

Akukho Muzi Ungathunqi Ntuthu*

Local Knowledge as Creative Rebellion

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* Zulu proverb meaning that there is no home without internal conflicts

Introduction

Come inside and remember to leave your shoes and your mind outside

Mawande Ka Zenzile's work *Leave Your Mind Outside* (2018, p00) illustrates epistemic incommensurability, 'the divergence between different styles of reasoning and methods of justification' (Baghratian 2004: 150). To enter one house of knowledge, the work suggests, one must abandon other incommensurate ways of knowing. Ka Zenzile illuminates a very specific predicament: the sanctuaries of learning in South Africa seem to be places of negation, alienation and violence. The paradoxes in Ka Zenzile's work – the mud house in the gallery, the iconic cultural images composed in cow dung, and the rebellion so inextricably bound to the institution it refutes – are indicative of the urgent crises arising from multiple and reinforced racial and socio-economic disparities. His work asks: which worldviews, epistemologies or ways of knowing, modes of living, are more relevant than others? Which are more truthful or scientific than others? Which are more valuable? Are certain ways of knowing and living really that incompatible with others?

Among other themes, one significant trope in Ka Zenzile's oeuvre is the inverted house. It is symbolised in the explicit rendition of mud walls or his cynical critique of *umzi wemfundo*, the house of learning or university institution. He does this through interrogating the pyramidal structure of power, with its centralised hierarchies, or the triangular complex of the seven liberal arts defined by the trivium and the quadrivium. By using the metaphor of the house, his work also suggests the contemporary South African nation not as a singular house but as divided and incongruous establishments with divergent ways of knowing. After all, Nguni languages distinguish between *indlu* (singular

house) and *umzi* (a commune, homestead or an establishment). Ka Zenzile presents the predicament of (un)belonging by inverting the house, demonstrating the dislocation of the gallery through casting it as a mud house and questioning the power structure of the university – an act of creative rebellion.

This rebellion is also demonstrated by his response to an experience he had while studying towards an undergraduate degree a few years ago. Ka Zenzile identified this experience as epistemic violence, to use Gayatri Spivak's nomenclature (1988). An assessment task for his class asked learners to look outside a window of their home and discuss the landscape they saw. Ka Zenzile pointed out that such a task failed to acknowledge the difference between what a window of a house in the township would show compared to a window of a house in a suburb. This oversight, he contested, revealed an ideological battle in which experiential local, rural or township knowledges are to be not only transcended but forgotten or erased. Once one is in the university, the experience of the township or rural area seems 'out of place' or dislocated. The window becomes an allegory for knowledge frameworks connoting the distancing and configuration of the world 'out there' beyond one's own position. His oeuvre asks us to question how we know what we know, how we assign value to some forms of knowing and not others. It also asks why local knowledge, particularly Xhosa, which is more responsive to and reflective of its African context, is neglected in favour of knowledge that is transposed from colonial Europe and therefore dislocated or misplaced in the postcolonial context, appearing out of time and out of place.

*And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken.
The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture*

In a 2017 work titled with the above quote, Ka Zenzile makes reference to Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o’s experience of writing in English and writing in Gikuyu. Wa Thiong’o asserts that ‘language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world’ (1986: 11). He states: ‘the home and the field were then our pre-primary school, but what is important for this discussion, the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one’. Colonial school, Wa Thiong’o asserts, disrupted this consistency. This irony, in which school enacts violence or ‘breaks’ the harmony, lies at the core of the sense of loss and dislocation in Ka Zenzile’s work. Suggested in the statement is that this disruption lies not only in having to articulate one’s knowledge in the English language, but also in experiencing the loss of the particular worldview offered by one’s own language. The language of one’s own culture ceases to resonate with one’s education in the proverbial colonial school. Ka Zenzile astutely juxtaposes the tropes of the ‘home and the field’ with that of the ‘colonial school’, marking a fault line, a rupture and disconnect. The (mud) house inside the gallery building evokes the kind of alienation defined by Wa Thiong’o who argues that ‘the disassociation of the sensibility of [the colonial child] from his natural and social environment’ resulted in ‘what we might call colonial alienation’ (1986: 17). The university for Ka Zenzile is one such alienating space and the white-cube gallery another. One is surrounded by knowledge, but to be assimilated

in that space one has to perform outside of one’s own local knowledge, finding oneself simultaneously alienated from Eurocentric knowledge and from the indigenous knowledge that is undermined and eroded in universities. Ka Zenzile’s work functions as a form of creative protest, seeking to reveal and challenge the disjuncture.

