AmaHubo – Short Film
2018
Digital 4K video, three-channel projection with sound
13 mins 1 sec
Edition of 5 + 2AP
Umntuntu

2018
Digital 4K video with sound
2 mins 30 secs
Edition of 3 - 1 AP
Amakhosi

2018
Digital 4K video
3 mins 57 secs
Edition of 3 - 1 AP
Eziko
2018
Digital 4K video
6 mins 27 secs
Edition of 3 - 1 AP
insimu yase-Edene

2018
Performatve installation
Apples, video, umkhando, wooden plinth and blanket
Dimensions variable, durational performance
Sinje ngamaJuba

2018
Light-jet Print on Fuji Crystal Matte
280 x 62.2 cm
Edition of 5 + 2 AP
Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the field where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop, he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.1

While classical African belief systems are enmeshed into everyday life, we find ourselves knowing very little about them. John Mbiti suggests that this “incomplete knowledge of African religions” makes it difficult to fully understand its history and its absorption of “ideas and practices” from other religions and socio-cultural phenomena.2 Within this maze, the prominent role of women in religion has become misconstrued. It is here that Buhlebezwe Siwani’s work intervenes. It probes the historical entanglements of African religions and cosmologies with Christian beliefs. It locates the practice of healing within the convolution of neo-colonial conditions.

2 Ibid. Pp. 5.
Understanding Siwani's intricate position as a sangoma and as an artist is key. As a Sangoma she is immersed into knowledge embedded in the philosophical world of African cosmologies and as an artist she can interrogate the transmutation of that world as situated in a racialised, class-defined and gendered present. In this way, the very practice of healing is responsive to the circumstances of continued exploited labour, economic migration and race segregation. In this combined role of artist and sangoma, arises the image of the black prophetess.

The black prophetess in Siwani’s work possesses knowledge, makes sacrifices, traverses in-between spaces. She is itinerant. She represents a multiplicity of selves. Entrenched in the politics of black pain and healing, she fills the lacunae of colonial catastrophe. The figure of the black prophetess is a tragic figure. Often surrounded by the dead bodies of chickens or carcases of cattle represented by cattle skulls, she evokes the tragedy of the young Xhosa prophetess, uNongqawuse.

Benita Parry notes that “At a time when crops were failing, livestock dying of imported disease and white settlers appropriating the land, a child prophetess Nongqawuse called on the Xhosa people to slaughter their cattle and leave fields untended, promising that the spirits of the ancestors would drive out the invaders and resurrect the dead.” This sacrifice, signalling profound loss was the turning point for the Xhosa nation and the intersection of Christianity and indigenous belief systems. Mhlakaza, Nongqawuse's uncle was a religious man. Since the “mission propagation of Christianity had been proceeding in Xhosaland since 1817,” there were Xhosa prophets such as Mhlakaza who were converts that “borrowed from Christianity and the Bible.” Cattle-killing as Peires argues, "owed its very existence to Biblical doctrine."

This intersection, the crossroads between indigenous belief systems and Christianity is the terrain in which Siwani’s work operates. The women dressed in white, evoke both the white robes of Sangoma's as well as the white robes worn by members of the African Apostolic church, an African Initiated Church (AIC). Siwani is also portrayed wearing white robes and a red cape with a Christian cross sewn at the back. The colours of these robes are symbolic: white and red connote transition or transformation.

In the work, the women healers, women prophets embark on a journey. Siwani’s journey takes her from wine farms into urban areas where medicines and other accouterments for healing are sold. Here in this juncture, we become aware of the underlying currency of religion. This is part of what I term a theoconomy. This portmanteau of ‘theo’ and ‘economy’ refers to “the intertwining of economy, politics and religion that creates an exchange system of the fantastic through symbols and spectacle, infused with the mystical characteristics of neoliberal capitalism.” The vacillation between spiritual beliefs, the centrality of the colonial missionary discourse, the lingering reminder of dispossession through Christianisation, haunts what has otherwise become bound to the omnipotence of racialised capitalism. Today’s religious movements are a

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5 Ibid.

painful reminder of this loss and what Siwani aptly calls "a demonization of African religious and spiritual beliefs."

In this vein, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger unpack "false models of colonial codified African tradition" and argue that tradition was invented "to give rapid and recognisable symbolic form to developing types of authority and submission". These codifications pushed African belief systems into obscurity. As Birgit Meyer illustrates, the "colonial discourse constructed those beliefs (indigenous) as superstition to be left behind with the gradual increase of education." This created a disjuncture between Christian churches and African Initiated Churches as well as practices such as traditional healing. It also ruptured African society according to class, so much so that classical indigenous beliefs have become associated more with the black poor as opposed to the black elite.

