

Muḥhala: Through Johnny Mbizo Dyani and Mawande Ka Zenzile Kabelo Malatsie

I was just into another level, because I know for a fact, Barney Rachabane and all these guys in South Africa, we used to jam all night. We'd play 'Stardust' 24 hours, just 'Stardust'. We'd get all these chords, the meaning of this and that, because we were doing this experiment to see is there any kwela, mbaqanga, anything in these songs. Johnny Mbizo Dyani, December 1985

During a road trip from Makhanda formerly known as Grahamstown to Cape Town, I became aware of Johnny Dyani's thoughts on his musical practice. On another road trip from Makhanda to Johannesburg, I encountered the Eastern Cape, a landscape that informs and is implicated in Mawande Ka Zenzile's practice. In this text, I set out to read Ka Zenzile's artworks through a meditation on Dyani's process in his music. This meditation serves as a navigational tool to contemplate practices that draw from a myriad of references. Dyani uses the term 'black music family' to describe the influences in his music, not negating the cross-pollination of musical forms such as umngqungqo, mbaqanga, kwela and marabi with jazz even though his preferred instrument, the double bass, is mainly played within the jazz genre. Ka Zenzile's practice also draws from a wide pool of references such as politics, philosophy, history, popular culture and the esoteric, which he uses to think through societal systems that inform how we perceive the world we inhabit in his visual art. I draw a parallel between Dyani and Ka Zenzile, for both of whom the Eastern Cape becomes a conceptual framework, using the location and culture as a device to contemplate and introduce another way of doing and thinking.

Johnny Mbizo Dyani is a jazz musician who was born in the Eastern Cape in 1945. In 1964, as a late teen, he left South Africa for Europe as a member of the well-known band The Blue Notes, and he lived in exile for the

rest of his life. Dyani played double bass and piano, which he learned from his brother Nuse and the musical community he grew up in. In a 1985 interview with Aryan Kaganof, Dyani describes a commitment to pushing one's practice beyond what is intelligible to an other. In contemporary practice, being intelligible is often given unnecessary prominence. In this text, I use the Xhosa word muḥhala, which can be described as a dedication to pursuing a trace or an impulse, even if this does not immediately follow a well-defined trajectory. Muḥhala translates as following or looking for a trail that may not have a clear lead – the trace may be hidden even to the person pursuing it. Go latela muḥhala is driven by an impulse to seek without a clear destination. Following the trace often looks like madness to those watching at a distance, and perhaps to the seeker as well because there is no immediate or visible logic to the pursuit; this may also seem arrogant as the practitioner often has no large chorus cheering them on. In this sense, muḥhala becomes equivalent to a persistent, tenacious and unrelenting quest.

For Dyani and Ka Zenzile the muḥhala may not be visible in the finished work, the song or art object; it is within the process that informs the practice that it is most visible. Muḥhala in some sense can be understood as a belief that there is more that can be done and this belief is enough to keep the pursuit going. At times the trace is intuitive, but the process of understanding is exhaustive. Dyani, in his

interview with Kaganof, articulates that he was encouraged by his desire to ‘contribute’.

In the abovementioned interview, Dyani describes his practice and his understanding of jazz as something that required a lot of listening and hearing. His reference point remained African even when he was in exile where he was often invited to commercialise his practice, to make pop music. His understanding of jazz depended on him recognising his own musical and sonic heritage. He describes different scenarios where he realised he should not exclude his own understanding when playing. He speaks of being encouraged by an older jazz musician, Dick Khoza, to ‘play it his own way. Break the rules.’ In another moment he speaks highly of jazz musician Eric Nomvete playing at a concert ‘where everyone was playing so-called jazz’ and he was playing *Pondo Blues*¹ which encouraged people to be ‘aware of their own thing’. This making/playing of music that was inspired by his heritage, which includes Dyani and the people he comes from and walks with, meant that he pushed his practice beyond being an intelligible musician concerned with making popular music. Further on in the lengthy interview, Dyani mentions a conversation with jazz musician Wes Montgomery about practice and the ability to ‘contribute’ which is not just playing for the sake of playing. Dyani ‘wanted to be a contributor’. He believed that following muṭhala would lead to creating music with great depth, to ‘contribute’ to South African music by accepting that his music is influenced by its wider musical context – by American jazz as much as Dyani’s experiences and cultural heritage – and that this acceptance can lead to music-making that pushes beyond what is currently accepted and legible.

I want to zoom in on the practice of ‘tracing’ a song’s audible and inaudible components to the things that cannot easily be understood by

formal instruction, something that requires digging deeper, beyond the easily discernible components, which is described by Dyani in the quote at the beginning of this text. In Dyani’s practice, following muṭhala seems to have led him to make the bass play beyond what was conventionally expected of the instrument. Dyani was known for criticising South African musicians who ‘sold out’ and chose to create popular music. He thought that African musicians had a reference point that American musicians were perhaps far from, that they had the ability to push music and ‘contribute’, like Fela Kuti and many other artists. Of course, there are many American musicians that Dyani respected and that he simply said ‘had it’. Having ‘it’ meant that you were a ‘contributor’, that you went beyond being understood and applauded. It is in Dyani’s following muṭhala that the Eastern Cape is visibly included in his music. It is not only in the use of Xhosa words in songs but how things were layered. This manner of layering becomes a form of code, a conceptual framework. Dyani’s layering incorporated what he learned from his parents, who straddled and negotiated township and rural ways of living. The shebeens, or cultural houses as Dyani called them, are emblematic of this layering as different ways of being intermingled there, influencing his inconceivable musical compositions.