The dividing line that recurs in Ka Zenzile’s figurative and abstract works can be understood as one strategy to visualise this fundamental rupture. It critiques Western humanism, founded on Renaissance empiricism and rationalism. Unlike the animist thought entrenched in local knowledge systems, humanist Cartesian philosophy and dualism theoretically divide the body from the soul and the spiritual from the material. The works *Spiritual/Material* (2018, p00) and *Body/Soul without the Mind* (2018, p00) draw a link between Enlightenment-era theoretical postulations in which the body is disfigured or separated from the mind and the deformation of the exploited body under colonialism. The dividing lines in his abstract work, like lacerations, dissect the canvas as body, extending dialogues with earlier works where the body is literally disfigured, mutilated and defaced, as in *Crime Scene* (2016, p00).

In this reading, the adage ‘Come inside and remember to leave [...] your mind outside’ can be seen to evoke the British colonial strategy to limit the forms of education that could be offered to Africans. British indirect rule saw educated Africans as a threat. Chika Okeke-Agulu points out that ‘early twentieth century British Colonial Administration

was particularly suspicious of what was then called literary education – social science and humanities courses (including fine art) – because such education was believed to breed, in the colonized subjects, critical thinkers and “troublemakers” who constituted a formidable, even mortal threat to the entire colonial system’ (2015: 22). It is through inferior education systems that the colonised could be reduced to soulless, mindless bodies as units of labour.

A striking example of this is *Head of an Anonymous Moor* (2011), which is an illustration of the drawing formula used by Albrecht Dürer to gauge human proportions. This particular diagram is aimed at establishing the proportions of an African’s head. In the original diagram, the head is depicted, and the lines cut across its profile. In Ka Zenzile’s work, the diagram consists only of the lacerating lines, which reduce the face to illegible sections and dehumanise the portrayed African. In this work, ‘rationalised knowledge’, upon which the scientificisation of the human body is based, is a particular form of violence. As the foundation upon which most disciplines are formed, scientific racism constitutes both symbolic and material violence. Rebellious against systemic violence in institutions of higher learning, Ka Zenzile discloses the crudeness of scientific racism in general.

Ka Zenzile’s work brings to mind the classic song by the Nigerian musician and activist Fela Anikulapo Kuti, *Who No Know Go Know*. In it: ignorance is the opium of those who think they know it all. Music, in Ka Zenzile’s *We Describe Our Music as a Road to Consciousness* (2018, p00), is described – here quoting Bob Marley (1979) – as the revolution of the mind. In *Who No Know Go Know*, Fela Kuti laments the ignored narratives of African historical figures. He names Sekou Toure and Kwame Nkrumah. He also refers to Idi Amin Dada whose brutal regime sets him apart from the others mentioned in the

song. The words ‘Who No Know Go Know’ emphasise the need to understand the intricacy of African knowledge within the entangled histories of colonialism and post-independence neo-colonialism. Only in this way can we see the dislocation of African paradigms and how this hinders meaningful ways of knowing. It is no wonder that this phrase became the motto of the pan-African *Chimurenga* magazine. The emphasis on locally produced knowledge is an antithesis to the narratives fabricated to reinforce imperialism and foster racist colonialism. Ka Zenzile’s works can be read as declarations and protest slogans, written as though they were protest signs. However, like the rebellions of musicians Fela Kuti and Bob Marley, this kind of protest takes the form of creative rebellion.

Eating the Elephant

If Ka Zenzile’s work is a form of rebellion, the question arises: how does one fight an institution that one is already subsumed by?

What does it mean to practice in the very spaces one questions and is suspicious of? This paradox has been faced by artists globally who engage in institutional critique. While Ka Zenzile’s work differs from conventional strategies of institutional critique, the question remains. Ka Zenzile once defined his artistic and intellectual work as a process of eating, from the inside, the elephant that has swallowed him. The elephant, in this case the institution, has overpowered and consumed him but, now that he is inside it, he must in turn consume it internally and eventually dismantle it.

