



**BAKHUTLI: ANCESTORS RETURNING AGAIN, ONLY THIS
TIME TO THEMSELVES**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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Abstract

How can performance help us remember the past to imagine the future? This study is concerned with the recovery of historical knowledge through performance and the role of an audience in that process. Practice as Research (PaR) is used as a method to identify the role of ancestors in the world of the living. Through autoethnography, I draw examples and insights from my personal experiences with *bongaka* and my ongoing relationship with my ancestors. In addition, I use performance to enable an engagement between ancestors and the living through ritual process/performance. The ideal of *sankofa* is employed to frame the research and determine how ancestors could help us remember the past so that we, together with them, could imagine the future. I propose the concept of *Bohareng* as an alternative consideration of what the future could be viewed as in relation to performance. Performance projects and autoethnographic experiences in the form of field notes are incorporated to arrive at the findings of this study.

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Introduction

Within academia, there is a scant amount of published material on *bongaka*¹ written by black South African authors compared to that written by white authors. In other words, there exists a vast amount of literature around *bongaka* produced by Western authors, acquired ethnographically. The process of “ethnography involved actually living in the communities studied [...and] participating in their activities to one degree or another as well as interviewing them” (Hammersley, 2006:4). The colonial process ensured that black African people were “deprived of the ability to write about themselves” (Crawford, 2020:1). I researched in dismay realising that, regarding the production of written knowledge, the legacy of colonialism exceeded its period.

Having said that, what has compelled me to embark on this research and thus produce this written explication, is not so much the ‘who’ – the authorship – but rather the how – mode of knowledge transmission – of the matter. Every South African culture, especially in relation to *bongaka*, has “its way of transferring knowledge and ways of knowing across generations” (McCabe, 2008:150). However, during colonialism, writing in documents was the preferred way of keeping and transmitting knowledge, and this method has since been adopted by academic institutions. To move towards a more methodologically inclusive approach, and subvert the superiority of storing historical knowledge through writing in documents, South African scholars at the University of Cape Town established the Centre for African Studies' “Rethinking Africa” series in 2012, “an initiative of the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS)²” (Ntsebeza, 2018:1).

The purpose of this catalytic project is to “create a platform that would support and nurture research over the long term, and to promote the development of methodologies that would take forward the study of the pre-colonial eras in southern Africa” (Ntsebeza, 2018:1). To contribute to the methodologies to be employed under the project, Fani Ncapayi and Mlingani

¹ *Bongaka* – the practice of healing. Throughout the paper, I use the term to refer to those who are gifted, *lingaka/izangoma*, and to a solo performance project, respectively. When referring to the project, the term is in bold – ***bakhethoa***. I also write some words in Sesotho because I feel a more spiritual connection to them when written in Sesotho than when translated to English. In addition, I am contributing to “the insertion of the entire range of vernacular epistemologies into formal educational institutions” (Falola, 2020:483).

² See www.nihss.ac.za.

Mayongo suggest an embrace of historical knowledge gained from “oral history... as an alternative source of information” (2018:121). Similar to Ncapayi and Mayongo, but with a specific source of oral history, Babalwa Magoqwana posits *uMakhulu*, known as an elderly grandmother to Xhosa-speaking people, as “an institution of knowledge that transfers not only ‘history’ through *iintsomi* (folktales), but also as a body of knowledge that stores, transfers, and disseminates knowledge and values” (2018:15).

Within *bongaka*, the process of learning and sharing knowledge takes place orally or performatively through dancing, drumming, clapping, singing, bone divination, dreaming and ritual processes, not through documenting in papers and reading. Litsoanelo Zwane attests:

As a Gobela, the information I share with my students is often of an oral nature; this is information which was shared with me during my own training in ubungoma as well as through dreams where my ancestors share knowledge. (2021:21).

The literature available within academia covers key aspects of *bongaka*, from what a calling³ is, the symptoms that indicate that one has a calling, the different kinds of ancestral gifts, the significance of dreams and performing rituals, to the training process involved in the journey of becoming a *ngaka*⁴. However, all this vastly researched literature fails to cover the most crucial element of *bongaka*, which is performance and that is why I am doing this research. In addition, the Western approach to acquiring and sharing knowledge – through writing – promotes the

³ A calling is “a spiritual journey that is specifically designed by ancestors for those who are endowed with the gift of healing by ancestors” (Mlisa, 2009:5). *Mokhethoa*, the chosen individual, is entrusted with the responsibility of becoming a “healer... whose work encompasses the skills of the diviner, herbalist, psychotherapist, [dream interpreter], and community counsellor, not to mention artist, [teacher], detective, mediator, and sensor” (Wreford, 2005:16). Following instructions from ancestors, the chosen individual would then have to acknowledge the gift extended to them, accept it, and go through a training process known as *ho thwasa* that would equip them with the mechanics, knowledge, and understanding of how to employ their gift. The manner in which one’s gift must be employed can range from one to all of the examples mentioned above, and the decision is made known to *mokhethoa* through a consultation with *isangoma*, a ritual process, or through dreams, as was done to me by my ancestors.

⁴ *Ngaka* – healer.

“individualistic research-focused approach” resulting in the authorship and ownership of work (Zwane, 2021:10).

Conversely, central to the values of *bongaka* is the embrace of Rolando Vazquez’s notion of the “we-voice”, which he defines as:

The acknowledgement that what we are thinking is not ours; the awareness that there is a community producing what we are thinking beginning from the language we speak, all the way up to the concepts, and insights we are presenting. It is not ‘I thought of this’, but instead to have a sense that ‘we are thinking with’. It also has to do with an effort to move out of the I-voice that determines ownership, property and individuality. (2020:xxv).

Crucial to *bongaka* is the nurturing of “community and the communal production and sharing of knowledge” (Zwane, 2021:10). The knowledge is not meant to be archived inside an institution’s physical or digital repository where it can only be accessed by one person at a time, and no one should be able to package it through a document they can claim ownership of. Instead, the knowledge must be collectively experienced at the same time in the same space to create a live, immediate, visceral, and communal reception of the knowledge.

