



Intwaso: Archiving the Unknown

By: Mkutaji

The Middle

It always begins in shambles. The contradicting thoughts that make the decision to stay or to go seem like some or other betrayal of self. When staying means you will discover nothing and going means you may lose everything. The floods of agony associated with a calling are unlike any other.

Upon reflecting on the circular understanding of life that cradles Afrikan spirituality; it appears that in every moment of our lives (collectively and individually), we will always be at the 'beginning' of one journey, and at the 'end' of another. Our initiation into Ubuntu; the constant process of Being and Becoming, has no beginning and no end. In his novel *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences* uBaba uBayo Akomlafe, writes;

“There are no beginnings that appear unperturbed, pristine and without hauntings. And there are no endings that are devoid of traces of the new, spontaneous departures from disclosure, and simmering events yet to happen. The middle isn't the space between things; it is the world in its ongoing practices of worlding itself.” **We are always in the middle.**

– Bayo Akomlafe, *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences*

Like a circle, we as abantu¹ are in a constant process of Becoming. Our experiences, systems, and institutions all pass through a passage of metamorphosis. With this seed planted in our minds, we can observe and experience the **traditional and the modern as two unconflicted parts of the whole that is Becoming... a collective Afrikan society.**

¹ People



In my first contribution titled ‘*Ingoma: Soundscapes of our Spirit,*’ I travelled through some of the intimacies between Afrikan spirituality and sound as expressed through music. In this offering; I would like us to have a look at how we can elevate the institutions that archive the profound connection between sound and spirit. Reflecting on how at each point in our lives, we are being initiated into our collective Becoming.

Allow me to use the middle as our point of departure into examining the progression of our systems of archiving and institutionalising *Ingoma*.

Sound is an Indigenous Knowledge System

Umzi Watsha is a popular children’s song among amaXhosa. It speaks of a house burning, and directs those listening to look for water and help seize the fire. The simplicity of this four-lined song teaches children that in a case of fire, water can be used as a means to extinguish. One of the most popular songs by multi-instrumentalist uBaba uFela Aníkúlápó Kuti: *Water No Get Enemy*, is a modern-day example of how music is used to teach abantu of the supernatural powers embedded in nature. He educates us on how without water, nothing can grow. Even when a child dies of a water related death, water will be used to cleanse their body and send them to the spirit world.

In a conversation with uLerato Lichaba; uMaKhulu uBhengu, a musician and renowned uMakhweyana player, speaks of how music is used as a way to teach children of their social responsibilities, to themselves and their communities. She says, “*Umculo wesintu ubalulekile ngoba uyakha. Wakha ikhaya, wakha enganeni. Abazali yindlela abasiqoqa ngayo ukuthi siqoqeke,*” (*Traditional music is very important because it builds the home. This is the way in which parents mold and shape their children.*)

There are deep lessons that lie within the words and melodies of our music. When letting go of the need to impose the preconceived European understanding of what an archive or an institution is, we can begin to see the archives and institutions that already exist in our communities and work on their development. This is a necessary step in preserving our spiritual ideologies, because in traveling through the mega-mind of Afrikan philosophy, one will detect that most, if not all of our institutions, are based on our cosmological connection to nature and the spirit worlds.



For centuries there existed an indigenous institution in the Sahel region of West Afrika that passed down knowledge of the spiritual, cultural, and philosophical reckonings of their communities. Those entrusted with preserving this knowledge were known as *Griots*. These were traveling guardians of oral tradition who modernity would refer to as historians, storytellers, genealogists, and musicians. Traditionally, a Griot was a highly respected position, as over generations they would pass down tenors of collective history through music; each adding their own individual experience.

Though the formal acknowledgement of the Griot institution has slowly diminished through time, in our communities are modern-day musicians who share knowledge about the state of both rural and urban life. We learn about the experiences of our grandparents and parents through the sounds of uMaKhulu Busi Mhlongo and uMaKhulu Miriam Makeba. And we hear our own collective experiences with spirituality and modernity articulated through the music of uBuhlebendalo Mda and uZawadi Ya Mungu. In each generation, there are those who are chosen to masterfully express and archive the stories in their communities.

