



Ingoma: Soundscapes of our Spirit

By: Mkutaji

It all came together like the first time we heard the earth-bending sounds of *Genes and Spirits* by Ra Moses Taiwa Molelekwa.

The naïve and frantic questions asked by the keys, effortlessly answered by the steady and self-aware bass and percussion. The constant swing of call-and-response. As the energy transforms, other instruments are then tasked with the responsibility to learn and then teach their findings with the melodies that ask for guidance.

It all came together as though it were a ritual performed many times before. Each member of the community was responsible in some or other way for the process of transcendence. Where sound, nature, the ancestors, abantu¹ and God: all morphed into One.

I believe this was how it happened in the beginning.

The Dawn of Creation

On both sides of the Kunene River, in what is known today as Namibia and Angola, live abantu who refer to themselves as OvaHimba². In this community the birth of a child is not dated to when they were born, or the day their parents conceived them. The birthdate of a child is the day their mother decides...or rather...is guided to have them. On this day the mother will go and sit alone under a tree in the open air and patiently listen until she hears the song of the child who is ready to come. Once she has heard her child's song, she then goes to the man who she will have the child with, and teaches him the sacred tune. They then make love and physically conceive this child while singing the melody as a cosmic invitation for the child to come. During her pregnancy, the mother teaches her child's song to the midwives and women who will assist her during the birth. As the child emerges from their mother's body, the song is sung by the women as a way of welcoming them onto earth. As the child grows and progresses through life, succeeds and makes mistakes, the people of the community gather around

¹ People in a collection of Nguni languages

² The collective name for the Himba people of Northern Namibia and Southern Angola. Singular: OmuHimba



and sing the song. Because in Himba philosophy, much like many Afrikan societies, a wrong-doing is not a cause for punishment, but an opportunity for correction.

This soundtrack for the creation of a child is not unique to OvaHimba. Many ancient Afrikan societies, especially in the Southern parts, practiced a variation of this. What I find interesting about this tradition is its closeness to what I could only imagine to be the creation of Creation itself. iSanusi³ uBaba oMkhulu uVusamazulu Credo Mutwa details how the world came into being through *Fertile Nothingness*. As the Himba mother sits under the tree and listens for a song in the presence of what many may call sonic nothingness, something emerges; the beginning of the life she has been tasked to nurture.

A number of Afrikan societies reference the beginning of cosmic creation to the vibrations of sounds uttered by The Great One (uNkulunkulu). The Bambara and Dogon of West Afrika teach of the emergence of nature through the great sounds of the four elements; water, fire, earth and air. BaVenda and VaShona of Southern Afrika, speak of *Ngoma-lungudu* which is known as the drum that possesses the voice of Mwali/Mwari⁴ (God). This is a drum that can only be beaten by a high-priest known as *Dzomo la Dzimu* (the mouthpiece of Mwali). A similar drum is known by BaKongo - a Bantu-speaking group from Central Afrika as *Ngoma*.

In making connections between the language + cosmology and its relationship with sound in various Afrikan societies, we can begin to see the intricacies between Afrikan spirituality and the aspect of sound known as music. The stories I have shared reveal the profoundly rooted connection between creation, as it is understood in cosmology, through sound. With this understanding that to many, sound is the canvas in which it all began, we can begin to explore the connections between music and spirituality on different levels.

Ubungoma

If one were to ask someone with a basic understanding of a Nguni language, they would probably tell you that the term *Ingoma* is used when talking about a song. If you were to ask someone with a slightly

³ A Searer, healer, foreteller etc. in the tradition of abeNguni (the Nguni people)

⁴ Mwali: The tshiVenda word for God. Mwari: the Shona word for God.



deeper understanding, they may be able to explain to you that there are supernatural ties between Ingoma (song) and Ingoma (a spiritual dimension that combines the physical and metaphysical).

“Ingoma can be described as the collective title given to the ritual, spiritual, healing and knowledge transference component that form this Sub-Saharan indigenous esoteric knowledge system,” (Thorton, 2009)

What Thorton is getting at in the statement above is that; Ingoma is also used in different parts of Sub-Saharan Afrika to describe the transcendental experience of encountering the spirit worlds either through rituals, healing, or in the sharing of knowledge. In his work ‘*Motse Wa Ba Dimo*,’ uBaba Maila examines Afrikan spirituality and physical space through the lens of *Ubungoma*.⁵ He found that in the circles of *iZangoma*⁶ ingoma is the term used when referring to the practice of serving the ancestors through healing and divining. As I had mentioned before, during rituals in many parts of the continent the *Ngoma* drum is used as a sacred drum to communicate with the ancestors through vibrations and sound. Ingoma is then a social institution that forms as a guide for communities in their interactions with the spirit worlds, nature and life on earth.

“Ingoma has always been at the center of African society primarily in the form of healing and guiding communities. Protecting the balance between humans and nature, solidifying the bonds of community and ancestors as well as acting as a custodian of esoteric and historical knowledge,” (Maila, 2017).