Currently, in South Africa, there are young black artists who are exploring *bongaka* in relation to their artwork. Central to their work is the use of performance and the incorporation of autoethnographic experiences to frame their theories and practice. In their artworks, performance is used to “interrogate, meditate, examine, probe, excavate, theorise” the knowledge of *bongaka* and reinsert it in the academic institution (Mbongwa, 2020:9). These include Khanyisile Mbongwa, Albert Ibokwe Khoza, Lulamile Bongo Nikani, Sikhumbuzo Makandula and Buhlebezwe Siwani.

As an attempt to ‘think with’ these artists, I also curate my research autoethnographically, drawing examples and insights from my personal experiences with *bongaka* and my ongoing relationship with my ancestors. Autoethnography may be “understood as the practice of doing [one’s] identity work self-consciously, or deliberately, in order to understand or represent some worldly phenomenon that exceeds the self; it is a form of self-narration that places the self within a social context” (Butz & Besio, 2009:1660). The central question of my research is: How can performance help us remember the past to imagine the future? Below, I situate myself within this study as an artist and *mokhutli*. I use Practice as Research (PaR) as a method to identify the role of ancestors in the world of the living. The ideal of *sankofa* is employed to frame the research

and determine how ancestors could help us remember the past so that we, together with them, could imagine the future. I give a detailed account of my performance projects – the minor project, the medium project, and the solo show – and autoethnographic experiences in the form of field notes to reflect on the journey of this research from the beginning to this point. Within the reflections, I discuss how other South African artists and *bakhethea* have impacted my creative practice. I then discuss “the importance, yet vagueness, of the concept of audience and emphasise the need to adequately elucidate its status and role” within ritual process/performance (Cote, 2016:544). In my reflection, I examine the performer-audience relationship as insider and/or outsider at the level of status and role. Lastly, I propose the concept of *Bohareng* as an alternative consideration of what the future could be viewed as in relation to performance.

My surname is Molekoa. When separated, ‘mo le koa’ translates to here and there, in the world of the living and in the realm of ancestors. I was born inside an unbroken amniotic sac. Within *bongaka*, this kind of birth is referred to as “*ukuzalwa wembethe* – being born inside ‘the veil’ or the amniotic sac” (Zwane, 2021:3). According to Zwane, being born inside the veil:

Depicts a proximity with one’s ancestors and God, having acute psychic, supernatural and clairvoyant gifts. The line between the living and the dead is greatly diminished and there is an inherent accessibility of the spiritual realm. Additionally, when one is born inside the veil, in Zulu culture, it is said that one is an actual ancestor who has reincarnated. (2021:14-15)

Ke mokhutli – I am one who has returned. *Bakhutli* are those who have returned, having transcended before without utilising their ancestral gift. Within *bongaka*:

It is believed that ancestors may reincarnate (via their spirits) as many times as possible to help people. Those who die without fulfilling their purpose of being also reincarnate to accomplish their God-given existential purpose. (Ephirim-Donkor, 1997:140)

As one who was born inside the amniotic sac or bag of water, I live to serve the interests of my ancestors in the physical and spiritual realms. I have returned to the physical world not only to acknowledge that I am one with a gift and accept it, but also to use artistic ways to share my knowledge of the practices relating to *bongaka* as per my ancestors’ request.

Dream: It is night-time. I am asleep, dreaming. In the dream... I am a teacher, surrounded by a group of students. We are all seated, on the floor, on the chairs, and on the bed, having a discussion. Although we are in the bedroom, because of the atmosphere in the room, it feels like we are outside. A student asks: “why is it that when I am done with the research the paper becomes the property of the university; why can I not keep it to myself?” Other students make remarks, expressing their mutuality to the student’s concern. As the teacher, I reply: “because the university needs to benefit from your research.” ... I wake up, sit up to recollect the details of the dream, and interpret it.

Dreams play a significant role in the spiritual journey of *bakhethoa*⁵ and “in the lives of Black people [...] they are treated like fragments of reality” and carriers of messages from ancestors (Buhrmann, 1984:30). The messages or instructions are “often understood as calls to action” (Chidester, 2008:138). As a result, the information “contained in the dreams is usually acted on” by the recipients (Buhrmann, 1984:30). In the dream – above – I am instructed to use artistic ways, performance in particular, to share the knowledge and practices of *bongaka* to inform and/or to heal. I am called to performance by my ancestors “to learn their wishes, to be guided by their wisdom” (Buhrmann, 1984:27). The instruction is given to me both as an artist and *mokhutli*. I am a student for both. As an artist, I am a student at the University of Cape Town harnessing my creative and academic skills. As *mokhutli*, I am student on a spiritual journey learning from my ancestors. Therefore, my reason for embarking on this research is also “connected with the idea that [I am] under an obligation to venerate the ancestral shades” and their plea (Turner, 1969: 11). There is something about my journey as *mokhutli* and my learning that is asking me to bring it to performance.

Initial Subject of Research

In 2009, 158 skeletons were found in a dumping ground at Valle da Gafaria in Lagos, Portugal. An archaeological analysis of the bones and dental formation, as observed by Killgrove, reveals that:

[Their] unique dental style suggested that [the people] may have been of African origin, and a later genetic analysis confirmed ancestry with southern African, Bantu- speaking populations. Due to the archaeological and historical information, it is likely that all these people were enslaved. (2019)

In the wake of reading about the skeletons, I found myself wondering who the people were and what the circumstances that led to their demise might have been. I was then haunted by an image of 158 people *dying* to share their last words before their “moment of disappearance”, compelling me to take heed of what they were trying to say (Hartman, 2008:12). In *Venus in Two Acts*, Saidiya Hartman describes the task of imagining and writing about the dead before their moment of disappearance as being: “An impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an irrecoverable past; it

⁵ *Bakhethoa* (plural of *mokhethoa*) – those who are gifted/called/chosen.

is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive” (2008:12). A narrative of possibilities, encouraged by *what ifs*, written creatively to engage, exceed, question, oppose, and draw from the narratives of the archive. History ought to be told but cannot or may not want to be told, or already told but with omissions; with an absence whose presence is felt in the silence, “tempting [the writer] to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited” (Hartman, 2008:9); a space to grieve, to acknowledge the loss of, to remember, and to honour the dead.