This fragmentation is poignantly captured in Siwani's work, reminding us of the centrality of religion in the configuration of power. More importantly, it draws attention to the crucial role played by women in negotiating a precarious terrain. Now is more urgent a time than ever to fully understand what captures the social imaginary; and more importantly what processes of healing are needed in the neo-colonial, neo-apartheid era.


Buhlebezwe Siwani is a performance artist, working with multimedia, including video, photography, sculpture, installation and works on paper. Central to her work is her own body, which operates in multiple registers as subject, object, form, medium, material, language and site. Her body assumes the role of life, meaning, knowledge, discourse and more. For it is with and through her body, which is black and gendered, that she articulates her ideas, sensibilities, concerns and aspirations. Its presence in the visual domain of her work is twofold. On one level, it locates Siwani’s art within the discursive practices of self-writing, self-insertion, self-representation and self-fashioning. On another, it does so in ways that position her-self as the empowered subject, one of inquiry and as a self-conscious historical and contemporary actor. But such autobiographical strategies are not reductively about the self for itself but the self with and for others in the meaningful understanding of umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu: Ubuntu.

This is evident in her dialogue and collaboration with other women, and who are implied in her work. The same applies to the themes of African spirituality, religion, rituals, black womanhood, identity and history that she negotiates in her artworks; artworks that enter exhibition spaces as performative hybrids in complex configurations that are not short of aesthetics and socio-cultural politics. What is captivating about these artworks are the inventive strategies she employs for producing engaging re-presentation and interactive performances, in particular when viewed in the context of curated exhibitions.¹

¹ For a comprehensive documentation of Buhlebezwe Siwani’s oeuvre see https://www.buhlebezweisiwani.com/
Qab’imbola is a new body of work, whose preoccupation is not dissimilar to the themes noted above, except to say themes of memory and land are at play too. These are investigated with reference to the consequences of western Christianity and colonisation in South Africa. Siwani focuses on the historical rapture and reconfiguration of African spirituality and indigenous faith. Her concern is the psycho-experiential upshot of this historical impact, particularly with respect to the colonial dispossession of land, the consequence of which is not just the alienation of Africans from socio-economic, cultural, mental, emotional and spiritual sustenance. It is also the erasure of African memory associated with land and its multiple attributes ranging from family and community to heritage and ancestry.

Without dwelling on the negative or overlooking the colonial and missionary trauma, Siwani consciously opts to explore the religious and spiritual forms of African women who have appropriated and reimagined western Christianity and colonial inflections that are often utilised to emboldened devotees in contemporary society. Her undertaking is to unearth, illuminate and disseminate the postcolonial subjectivities of these black devotees. It is with this understanding that I read her autobiographical strategies as the self with and for others, but one that is critically reflective, politically curious and artistically conscious of the force of aesthetics.

In producing Qab’imbola, Siwani embarked on an artistic pilgrimage, by travelling to four provinces around South Africa: Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and Eastern Cape. In these locations, she has researched her subjects not to record but dialogue with them: a dialogue that implicates her as an artist, women and sangoma that is black, African among various other roles. The evidence of this dialogue is her collaboration with the black women, revealed in the series of performances or performative interventions that are captured in motion and still images, as well as the installations making up Qab’imbola. At the heart of this project is the reclamation of African spirituality and indigenous faith as possessed and practised by black women. This reclamation is however mainly concerned with cultural memory and land, both of which are key resources for the livelihood of such spirituality and faith. To accomplish this task, Siwani sought to explore sacred devices and spiritual interventions in creative ways that re-claim or re-possess the land even if symbolically and through visual representations that solicit dialogues. Such dialogues, in fact, are what underscore these new artworks which are comprised of Amahubo, Amakhosi, Eziko, Umtuntu Sinje ngamaJuba, and Insimi yase Edene.

Each of these series has a particular focal point on which they comment and solicit discourse, yet at large they serve as an investigation into the lingering impact of western Christianity and colonisation of Africans in South Africa. Siwani takes issue with the demise and demonization of African religious and spiritual beliefs, the consequence of which is the conditioning of Africans to despise and disinherit their traditional cultures, especially ancestral rituals through which identity, language, spirituality and faith are central, resourced and enacted.