Sound is accepted across the world as evocative. Where words and thoughts fail, sound has the ability to evoke forces of exceptional potency which can produce tangible results for human and natural life. Global Eastern communities are known for their chants and incantations that form as a meditation. Afrikan communities are celebrated for our repetitive rhythms and melodies which create affirmations

⁵ An institution for traditional healing and specific practices of Afrikan spirituality

⁶ People who are initiated and practise in the field of Ubungoma as traditional healers. Singular: iSangoma



that reach all realms in which we exist. These experiences are not only reflective of the ethereal nature of music, but the ability for sound to contain esoteric knowledge which is transferred through generations.

There is a true resemblance between the work of iSangoma as a medium, and those who are chosen to heal abantu through music. Just as iSangoma is selected by the ancestors, our custodians of music are entrusted with the gift of healing through the passages of the Divine. The Godmother of Zulu Rock uMam’Busi Mhlongo has been described as someone who not only recorded music, but a medium who provides a service. Much like the work of an alchemist, uMa’Mhlongo transports her listeners on a journey into the unknown. Those who dare to voyage with her, cease to return the same.

“Busi Mhlongo doesn’t compose music. She dreams in surreal sonic layers. I suspect she also “sees” music through a filter of multiple colours,”

(Bongani Madondo, 2010: a writer who spent some time with uMa’Mhlongo)

Rituals: The Soundscapes of Ubuntu

We gathered on that chilly Thursday evening at Mangrove in the heart of Johannesburg to listen to the sounds of forgotten theories. The night progressed from the dynamic Maskandi welcoming by uBaba uMahoyana Nkwanyana, to the earth-shattering sounds of uLerato Lichaba and uNeo Mabena. The evening ended with us safely transported into a new realm by uBafo uMadala Kunene, uLerato Lichaba and uGontse Makhene. As all of this was going on, I could not help thinking whether the spatial context of a restaurant in the middle of a concrete jungle could adequately house the cathartic experience of what felt like a ritual. Has sprawling from the natural landscape in our villages and homelands, to perform in the contained spaces of a post-apartheid city raptured our collective spiritual experience to a point of no return?

The discomfort in my head was soon settled by simply reminding myself of the omnipotent cosmic concept of *Ubuntu*. Now you see, rainbow nation politics and the surge of modernity has bastardised the spiritual theory of *Ubuntu*. uTata uZim Ngqawana, a profound musician and anthropologist, often referred to *Ubuntu* as the abyss where music and Afrikan spirituality collide. When thinking about the nature of Afrikan music then and now; community and collectivity are central variables in our



experience of transcendence. When asked what Ubuntu means to him, he mentioned that it deals with aspects of compassion, wisdom, collectivity and the understanding of creation and The Creator.

Ubuntu simply requires the presence of others to be realized, be it the physical presence of other humans, the company of ancestors who are also understood to be abantu, or in communion with God and nature; ubuntu is working. So, whether we gather along the river banks of our ancestral homes or in beerhalls of the city; where there is music, communion, and the collective intention to be transported on a spiritual journey; a ritual is born.

Fully immersed in the collection of rhythms and harmonies created by the trio that was uBafo uMadala Kunene, uLerato Lichaba and uGontse Makhene; I imagined three different universes seamlessly colliding into one mystical soundscape. The stories of not only the three custodians on stage, but the collective journey each individual, being, thing and their ancestors came together in celebration of Ubuntu. We carried the experiences of those who came before us and those who are yet to come. There is an isiZulu proverb that goes: *'Aku'mfula ungahlokomi'* (There is no river that has not its own sound). Each river has its own waters that have traveled their own path, collecting the experiences of different landscapes. Equally each individual has their own journey, a collection of stories from their lineage, enhanced by their human experiences. In a ritual space; all of those rivers come together and create a collective passage into the Divine through celestial composition of Ubuntu and Ingoma.

As we baptize ourselves into the spiritual soundscape of music, we may begin to understand how life and death are as intimately linked as soil and water. Often our humanness fails to perceive beyond what the eyes can see, or the mind can imagine. What I am getting at here is simply that the sounds we create are as much our own as they are of those who came before us. Perhaps Ra Moses Taiwa Molelekwa could explain it better than I. In an interview while reflecting on the musical ingenuity of his predecessor, uBaba uBheki Mseleku he says;

"It's not in one lifetime that one becomes a master musician."

He continues by mentioning that one goes through a couple of lifetimes to become a true master and custodian of music as it is understood through spirituality. uBaba uMseleku was a known as a self-taught master of many instruments. Often people would say that he could choose any instrument and play it like it were the only one he knew. Now, this could be a product of what some may refer to as reincarnation. I would like to explore the possibility that uBaba uMseleku, like many musicians who



are healers through sound, have inherited their gifts through their ancestry. The cosmic abilities of Izangoma to heal, are passed down through their genealogy. Perhaps the supernatural artistry of musicians takes on the same line of descent. This makes the gift of music and how it is distributed by the spirit worlds not only an archive of the collective experiences of abantu, but an institution in which knowledge is stored for generations.

In my exploration of the sacred tie between sound and Spirit, I have come to find though that we as human beings have the power to create and recreate, we in our capacity are not bearers of music. We as beings who come from worlds beyond our understanding, can only be custodians tasked to protect and elevate the great big soundscape we know to be Ingoma.

“Ingoma means healing – that is the true purpose of music,”

- uTa' Zim Ngqawana



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