In Ka Zenzile’s practice the Eastern Cape features physically in the materials used in his artworks and conceptually as a point of orientation as he unpacks what has become the normalised and one-dimensional understanding of our society. Whereas Dyani would play a song for 24 hours straight, breaking down its indiscernible components, Ka Zenzile is exhaustively dealing with the construction of our perception of the world by looking at political, philosophical, popular culture

¹ *Pondo Blues* is the title of Eric Nomvete’s song. Amapondo is one of the subgroups of AmaXhosa amongst AbaThembu, amaHlubi, amaMfengu.

and esoteric systems of thought, breaking down their unfathomable components. Ka Zenzile does not use art to make a logical and convincing argument about systems of perception but rather, in following his muṭhala, he invites us to follow the trace that he leaves in his artworks. Ka Zenzile often says that the language/tools that are used to articulate practice should be able to convey complexity and nuance within the work; the translator (curator/writer) must follow their own muṭhala in order to also ‘contribute’.

Ka Zenzile was born in Lady Frere on 9 January 1986, and grew up between Esingeni, Lady Frere and Nyanga East, Cape Town. The Eastern Cape informs his practice not only as a landscape that exists as a marker of a very specific geographic location and its predominant cultural practices; it goes beyond this as it disrupts current frameworks of perceiving materiality. Like Dyani, Ka Zenzile demands that we look exhaustively at the work beyond the accepted ways of reading artworks. The materials he uses include mud bricks in the installation *Usoze* (2015, p00), sticks in *Rope Trick* (2015, p00), and cow dung and soil in his paintings and performances. These materials do not function as nativist and nostalgic references to his memory and beloved landscape, as is often the case when artists take on things from their distant past or childhood. Here, the materials act as a source code, a trace to follow, a conceptual framework to navigate the many other materials that he uses in his pursuit to understand the complex construction and composition of our understanding of society. As Ka Zenzile would enthusiastically say, ‘I am interested in paradigm shifts.’ Ka Zenzile’s artworks are traces of an exhaustive process of understanding different intersecting paradigms in order to ‘contribute’ to a shift. Like Dyani, who uses his musical heritage that included

older jazz musicians, Ka Zenzile’s installations and interventions are often made from materials from the Eastern Cape to anchor his pursuits in his exhibitions. This is seen in his decision to paint the gallery walls with soil and ochre and his use of thatch in the installation *Intsika* (p00) in the exhibition *Uhambo luyazilawula* (2018); in the video *Outwitting the Devil* (p00), the sculpture *Abangoma* (p00) and the smearing of the orange-painted gallery wall with soil in the exhibition *Archetypocalypse* (2017, p00); in the sculpture *Heritage of a noble man* (p00) in his eponymous show of 2016; in the installations *Rope Trick* and *Usoze* in the exhibition *Experimentation: All Hell Break Loose* (2015, p00). These marks point to something that is not contained within the frame of perception.

To conclude, muṭhala is a form of practice engaged in a pursuit to understand or comprehend one’s literacy that often seems incomprehensible to an other in order to create works that ‘contribute’. Dyani believed that his following of muṭhala would lead to creating music with great depth, to ‘contribute’ to South African music by accepting that the music is influenced by its wider musical context, ‘the black family music’. Though I cannot assume to know Ka Zenzile’s intentions, the materials he has brought to the fore point to a greater unlearning, not only of the simple readings of imagery and art objects with our supposed critical education and our notion of objectivity that often trick us into believing that we are ‘contributing’ to impartial knowledge-making. He is leading us to follow our own muṭhala that may question and implicate us in enforcing hierarchical systems of meaning-making. In this sense, I myself am trying to follow muṭhala in order to start ‘contributing’ instead of making legible or intelligible what Dyani and Zenzile have

created through a descriptive text that does not open up other complex ways of engaging practices. Following muṭhala is an exhaustive process, which demands greater understanding of ways of doing that are not always visible when using accepted logical frameworks. If we follow Dyani's and Ka Zenzile's leads, we need a different framework for writing or articulating practice, one that does not emphasise legibility and argument over following muṭhala.

Through *Usoze* and *Ingqami (The end of an ideology)* (2015-, p00), Ka Zenzile points us to keep turning the truths we have come to believe and identify with upside down and inside out, even if that means we become uncertain and a people in perpetual pursuit. The pursuit must start with the rejection of systems of objectivity and logic; we must break rules, disrupt spaces, not only for the sake of disruption but in order to follow muṭhala.

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Reference

Kaganof, A, Johnny Mbizo Dyani. 'The Forest and the Zoo: Johnny Dyani Interview, 22-23 December 1985'. *Chimurenga Chronic*. <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/johnny-mbizo-dyani/>