of revealing hermeneutics. I do believe that these are some of the futures of spirituality in formal education systems, especially in an African context. Allowing these kinds of conversations in a classroom setting, will indeed evoke spirituality. There is a need to develop teaching methods that approach the spaces of learning and the learners with compassion and empathy.

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