News about the discovery of the remains garnered attention from archaeologists who took to the site to conduct their own analysis of the skeletal samples and later wrote articles about their findings. Ferreira *et al* (2019) observed that the bones of adult individuals had signs of injuries, which signified “evidence of trauma”; Wasterlain, Neves and Ferreira (2016) examined the dental modifications of the samples to determine a more specific southern African origin and declared their study as being inconclusive; and Ellen Chapman expressed that:

The site is an incredibly disturbing one, and one that clearly illustrates the pervasive mistreatment of enslaved people by the architects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade [...]. [The] skeletal collection is indicative of the high mortality associated with slave ships and the Middle Passage. (in Killgrove, 2019)

The haunting image of 158 people dying to share their last words before their moment of disappearance inspired a need in me to want to know more about them. What were their names? Which specific part of southern Africa might they have been from? Were any of them related, and if so, in what way? What language(s) did they speak? What traditions, cultural practices and customs did they embrace? At the point where the written documents falter and fail to produce answers to these questions, performance becomes an alternative way of researching to address them, as performance has the capacity to enable “the recovery of [the] unwritten existence” of the people (Kukama in Mbongwa, 2020: 16). My research asks: why do ancestors matter? What role do they play in the world of the living, and what could they teach us about the past? It uses the ideal of *sankofa*, through performance, as a basis to step forward and follow Hartman’s enquiry of the retrieval of (yet) unknown African history forgone or forgotten in the past to establish “another kind of existence” that early African people might have known prior to and

during slavery (Hartman, 2021:130). This is done to readdress the past, provide education in the present, and imagine the future.

Performing Sankofa to Remember the Past



Figure 1: The bird of *sankofa*.

“Se wo were fi na wosan a yenki” ... [In English] these words mean ‘go back and get it’, ‘go back to the past and bring forward that which is useful’, or ‘it is not taboo to go back and fetch it’” (Rowell, 2017:3).

The Ghanaian expression ‘*se wo were fi na wosan a yenki*’ is derived from the ideal of *sankofa* accredited to the Akan. The Akan people, particularly the Ashanti, “Are an ethnic group of West Africa predominantly in Ghana... [who speak] Twi as their language; [for whom] oral communication has been a medium for the transmission of values from generation to generation” (Kwarteng, 2016:61). The transmission of beliefs, values, culture, knowledge, and history through oral communication was a practice embraced by the many black bodies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from southern Africa through to western Africa to store and keep the memory of their personhoods, places of origin, languages, and past.

Sankofa is regarded as a prevalent Adinkra symbol appearing in many aspects of Ghanaian and West African life spanning Nigeria, Niger, Congo, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Ivory Coast to remind African people that “whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated” (Kwarteng, 2016:61). It is symbolised by a bird with its feet facing forward and head facing backwards with an egg on its beak to signify the importance of learning and drawing from the past. It also suggests that the past is an integral part of the present and the present of the future. The act of turning to the past, particularly where historical knowledge is concerned, could teach a people “

what they have been and where they have been, what they are and where they are... [and] where they must still go and what they must still [do and] be” (Clark in Saphir, 2001:9).

Journey of the Research

The Minor Project



A cold damp floor, a white candle, a log, and a human body; tossing and turning in restless sleep, haunted by erased memories. A nightmare of 158 people dying to share their last words before their moment of disappearance. A yearning to cling to, to remember, to keep... A clap. Greetings. A plea for the retrieval of personhoods, culture, and history. "In 2009, 158 skeletons were found..." A ritual. Ancestral gift. Locked doors against a solid wall. A sacred

space. Home. Me. An exhumation of thought, memory, a search, a struggle. "158 skeletons found in a dumping ground." Materiality. Histories. A turn to an alternative source. The beginnings of a project of exhuming the past, in the present, to better the future (Reflective description of a minor project, 2021). Figure 1: Image from minor project performance.

A minor project⁶ is an embodied articulation of the theoretical cornerstones and throughlines, as well as works by live art/performance artists guiding one's research. It is a minor representation of the question/provocation, theory, and the artistic subject of research. Diana Taylor's *Archive and Repertoire* (2003), and the notion of contemplative archaeology served as theoretical underpinnings that guided my research at this initial stage. Academic research has shown the limitations of 'textual' knowledge of the past, attributed to limited resources or lack of written evidence of history. The study of "contemplative archaeology suggests the possibility of abandoning textualism and turning to questions of the past's materiality" (Domanska, 2005:389). Taylor speaks of the archive as being a 'place' where (written) knowledge or information is stored and the repertoire as being the embodiment of the knowledge. With that in mind, I propose a consideration of other places that could be viewed as archives – like the graveyard, where human remains carry the repertoire of history.

I performed the minor project on 21st May 2021, at Hiddingh Campus, Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies. I employed Practice as Research (PaR) as a method of inquiry through the beginning of my research. As a research tool, PaR, through autoethnography,

⁶ Minor Project Performance. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/746386664>

allows the researcher to become both the author and subject of study within a wider socio-political context, and thus, to bear the responsibility to “scrutinise, publicise, and reflexively rework their own self-understandings as a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world” (Butz & Besio, 2009:1660). PaR has the capacity to “[produce embodied knowledge and] promote a more profound understanding of how knowledge is revealed, acquired, and expressed” (Barrett & Bolt, 2007:xi) and to “address a problem, find things out, [and] establish new insights” (Nelson, 2013:3) by means of performance practice.

The preparation for the minor project presentation began in April 2021, through reading articles and archival databases, doing studio class activities, dreaming, conceptualising, and later working on the floor. I started the performance by introducing the discovery of the human remains; sharing aspects about my history and relationship with my ancestors; identifying my research enquiry’s main ideas; and proposing an alternative source from which questions of the past could be addressed – history’s materiality, the bones. As a mode of expression, performance enabled me to “learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action” so that the audience could experience a visual, immediate, and visceral articulation of my research enquiry as opposed to reading about it from a paper (Taylor, 2003:xvi).

The minor project performance took place in the Ritchie Quad underground area (see images below). Objects were used to symbolise the limits of the archive; the very little of the slave’s life that they could call their own after being cut off from their place of origin, family, communities, culture, and history, having been dehumanised and reduced to property. Elements of performance used included physical theatre, text, song, drumming, and storytelling.



Figure 2: Image from minor project performance.