That today Africans are wrestling with the meaning and functions of their cultures, identities, languages, memories, faith and values attest to the prolonging impact of colonialism and its missionaries. To some degree, these historical regimes succeeded in dismantling African personhoods, families, communities and by extension indigenous socio-cultural cosmology. Of course, Africans resisted and fought against colonial forces, otherwise the living heritage of Africans in various forms of cultural identities, customs, rituals or rites of birth, passage, marriage, death and mourning, would be unexplainable, for example. That Siwani is a sangoma is more than enough testimony to this living cultural heritage and memory of being and becoming African in this modern anti-black world.

The introduction of capitalism and industrialisation brought to effect a modernity that also extended imperial control, insidiously embedding
eurocentrism while reinforcing the disintegration of Africans. Adding apartheid and its peculiar though profound advancement of institutionalised racism, these white supremacist regimes divided and ruled Africans, turned them against each other, established the breeding ground for self-hate. The disappearance of intonjane and related rites of passage for the transition of Xhosa girls into womanhood is not merely indicative of colonial modernisation but also the annihilation of African heritage and cultural consciousness. Many modern conflicts, tensions and the scourge of indifference between African men and women, educated and illiterate, converts and heathens or amoqhobhoka namabomwana, amakholwa nabahenedi are exemplary outcomes of the impact these historical white regimes have had on the anteriority of African subjects.

If intonjane is currently defunct among amaXhosa, the Nongqawuse saga is a historical incident evincing the colonial destruction in South Africa. And to have Nongqawuse at the heart of this Xhosa tragedy reveals the centrality of African women in the heated contact zone of colonialism, a historical predicament that is of particular interest in Siwani’s work: what is spotlighted is how the black female body is the terrain in which historical narratives of colonialism and Christianity, African resistance and subjectivities are contested and inscribed. In this dialectical tension, there is also tradition and modernity, rural and urban, village and city, masculinity and femininity, patriarchy and feminism. The tension contributes to the theatrical drama that African subjects have to negotiate in the post-colony.

Of this postcolonial drama, Siwani’s focus is on black women, their place and role in the cultural practices of African spirituality and religious rituals through which beliefs are performed. The centralising of the black female body in her performative artworks engages the black gendered body as the site for commentary, critique and empowerment in the discursive practices of self-defining and knowledge production. Importantly, her artworks are characteristic of an embodied subjectivity which expresses a curious imagination that works towards repossessing and refocusing attention to the historically violated and silenced, if not repressed and marginalised black female body, black women traditional seers, prophets and healers - Nongqawuse being one of them.

Qab’imbola is about these black gendered spirituals and rituals, including significant women like Nongqawuse. At once, it is a subtle critique of colonial Christianity and yet a staging of black women’s agency in independent African churches and religious gatherings that operate outside conventional western churches in South Africa. These could be Zionist Churches or Shembe congregation; even Apostolic faith kwa Mai Mai, as visually played out in the photographic work, Sinje ngamaluba. It could also be some collective with another name. Who knows? Yet their imagery is characteristic of indigenous spirituals whose religious sanctification and sacred rituals are indicative of African cultural forms that are pivotal to the thematic discourse underpinning Siwani’s work.

Consider: African women dressed in white garments, congregating and performing outdoors in the short film, AmaHubo, shot in the Western Cape. The design of the garments is that of independent churches and Zionist spirituals, which together with their white head wraps and the wooden sticks held by the women produce hybrid images that embody and can read as that of African Christianity. I emphasise the white garments to underscore their signifying politics, natural scenery is suggestive of freedom, not only from the constraints of indoor church ceremonies but from the dogma of western Christianity itself. The choice of congregating outdoors is political, not merely in the sense that such African spirituality is hybrid, owing to appropriation, improvisation and reformulation of various attributes of western Christianity, African rituals and Islam. But more so in the sense that the beautiful land-scape in which AmaHubo is shot remains contested, noting the current discourse on the appropriation of land without compensation as well as the historical dispossession of land
in the Western Cape, the tip of Africa that was, in fact, the colonial point of entry into South Africa. Twofold is the persisting erasure of black women in that particular part of the country, a province that remains unashamedly though disgustingy and unacceptably a white-dominated territory.

In that part of South Africa, black people are always already in jeopardy, existing as the living dead. They operate in a state of black death owing to the pervasiveness of white supremacy – a systemic means of domination andlayered violence which is an unbearable suffocation, occurring at a magnitude necessitating a question or appeal to deities and ancestors, even when they seem to allow the ongoing slaughter of black subjects as if they are sacrificial lambs. Perhaps this could be one symptomatic reading in the ritual of animal sacrifice that is a recurring metaphor in Siwani's oeuvre, notable particularly with the chickens she features in her performances. Consider the video, Eziko, shot in the old defunct though now heritage monument Johannesburg train station. It is a performative commentary on the politics of sacrifice and slaughter, speaking on the claims of ownership and belonging in the sense that, unlike Cape Town, Johannesburg is considered a place of diverse cultures and identities, a terrain or contact zone that belongs to no one but has a piece of everyone.