Ka Zenzile’s approach reverberates with Audre Lorde’s well-known assertion that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (1984). But perhaps for Ka Zenzile the master’s house can be turned inside out, where

the fissures in the walls become clearly visible. Perhaps the insertion of one architectural language into another reciprocates the dislocation of European architecture in an African landscape by its inverse: the Xhosa architectural style in a gallery. In this way, the words ‘the observer is observed, the analyser is analysed’, in a 2015 work of the same title, are cunning ways of engaging with the dialectic of the consumer as the consumed.

***Isanusi* and the Mud House Pluriversity**

Isanusi is a spiritual teacher. In many ways, Ka Zenzile can be defined as that kind of artist: one who is deeply immersed in how knowledge as power operates. Ka Zenzile’s creative strategies, the inverted house for example, allude to the plurality and decentralisation of knowledge. His painting *Leviathan* (2016-17, p00) engages with the intricacies of power and specifically the argument that centralised power is more effective than democratic, decentralised power. In the painting, there is the impression of a horizontal structure of power, while simultaneously the title refers to Thomas Hobbes’s 1651 book which argues for centralised, sovereign power. The latter in Ka Zenzile’s painting is implied in the hierarchical layers where the brown base represents those who are ruled through monarchy. This interplay between horizontal and vertical power structures perhaps best illustrates Ka Zenzile’s sarcasm. His *Leviathan*, it can be argued, is a sarcastic remark on how the democratisation and decentralisation of power still bears the semblance of absolutism. People can still experience the sense of absolute power and authority even under the conditions of what seems to be decentralised governance. The mud house in Ka Zenzile’s work can therefore be seen as a metaphor for the inferior/superior

dialectic. As a place of knowing, the mud house is antithetical to ‘*the* institution’ but as its inverse, represents the two as inseparable sides of a coin.

When Rasheed Araeen wrote the article ‘Our Bauhaus, Others’ Mudhouse’, he was critiquing the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*. This exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1989 was aimed at exhibiting Western art alongside ‘non-Western’ art to provide an antithesis to the colonial view that African and Oceanic art represents the modernist aesthetic of primitivism. The institution, in this case the Pompidou (which is designed in such a way that the internal structure is ‘turned out’ onto the façade), literally encompassed mud houses in its interior (for example, Esther Mahlangu’s house replica, Bowa Devi’s paintings on mud walls, and Richard Long’s *Mud Circle*). In his article, however, Araeen argues that it failed to achieve its goal. The exhibition is ‘a grand spectacle’ that ‘ignores or undermines issues of a historical and epistemological nature’ where ‘exoticism is not necessarily inherent in the works themselves’ but is rather ‘in their decontextualisation, not only in the shift from one culture to another (which is inevitable), but more importantly, in the displacement from one paradigm to another’ which ‘has emptied them of their meanings, leaving only what Fredric Jameson calls a “play of surfaces” to dazzle the (dominant) eye’ (1989: 4-5). Araeen suggests that the discourses, even those seemingly liberal, that thrust indigenous classical creative forms into obscurity are destructive. Suspicious of the ‘anything goes’ plurality, he emphasises the importance of considering ‘present historical and material conditions of cultures’. That is, locating these in the present and in the paradigmatic frameworks to which they belong is important for understanding how they continue to generate knowledge.

By bringing seemingly disparate environs into

close proximity, Ka Zenzile points to not only this decontextualisation but also how power shapeshifts into different guises. Ka Zenzile also performs a protest against surreptitious violence in art institutions and the institutions of higher learning. His work urges us to see violence even where it is sanitised as knowledge. *Umzi we mfundo*, the institution, is cast as a space of historical conflict where there is smoke, *lapho ku thunq’ intutbu*. Taking the house apart, turning it inside out, revealing its conflictual nature and rejecting its conventions and customs is a form of creative disobedience. Ka Zenzile’s cynicism in his work also caricatures the epistemes that are so valued in the classic colonial institution. Through parody, declarations, profanation (in the use of dung) and contestation, Ka Zenzile’s work is a creative rebellion against the systemic violence of our current educational and cultural institutions.

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