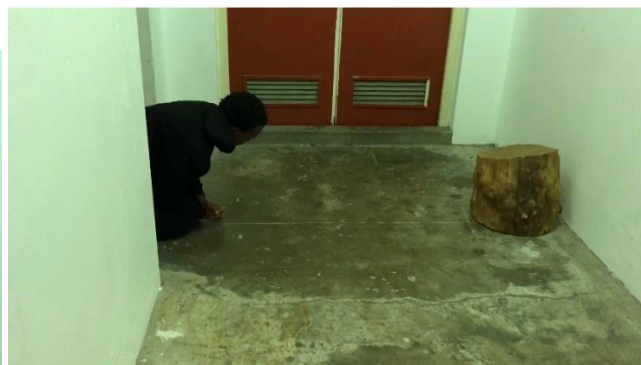


Figure 3: Image from minor project performance.

Reflections Following Minor Performance

To answer the question, Why do ancestors matter?, I first need to ask what the relationship is between ancestors and the living. I understand that the living venerate ancestors; receive messages and instructions from them; are guided and protected by them; communicate to them through prayer and ritual practice; and see them as powerful, loving, caring, and vengeful beings, depending on one's relationship with them. Oppositely, what do ancestors think of the living? Do they see us as tools to use to further their ends or meet their demands; to bury them; to perform rituals to them or on their behalf; to honour them; to remember them, by either just thinking or talking about them, or visiting their gravesites? According to Robert Pogue Harrison, ancestors demand that the living “serve the interests of the unborn” by imagining the future (2003:ix).

With the adage ‘it is not taboo to go back and fetch it’, *sankofa* bids us to “return to our own sources” – our ancestors – for answers to questions of the past (Soyinka, 1988:27). The dead are custodians of history. They have stored the knowledge of the past, gained from personal experience; they are aware of events and circumstances of the present, and they also know what the future holds. As “they are dead, ancestors are believed to know more than anyone alive...[and thus could help] human beings to understand their origins as well as their destinations” (Edwards *et al*, 2009:5).

The Medium Project - The Past is not Dead.

A human body lying on the floor, feet facing forward, and head turned backwards... An embodiment, experience, and performance of sankofa to enable an exhumation of the past. A reclamation of erased or unscripted experiences... The need to (re)collect, (re)store, and transmit stories to fill in the gaps... A conflict or negotiation between dual forces – maternal and paternal families; different spiritual beliefs; artist and mokhutli; facts and imaginations; limitations and possibilities; and text and performance.
(Reflective description of a medium project, 2021)

The medium project is an opportunity to consolidate the practical and theoretical explorations of one's research. I performed the medium project on 9th December 2021, at Hiddingh Campus in the Arena Theatre. Ritual performances are used to initiate “interactions between spiritual realms and earthly-based human beings” (Falola, 2020:473). For *The Past is not Dead*, I used ritual performance to enable a performative engagement between myself, my ancestors, and the

remains of the 158 people. This engagement was driven by my desire to contact my ancestors “from the perspective of reclaiming, rebuilding, acknowledging, and honouring” them (Neeganagwedgin, 2013:327), so I could learn more about my own history and who the 158 people were.

I began the performance by introducing myself, as a child of both the Molekoa (maternal) and Makgotla (paternal) families. I was raised by my maternal family and did not establish contact with my paternal family until I had to embark on my journey of *bongaka*. I have received my ancestral gift from my paternal ancestors. The Molekoa family members are Christians, and thus, I grew up attending church and following Christian teachings. However, I do have ancestors in my maternal lineage who practised *bongaka*. In the spiritual realms, my ancestors from both maternal and paternal lineages work together to further the interests of my journey as *mokhutli*. As I did not know the members of my paternal family, my ancestors tasked me to contact my late father’s younger brother, who had to teach me about our family history. Part of this process included visiting the gravesites to know the names of my paternal ancestors and where they were buried.

During the performance, I imagined arriving at the burial site of the 158 people and discovering their remains. I kneeled to examine the remains and felt the need to know the names of the people. Who were they? NourbeSe Philip, poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist, shares that she felt a need somewhat like the one I experienced when she studied the *Zong* massacre in which 134 enslaved people drowned after being thrown overboard the *Zong* (ship). In her book *Zong: As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*, she confides that whilst reading about the *Zong* massacre, “I develop a need to know the names of the murdered and actually call James Walvin, the author of *Black Ivory*, in England to ask him if he knew how I could locate them. ‘Oh no,’ his tone commiserative, ‘they did not keep names’. I do not – cannot believe this to be true” (2008:194). Regarding the *Zong* massacre of the 134 people, Philip exclaims, “I want the bones. ‘Give me the bones,’ I say to the silence that is so often what history presents to us” (in Saunders, 2008:68-9).

As I continued with the performance, I carefully touched the bones, remembering that “one knows an object or a person through intimate relationships mediated by touch. The African knows through feeling, touching, or dancing with the other” (Niang, 2020:263). I then stood up and performed repeated gestures of digging, spreading the soil, and gently burying the remains.

Like Philip, I wanted the remains of the 158 people because the bones are the only tangible evidence of their existence that is left, what they left behind after their moment of disappearance. I wanted the bones so I could create a space to grieve, acknowledge the loss of, remember, name, and honour the dead.

Following that, I approached the wall where a video of an archival book with turning pages was projected. As each page turned, I moved to the left and right, and then back and forth, trying to read the information detailed on the pages. Reading details out loud, I expressed that what was concerning about the information was the fact that in the records relating to slavery, African people are consistently positioned on the receiving end of the events that took place during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Hartman points out that “the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reasons that seized hold of their lives” (2008:2).

The reader is met with extensive narratives describing ‘what was done to them’ – the violence, oppression and exploitation suffered by enslaved people, as if to force the reader to only see them as those who were disempowered and unfree and believe that “there was very little of the slave’s life that he could call his own” (James, 2000:68). These narratives reveal how enslaved people “were torn away from their communities of origin, deprived of the ability to write about themselves and treated as cargo or property in official documents” (Crawford, 2020:1), in addition to how they died in extreme numbers, as indicated by James.