One way or another, Siwani's new body of artworks framed under the title Qab’imbola are complex and multi-layered, thus inherent with ambiguities and ambivalences. Furthermore, it is understandable why Siwani wishes to tackle themes of African religion and indigenous spirituality through an exploration of what she calls their midpoints, where western Christianity and colonial modernisation as well as African religious and spiritual forms of worship and belief intersect.

Pondering such midpoints and intersections, the notion of interstices comes to mind, which Homi Bhabha defines as an articulation of overlaps and displacements of differences: an in-between space where different subjects, experiences, values, sensibilities and interests enter inevitable exchanges that affect them in transformative results that are a hybrid, mixture or blend. There is also intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to theorise the complex interconnection, overlapping and interdependence of various power relations and systems as well as socio-cultural identities and practices.

These concepts are not sufficient to discuss the complexity of Siwani's project, yet they provide provisional, if not speculative means of engaging with and appreciating what, on the surface, underpins Qab’imbola, a curious project that awaits thoroughgoing reading. It is for this future reading my above sketchy notes sought to prepare. For now, manditshaye nditungiselele ukuqaba imbola.
In between all the noise that comes with planning an exhibition there have been an abundance of beautiful moments to feel the meaning of Qab’imbola. We were given moments to really internalize and be moved by how black bodies have existed through time. The ideas that the work is built around speak to a violent and difficult past. The imagery is rich and strikingly beautiful, however, it does not romanticize the difficult experience black people have had with Christianity and the seizure of our land. It visualizes how we as a people have been forced to compromise our relationships with the land we come from and our spirituality. Being a part of the production of these works has entrenched my connection to understanding what our country is built upon. It speaks to the self determination of those who this land grows and nurtures. The film and videos which are poignant and ruminative give me the space to feel and see the different layers of our history and force one to reflect on the black bodies that are always pictured in the distance and not often enough in full acknowledgment. It gives me a moment to reflect on what it means to be spiritual and what governs one to pursue the unseen but always felt and omnipresent realms we experience.

The act of producing this body of work threw us into the depths of seeing what the land question looks like in South Africa at the moment. We drove into the hyper affluent and grand wine lands of the Western Cape, the evergreen almost untouched Eastern Cape coastline, the enveloping and mesmerizing black owned sugar cane fields of Kwa-Zulu-Natal and the always intriguing cityscapes of Joburg which feel void without black bodies moving about it. The movements in the videos and short film in their repetitive nature stir the onlooker and bring on a kind of meditative state. It’s easy to imagine the sun beating down and warming your body to the point of breaking a sweat, the rustling of the sugarcane fields and the songs of insects, the crunching of chicken feathers as they fall and the feeling that runs down your spine as they land a little too close to the central figure.

These feelings experienced are not misplaced but encapsulate so much of the everyday hidden things that are not confronted and in need of recognition. The everyday refusal of acknowledging our ancestors, the ‘fallen’ and our history, the everyday pursuit of reclaiming space and our land, and the everyday notion of reconnecting with what allows our pulse to exist. There are so many nuances to what it means to be dispossessed, claiming dignity, space and a resting place for the spirits of those who suffered and passed. This work is an acknowledgement and remembrance. We will never forget and we will always manifest the claiming of what has been foretold.

Qab’imbola looks directly at the dispossession of the land and the ways in which black people have preserved their spiritual beliefs. It also gestures for the way to reconnect with and imagine a history that must be told. It sparks an awareness of what has been before and what will always guide the way forward.
Exhibitions

2018

The Eye Sees Not Itself, Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles
White blood blue night, Centre d’art contemporain d’Alfortville, Alfortville
Investec Cape Town Art Fair, Solo presentation, Cape Town
Tell Freedom, KaDe museum, Amsefoort
Condo at Madragoa, Sadie Cole’s HQ, London

2017

Encima, Galeria Madragoa, Lisbon
COIMBRA biennale, Coimbra, Portugal
The House, Twil Art Studios, Johannesburg, Gauteng
Dear History, it’s not me, it’s you, LBE/G Gallery, Hamburg, Germany
O CÉU DOS OBLÍQUOS, Galeria Madragoa, Portugal
Deep Memory, Kalmar Art Museum, Sweden
Being There, Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris
/Dedication to Freedom, Winter Sculpture Fair, Nirox
“a flagrant arcade in contemporary art” African art fair, Cape Town
Ukuthshona kuko Mendi, CAS Gallery, Cape Town
Michaelis Master’s show, Michaelis galleries, Cape Town