Teachers from the Spirit Worlds

uBaba oMkhulu uBheki Mseleku says something similar to the words I had shared by Ntate Moses ‘Taiwa’ Molelekwa in my previous contribution. He says;

“...I use a lot of theories, my own theories. What I’m saying is that it’s natural for me... that knowledge comes from my past life. So, there is nothing new I can bring to anyone else, because there is nothing old. Life never started; life always was,”

- (Mseleku in Sinker, 1987)

The process of initiation for those who are tasked to share knowledge through music is an ongoing process that precedes their life on earth, and will continue beyond their ascension into the ancestral realm.



When asked about how she learnt to play uMakhweyana, uMakhulu uBhengu shared that she grew up observing and listening to her sisters play the instrument. The process of teaching came from their daily lives. In-between completing her household chores, she would analyse how the instrument was played through observation, until such a point where her sisters began actively teaching her. uMaKhulu mentions that throughout the process of her training, she would be required to make connections between learning the instrument, integrating those teachings into her daily life, and vice versa. For her; the mastering of this craft comes as a form of inheritance. She learnt from those who came before her, and she plans to leave a legacy by teaching those who are still to come. Through teachings such as those of uBaba oMkhulu uMseleku and uMakhulu uBhengu along with many other examples, we can see how the craft of music is not only given by the spirit worlds, it is also taught through the realm of its origin.

I, as I am sure many others, consider elders to be what the modern world would consider a library. Observation and listening are key forms of the learning process, as it is taught through nature. There is a Nguni proverb that best describes this process. It goes; *'Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili,'* (*The way forward is seen by those who are ahead*). I suppose our indigenous knowledge systems self organise infinitely – where knowledge is passed down from generation to generation as a form of archiving. Perhaps those tasked to design our institutions did not anticipate the interruptions of modernity and Westernisation, and the impact they would have on our knowledge systems. It may be that they could not imagine a time when we would struggle to recount our spiritual concepts and ideologies. The truth is our current systems are not as aligned with nature as those that came before, or rather, that have always been there.

Technologies of Repetition

“There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority,” (Derrida, 1995).

We are in the middle of a journey with no beginning and no end. On the horizon lies the opportunity to make use of the knowledge from our past, and reimagine the magic of our future. We have since migrated from our homelands and settled in the depths of the post-Apartheid city. We could dive



headfirst into a state of incapacitated nostalgia. Longing for the systems that were. Or, we could fly with the intention of welcoming the knowledge of the spirit worlds as we are now. Adapting it to our current truth.

Before us, lies the opportunity to **preserve memory through cross-generational communion**. Where elders share their process and experience, with the younger members of our society. Through this exchange, a dynamic soundscape is born. Where the fertile and potent energy of the young, is combined with the wisdom and expertise of the old.

In a ritual space such as *Ingoma*, the act of repetition is powerful beyond measure. We have the opportunity to re-cultivate our institutions of archiving; where the 'old' and the 'new' interact with the intention of collective transcendence, and knowledge conservation. Movements such as the *House of Kuumba*, are an example of a space that intentionally nurtures multiple cross-generational exchanges. Where musicians such as the great percussive mastermind Ntate Mabi Thobejane, can inspire a new generation of drummers. And the likes of uNtomb'Yelanga can play uMakhweyana alongside her elder, uMaKhulu Bhengu.

Though the question 'how do we formalise these cross-generational processes,' remains. We cannot lose sight of the alchemy that is currently unfolding among musicians in our communities. Where it is possible; mentorship programmes can be put in place for young artists to learn from the expertise of their elders. Ritual spaces can be cultivated to encompass a tapestry of spirits through the intentional overlapping of eras.

The trail through our forest of knowledge could be becoming fainter and fainter as time goes by. However, the trees, animals, and natural phenomena still remain. Lets us follow the faint path of our predecessors for as much, and as long as we can. And when the visible trail diminishes, let us have the courage to call upon the elders who reside within us, and take the leap that leads us into a newer stream of consciousness.



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Author can be contacted at: hello@mkutaji.com