In 1751, the year of the greatest slaving activity on the records, 10 003 were traded and 2597 died, giving a mortality rate of 26 percent. For the total period from 1715 to 1775, 237 025 slaves were shipped and 35 727 died. (2000:64)

Other accounts include how they were captured; drowned; raped; punished; forced to labour; deprived of education; forced to abandon African languages to assimilate and communicate using foreign ones; and forced to breed more children who would later be violated, oppressed, and exploited as well (James, 2000). There is no documentation of their (original) African names and surnames, there is no trace of their lineages or familial, tribal, or communal ties; no sign of how and where they were buried (if they were) following their demise; and no record of any historical events prior to colonial contact, to explore the *what ifs*, as an attempt to discover all that is possible “when we close the books with their verifiable facts”, because at the heart of *sankofa*, is the desire to exhume “histories that no history book can tell us” (Hartman, 2021:130).

In *Wayward Lives*, Hartman works at “exceeding the limits of the archive [...by incorporating] lessons of poets, chronicles of song and stories” into the pre-existing narratives in the archive about enslaved people (2021:130) to imagine a different kind of existence of the people. To close the performance, I carried a steel bucket filled with water and placed it on the floor and used the water to draw on the wall whilst the video being projected continued to play. The narratives around the slave records should not be the centre, beginning, and end of its enquiry of the past. The study and understanding of African history must go “beyond unpacking the trauma and injustice of slavery” (Simonpillai, 2021:1) to allow the enquiry to no longer be about the conditions of African people’s enslavement, but rather about who the people were – their personhoods, culture, and stories.

Reflections Following Medium Project



Field Notes 1: I am in Oshakati, a village in Namibia, surrounded by three sangomas and other ritual participants. All those who are present, to an extent, have a gift of healing, although not all are practicing. There is a wooden spear and a white chicken between my thighs. I hold the chicken as an offering to balimo. A fire is burning. I smell traditional beer and the scent of impepho. Together we – the sangomas, participants, and I – are singing, beating the drums, and dancing. It is agreed upon that I will be the only one who

goes into trance when the moment arrives. The other participants retreat, careful to control themselves to not be induced into trance. Unfortunately, alone I fail. I cannot reach a state of trance. It has been 3 hours since we have been singing, drumming, and dancing. Eventually, we agree that everyone will go into trance. This will be a collective experience. With my eyes closed, I feel as if something is about to open at the top of my head, as though my brain is about to experience a magical explosion. I am in an indescribable state. A lion appears. It looks intently at me, draws closer, and roars. I am afraid-excited-curious-shocked-crazed-shaking. Visually I see a lion, but my entire being strongly feels the presence of a man. A powerful man in the form of a lion.

Ancestors reveal themselves to *bakhethoa* “in altered states of mind, such as trance and dreams” (Teppo, 2011:232). In such moments, “the ancestor might be represented in the dream [or trance state] by the appropriate totem animal, or as part animal, part man” (Seligman, 1921:159). *uMkhulu Ngwenyama*, The Lion, is the ancestor by whom I have been called and implored to use my gift in performance.

To initiate communication with my ancestors from my end I must perform a ritual or pray. By ritual I am referring to “a special engagement” (Turner, 1969:11) between *rona le balimo*⁷, upon which “ritual objects, persons, activities, episodes, gestures, events, ideas, and values are assembled” for a spiritual purpose (1969:85).

There are two types of audiences during a ritual process/performance. The first one is the seen audience, represented by the present, tangible, bodies in the space. It may consist of family, relatives, friends, neighbours, community members, and associates. In some cases, family may consist of both audience and participants, depending on the type of ritual. In any case, the seen audience is not meant to participate in the ritual. They are not invited to become participants, but rather to witness the process of the ritual.

Within African cultures, they are considered as those who are there to render support to the ritual performer, or the family of the ritual performer. Their role, fundamentally, is to declare that they were present, they supported the family, and they acknowledge that yes, indeed, the ritual was performed. The role assigned to them does not go beyond witnessing the ritual. As a result, their status is limited, and they always remain outsiders, meaning that they do not have

⁷ *Rona le balimo* – us (the living) and the ancestors.

active control over what happens during the ritual, and in some cases, a ritual could even be performed without them being invited.

The second type of audience, and perhaps the most significant, is the unseen audience. This is the ancestral audience witnessing the performance from the liminal space, consisting of *balimo*. The unseen audience holds a higher status, naturally, because the rituals are performed for them. *Bakhethoa* perform rituals to venerate them, to appease them, to give thanks to them, or to seek guidance from them. During the ritual, *balimo* take on the role of insider and/or outsider to influence the outcome of the process.

As insiders, they interact with the ritual performer, and thus, establish a “direct involvement or connection” with the ritual (Rooney, 2005:6). As outsiders, they witness or manipulate what happens in the ritual from a distance, like a “participant observer who remains an outsider” (Van Binsbergen, 1991: 333). Owing to their insider/outsider fluidity, they can take on the role of participant(s) and/or audience during a ritual.

For example, in the beginning of the ritual above, *uMkhulu* remained an audience member, witnessing from the liminal space as we initiated and proceeded with the ritual so I could have an encounter with him. For three hours, he remained an outsider, until all the present bodies went into a state of trance and enabled my encounter with him. He manipulated the process to happen in such a way that all the participants entered a state of trance and not just me. That was the only way he would want to shift from outsider to insider in the process. Some ancestors, like him, demand respect in that way. They do not reveal themselves until all the participants are fully committing and surrendering to the ritual. The following field notes offer another example of the performer-audience relationship as insider and/or outsider between *uMkhulu* and I.

Field Notes 2: It is April 2021. I am at the Liesbeeck River, hidden by small trees and long grass. I am on my knees, in a prayer position, facing east. In front of me are candles, umqombothi, a white cloth and a white ceramic bowl filled with water and mielie meal. I am about to perform a ritual. It turns out I am not as hidden as I think I am. A white man jogging with his dog stops a few feet away from me. He looks at me. I notice him and freeze. I am scared. I do not know if I have ever been this scared in my life before. Here is why: I am afraid of dogs. But even more than that, a few days ago a major fire erupted in and around the Table Mountain and the nearest parts of Cape Town. Investigations are

still being run to catch the instigators of the fire. If a few more joggers come by and start asking me questions, taking live social media videos of me, asking me what I am doing, asking if I am the one starting the fires in Cape Town because of the candles, I am going to cry. I will not know how to respond. Worst part is, if the videos go viral, the first thing my family members are going to say is: "we told you about this bongaka thing!" Anyway... the dog approaches me. The man asks: what are you doing? I say: I am praying. Having seen the candles and other objects he says: you can't do that here. The dog draws closer to me. To the dog I say: psst! (Gesturing with my hands for it to move away). It does not. The intensity of my fear rises, so, in tears, I shout: please call your dog! Please do not let it bite me! Please call it! ... "Park, let's go" the man orders. But the dog does not hear him. The strangest thing is that, since this incident began, I have not heard a single sound from the dog. It has just been there, drawing closer to me, not barking, not growling, just looking at me. I take a few breaths to calm myself down so I do not panic. There is something in the dog's eyes; a kind of tenderness or assurance that "I will not bite you, Morapeleng." ... "Park, let's go" the man orders again. Instantly, a shift happens in the dog, like a change of personality (or dognality) as if the dog's body was inhabited by something/someone. It forgets about me and runs away, leaving even the man behind. The man follows the dog.

Ancestors communicate "with the living not only by means of spirit mediumship, dreams, and divining bones but also by using animals" (Cumes, 2013:63). The incident above offers an example of what happens when insiders and outsiders have opposing interests during a ritual process.

By insiders, I am referring to *uMkhulu* and I, and outsiders, the man, and the dog. What is interesting about this particular performer-audience relationship is that the man, as the audience, challenges me, as the performer, by not accepting the role and status I would have assigned him if I were the one who invited him to attend the ritual process. Instead of having a lower status and no control over what happens during the ritual, he shifts the power dynamic between performer and audience by attempting to cease the process of the ritual altogether. When I inform him that I am praying he asserts that I am not allowed to do that by the river. What he is alluding to is that the ritual must be performed privately elsewhere. That is because in "1957, Parliament passed the Suppression of Witchcraft Act, another act of colonial legislation which declared divination illegal" thus, prohibiting the performance of rituals in public spaces (Denis,

2006:312). As a consequence of the Act, *bongaka* was “practised in South Africa but secretly” (2006:311).

Since *bakhethoa* and “*izangoma* communicate with ancestors, there is an assumption that *izangoma*⁸ are in constant communication with people who have passed on. However, ancestors are alive and can inhabit [the] bod[ies]” of not only *bakhethoa*, but animals as well (Siwani, 2016b:48). As with all matters concerning the spiritual realm or relating to ancestors and the living, ancestors have more control over what needs to happen and how it needs to happen. To ensure that the ritual process would be concluded in the way that he wanted, *uMkhulu* inhabited the body of the dog. Hence the change in the dog’s behaviour. Following the dog’s transformative moment, *uMkhulu* removed the man and the dog from the ritual site by causing the dog to leave, and in turn, the man to follow as well so I could proceed with the ritual without interference.

The Solo Show – Bakhethoa

I performed *bakhethoa* on 8th April 2022 as part of the MA program coursework. The project was based on a personal obsession emerging from my own biography. As part of the task, I was expected to choose an object which has great meaning, containing within it something about who I am, where I come from, my personal beliefs, memories, and fantasies. The object I chose was my ID, and from it my surname, as it indicates the family I was born into. In the spiritual realm, I am a child of the water. Therefore, for me, home is at the water. I visit water spaces frequently because “ancestors reside in the water” (Siwani, 2016b:28). From the water I have come and to the water I shall return when I transcend. In the physical realm, I was born in Limpopo in a small village called Bakenburg. I was an only child to my parents, who have both transcended. I have always been obsessed with family. Growing up as an orphan, I always longed to be part of or to belong to others. On a personal and conceptual level, *bakhethoa* was about my relationship with family, *bongaka*, and water. On the level of performance, the work was inspired by Buhlebezwe Siwani’s *iGagasi* (2015).

⁸ *Izangoma* (plural of *isangoma*) – diviners, healers, practitioners.



Buhlebezwe Siwani *iGagasi*, 2015

In *iGagasi*, Siwani uses her dual role as artist and *isangoma* to explore her relationship with water and secrets. The performance establishes water as “a repository” of the secret practices of *bongaka* (Siwani, 2016b:28). The back-and-forth motion of the waves becomes a metaphoric representation of the act of revealing and concealing secrets. There arises a theme of conflict regarding the object of the ritual performance. As an artist, she attempts to enter the ocean to recover and share the secrets of *bongaka*. However, because she is a child of the water, and the ocean is home, there is a risk that she might be pulled in and not return to the physical realm. In her explication of *iGagasi*, Siwani shares that:

During the performance I had to be tied by a rope, so I did not drown. Water is a spiritual home and I am a spirit. The risk lies in the possibility of being pulled in. [...] I walk into the ocean slowly and wonder what possibilities lie underneath the water. (2016b:28).

For Siwani, the rope is something that is meant to help pull her out to ensure that she does not drown or get pulled into the water. For me, however, the rope is a symbol of connection. It symbolises something that ties things together. During the performance of *bakhethoa*, I used a ball of red wool. It represented my family’s bloodline, as bloodline is the thing that ties me to my family, to *balimo*. Furthermore, even though it has been suppressed within the family for many years, *bongaka* has, and always will, run in my family’s bloodline.

During the performance, I unravelled the wool as I walked to each performance space so that a long thread of red was laid out behind me, linking the various different performance spaces. The performance took the form of a ritual in three stages, moving from one point to

another. Each stage was performed in one of the three chosen performance spaces around the Arena Quad, Hiddingh Campus. Each space was filled with objects with spiritual and familial meaning. Examples of these included eggs, divining bones, candles, steel bathtubs filled with water, red wool, a steel bucket filled with mud, a wooden spear, a wooden cooking stick, a matchbox, a sheet of plastic, sand, a cardigan, and a mirror.

The three stages – the introduction, the destruction, and the renewal – represented the history of *bongaka* within my family. The introduction represented the time when *uMkhulu* was practicing as a *ngaka* in his time as *mokhethoa* in the physical realm; the destruction represented the number of times from generation to generation when *bongaka* was suppressed in the family; and the renewal represented the present, now, with me as *mokhethoa*, accepting my calling and continuing the practice of *bongaka* within the family. I did not perform the stages in a chronological order.

For the first stage – the destruction – I step onto a pile of sand. There are objects hidden underneath the sand that I unearth as I perform, moving between different parts of the sand. I uncover a few eggs. The eggs are a symbol of life, a representation of *bakhethoa*. Following the eggs, I uncover a wooden spear, the same one I used for the ritual in Oshakati. It is the sacred object that my ancestors identify me with. I cannot perform a ritual without it.



Churchill Madikida *Struggles of the Heart*, 2003

I put down the wooden spear and then uncover a wooden spoon. The spoon represents family. In *Struggles of the Heart* (2003), Churchill Madikida, the performer, puts mielie meal in his mouth, “gagging on the mielie meal, struggling to chew the food, and there is a possibility that it might choke him” (Siwani, 2016b:36). By doing that, “Madikida alludes to being silenced [...] by not

speaking or showing the difficulty of speaking about certain things.” (2016b:34). As I continue with the first stage of the performance, I take the wooden spoon and move to grab a bucket filled with mud. I use the wooden spoon to work on the mud, like one would work on mielie meal when preparing pap, as I think of the time I initiated a meeting with my family to speak about my calling.

It is sunny on a Saturday afternoon. I have invited my family members to a meeting at my uncle’s house. At the table are my grandfather, uncles, and aunts. There is also food and drink to partake during the meeting. I explain to them that I have discovered that I have been bestowed with an ancestral gift, and I have chosen to accept it and embark on the journey. It comes as a great shock to everyone: “who told you that?” “Everyone is becoming a sangoma nowadays, people are being scammed, how do you know that it is true?” “For your own sake, my child, you need to pray that evil spirit away, we are Christians, we do not believe in such things.

In most South African communities, *bongaka* has been “dragged through the mud of witchcraft” (Mohoto in Magadla *et al*, 2021:642). Owing to that, oftentimes when *bakhethoa* bring up the topic of *bongaka* or rituals relating to it, “black people begin vilifying these practices and [advise *bakhethoa* to] stop practicing them altogether” (Siwani, 2016b:46). In my family, the thing that is used to reinforce the dragging of *bongaka* is Christianity.

As I proceed with the performance, I apply a portion of the mud to my feet, lips, eyes, and put some of it in my mouth to represent how I have been conditioned to see, speak, and walk according to the ways of Christianity. I then use the wooden spoon to break the eggs and put mud on top. However, instead of leaving the mud and the buried eggs like that, I push down the wooden spear through the mud, and position it to face up. With this, I say even though *bongaka* may be suppressed, and there are individuals in the family who have transcended without accepting their calling, *bongaka* will not perish. It runs in the bloodline. There is always going to be a child who is called to rise and continue the practice.

Throughout the performance, the audience follows me to each performance space “collaborating in the emergence of the experience by accompanying [me] and identifying what is supposed to be going on” (Langdon, 2007:30). Although I do not interact with the seen audience

during the performance, I need them to witness it. I am under an obligation to share and reveal things to them. Therefore, I acknowledge their presence. I wait for them to all come together before proceeding to the next part of the performance. The reason why there is no spoken text during the performance is so that the audience is not divided by any language barrier. If text had been included, I would have chosen to speak it in Sesotho. The performance is intended to be a collective experience; an engagement between the performer and the audience on a “corporeal, emotional, and sensorial” level (Langdon, 2007:31). They are “not there merely to look... [but to also be] affected by how the ritual is conducted” (Tuan, 1990:242).

To begin the second stage of the ritual – the renewal – I stand in front of a steel bathtub. Inside the tub is water, an egg, and a divining bone. Next to the tub, there is a transparent sheet of plastic. I use the water to rinse my mouth, wash and remove the mud on my feet, lips, and eyes, and then step inside the water. Following this, I wear the sheet of plastic. My being born inside the veil was a sign sent to my family by my ancestors to reveal to them that I am one with a gift. My family did not know the meaning of *ukuzalwa wembethe*, so they missed the sign. As I proceed with the performance, I take the plastic and pull the red wool as I walk to the third performance space, for the final stage.

The third stage – the introduction – plays with the “transmission over time, a handing down from generation to generation of [the knowledge and practices of *bongaka*] in words, practice, or style and form” (Cole in Siwani, 2016b:26). I wear an old cardigan and embody the character of *uMkhulu*. In front of me, there is a steel bathtub filled with water, two white candles, a matchbox, and a divining bone. I light the candles. I hold an egg in my left palm. I place the divining bone between my lips, inhaling as if to take a smoke. A few seconds after, I exhale, blowing air onto the egg. To close the performance, I take all the objects and push them down inside the water and then I bury my head in the water.

Reflections Following Bakhethoa: On Audience

As *mokhethoa*, I live to serve the interests of my ancestors in the physical and spiritual realms. South African artists Buhlebezwe Siwani, Sikhumbuzo Makandula, and Samson Mudzunga incorporate ritual performance in their practice as “a response to the needs of the physical and spiritual worlds” (Lila, 2020:44). In their performances, they work at initiating a kinaesthetically “felt and shared experience between the performer and the audience” (2020:31). The role “and

involvement of the audience has been a significant dimension of African performances” (Pather & Boulle, 2019:4), especially those of *bakhethoa*, exploring themes such as *bongaka*, ancestry, and history.



Samson Mudzunga *Vivho Venda*, 2007



Sikhumbuzo Makandula *Ingqumbo (Wrath)*, 2016



Buhlebezwe Siwani *uThengisa unokrwece elunxwemene* (She sells seashells by the seashore), 2015

In *Vivho Venda*, a performance about the ancestry and burial rites of Venda-speaking people, Mudzunga “invites audiences - art scholars and people from his community” to the performance. “These are academics and his community. The audience is spectators, and not participants” (Lila, 2020:56). In *Inggumbo*, Makandula leads “a procession of people to four historical monuments in Grahamstown, including the iconic 1820 Settler’s Monument, as though visiting stations of the cross. This procession was intended to make visible suppressed, denied, forgotten, and unacknowledged black histories” (Cole, 2020:88-9).

In *Uthengisa unokrwece elunxwemene* (She sells seashells by the seashore), Siwani “washed seashells in a blue powder mixed with white ochre, also used for ceremonial purposes, which she then handed to audience members [...]. In handing out shells to her audience during the performance, Siwani attempts to trigger in the recipients, latent memories of a forgotten and erased history – in particular, the fate of those Africans who went through the Middle Passage, many of whom died at sea” (Gule, 2019:280). The performances are performed to, for, and at times, with an audience. It is imperative that there be an audience during a ritual performance because “the success of ritual in performance depends on the collective representation between performer and audience” (Cole, 2020:48). The performances are intended “to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, [and] to deal with the sacred” (Schechner, 2002:46) in relation to *bongaka*.

Conclusion

Alternative Sources

The history and knowledge of African people, known personally from experience by those who lived in times of the past, now ancestors, could still be reclaimed for preservation and use in the events of tomorrow, for the betterment of society. However, this history that no history books can teach us, can only be acquired or reclaimed through finding alternative sources to learn about the past, and performance can be used as a tool to gain access to these sources.

Donna Kukama uses performance to create “a History Book that is not limited to bound paper written text. It is written by shifting between storytelling, public announcements, noise, monuments [...], objects, soundings, or nothing” (in Mbongwa, 2020:16). Litsoanelo Zwane proposes bone divination⁹ as an alternative approach to the recovery of historical knowledge. Seeing “divination as a system which has value for reconfiguring knowledge acquisition processes, even in research, ... allows for a mixed-method approach; one which ‘expands the horizon of possibilities’” (2021:63). Following Kukama and Zwane, as both artist and *mokhutli*, I propose performance and divination as alternative sources to study the past to make room for “new research questions and knowledge production” (Tisani, 2018:15).

Process (Then to Now)

Dream: I am alone in the yard, digging up money from the ground; large sums of notes. The neighbours who notice that I am hoarding money into a black plastic bag rush to grab some of the money from the ground as well. I beg them not to take the money, but one of them argues that the money does not belong to me. A minute later, a policeman¹⁰ arrives. I ask him to get the people to stop taking ‘my’ money, but he asks me why I think the money is mine. I could not respond. He asks, “what is your name?” I say, “Morapeleng Molekoa”. ‘Not Makgotla?’, he asks. No, not yet. But I have applied to change my surname. “So, you are Morapeleng Molekoa, in the meantime?”. “Yes”, I respond. He says, “okay” and walks away.

⁹ Divining bones are used as a means of communication between *lingaka* and the ancestors. They reveal messages and instructions from ancestors that are read and discerned by *lingaka* according to how they fall. As ancestors are in control of the information needing to be relayed, when being thrown, the bones “do not fall in a random fashion but in a way that the spirit world controls... [so that] a meaningful and highly accurate interpretation can be made” (Cumes, 2013:59).

¹⁰ Within *bongaka*, the police, soldiers, and other figures of authority represent ancestors.

Within *bongaka*, a “healer must first be healed” (Dow, 1986:58) before they can heal others. The healer must first experience the journey and process of healing before they can take others through it; to first learn about themselves before they can help others to find themselves. In the dream above, my ancestors were instructing me to learn about my own history before I could learn about the history of enslaved people; to find out who my direct ancestors are before I can find out who the 158 people were.

In addition to learning about my paternal ancestry (Makgotla), I was also expected to reclaim the practices of *bongaka* historically embraced within the family. In the physical realm, ancestors “hound the living with guilt, dread, and a sense of responsibility; obliging us, by whatever means necessary, to take the unborn into our care and to keep the story going” (Harrison, 2003:ix). The large sums of notes in the dream symbolise a wealth of historical knowledge that I need to exhume from the past to better the future of the next Makgotla generations.

Therefore, I have had to shift my research area from slavery to my calling. Throughout the process, I looked to the past and discovered things about my ancestors, where I come from and *bongaka*. That starting point brought me to this journey of self-discovery through different phases, steps, ideas of ritual and performance, and the understanding of looking to the past from a large colonial-slave past to direct ancestors. The historical knowledge I aim to reclaim and share with the university has shifted from that of early African people who were enslaved to that of the practices and teachings of *bongaka*. My research question is: How can performance help us remember the past to imagine the future? Moving forward, I would like to explore the concept of the future. What is the future and how can it be imagined?

The future is often regarded as a period ahead or yet to come; something to be waited for or looked forward to, believed to occur after the present. For this research project, I propose an alternative – a different consideration of what the future could be viewed as. I posit the notion that the future is not a period nor a time, but a fleeting experience realised in the liminal space. I term this experience *bohareng*. For emphasis, *bohareng* is not the liminal space, but what transpires in it. Turner (1969: 95) defines the liminal phase as being “neither here nor there... [existing in the middle of] or between and betwixt” the world of the living and the ancestral realm. The Sesotho translation of the liminal or in-between space is *bohare*. In Sesotho, the suffix -ng denotes an experience or a collective. For example:

experience

✚ *morapelo* – a session of prayer

morapelong – where prayer is experienced

✚ *phomolo* – rest (a state of rest)

phomolong – where there is rest

collective

✚ *morapele* – praise God (as an individual)

morapeleng – praise God (as a collective)

✚ *phomola* – rest (advice/instruction to an individual)

phomolang – rest (advice/instruction to a collective)

I purposefully attach the -ng suffix to the word *bohare* to emphasize that *bohareng* is not the liminal space (*bohare*), but what transpires in the space. Additionally, as a reminder that it is not possible to realise *bohareng* alone as an individual, *bohareng* is evoked through collective experience.

This study is concerned with the recovery of historical knowledge through performance and the role of an audience in that process. In addition, I use performance to enable an engagement between ancestors and the living through ritual process/performance.

To frame the performance and its ritual stages, *Bohareng* follows Khanyisile Mbongwa's elements of ritual performance – the remembering, the ancestral, and the spiritual. The “remembering is the act of tracing memory. The ancestral is the act of cultural recovery, the inheritance and familial. The spiritual is the act of connecting and positioning oneself through soulful alignment” (Mbongwa, 2020:11). Similar to *bakhethoa*, *Bohareng will be* a solo piece, performed by me.

As a final project, using the ideal of *sankofa*, *Bohareng* will be a performance experiment, using text, physical theatre, song, drumming, and storytelling to share historical knowledge about the practices of *bongaka* and enable a performative engagement between ancestors and the living. On the level of performance, the process of sharing manifests in the form of a ritual performance, through which I remember and reveal to the audience my life experiences and the rituals I participated in as *mokhutli*, my relationship with water, and the historical information I have discovered about *bongaka* my ancestry through divination consultations.

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