2016

Ingxowa yegaqwilukuzi, WHATIFTHEWORLD, Cape Town
Figure, Group show, Blank Projects, Cape Town
Rote Fabrik, Pro Helvetia residency, Zurich, Switzerland
Quiet Violence of Dreams, Stevenson gallery, Cape Town
Imfazwe Yenhuba, ITC session 3, Langa, Cape Town
The Incantation of the Disquieting Muse – On Divinity, Parallel- and Suprarealities or the Exorcisement of Witchery, Savvy Contemporary, Berlin
iQhiya group show, AVA, Cape Town
Indlovuluzi, Njelele Art Station, Harare, Zimbabwe
Imfihlo, Worldart, Cape Town
Rose Korber Summer Salon, Provenance Auction House, Cape Town

2015

Katarine Harries Print Cabinet Purchase Award.
Imfihlo, Graduate exhibition, Michaelis galleries, Cape Town.
Jobsburg Fringe, Johannesburg.
Watch and Talk, 10 day residency, Zurich, Switzerland.
Decolonising love, Liste art Fair, Basel, Switzerland.
Revisiting the Latent Archive In Sites, Greatmore Studios, Cape Town.
Towards Intersections; Negotiating Subjects, Objects and Contexts, Museum Africa, Johannesburg

2014

Scintilla, A show on Alchemy, Commune 1, Cape Town.
Revisiting Sites, The Hostel, Cape Town.
Between Subject and Object, GIPCA Live Arts Festival, Cape Town.
Between Subject and Object, Michaelis Galleries, Cape Town.

2012

Just Do It! Creative strategies of survival, Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, funded by APEX Art, New York.

2010

Martienssen Prize Award, Museum Africa, Johannesburg.
Graduate exhibition, Maboneng Arts Precint, Johannesburg.
Vessel, Wits Substation, Johannesburg.
Martienssen Prize Award.

2007

Domestomorphisis, Wits School of Arts, Johannesburg.
Performances

2017
"those ghels", Santarcangelo festival, Italy
ukhongolose, Appleton Square, Lisbon
RTTC, TAAC, Observatory, Cape Town
"those ghels", Spielart festival, Munich
"those ghels", Theater Spektakel, Zurich
Jikijela, iQhiya, Documenta 14, Kassel, Germany
Africa Raccontare un Mondo, Milan, Italy
"those ghels", Greatmore Studios, Cape Town
The Portrait, iQhiya, Documenta 14, Athens
Deep Memory, Kalmar Art Museum, Sweden
"those ghels", ICA Live Arts Festival, Cape Town
Black Madonna, ICA Live Arts Festival, Cape Town

2016
Busuku benzolo, Labor Zero Labor, Triangle Arts, Marseilles, France
Reparations, Theater Spektakel, Zurich, Switzerland
The Portrait, iQhiya, V&A, Cape Town
Qunusa/Buhle, 2016, Any Given Sunday, Khayelitsha, Cape Town
The Incantation of the Disquieting Muse – On Divinity, Parallel- and Suprarealities or the Exorcism of Witchery, Savvy Contemporary, Berlin
"those ghels", Infecting the City, Cape Town.
The Portrait, iQhiya, The Opening, Greatmore Studio's, Cape Town
The Commute, iQhiya, Iziko National Museum, Cape Town.
The Commute Part 2, iQhiya, ICA, Cape Town.
iJoowish (All the girls in their pretty dresses), Live Architecture, 55 Minute Hour, Cape Town

2015
Beyond the line, Finnisage, Gallery MOMO, Cape Town.
100 African Reads, Greenmarket square & De Waterkant, Cape Town.
Ramp, Stevenson, Cape Town.
Conjugal Visit, Alma Martha, Cape Town.
Iqhiya Elimnyama, Infecting the City, Cape Town.
Spill, Baxter Theatre Complex, Cape Town.
Spill, Infecting the City, Cape Town.
Towards Intersections; Negotiating Subjects, Objects and Contexts, Museum Africa, Johannesburg

2014
Scintilla, A show on Alchemy, Commune 1, Cape Town.
Chroma, Performance as part of Mawande Ka Zenzile’s portraits, Stevenson, Cape Town.
My Body Is Not An Apology, Cape Town Artweek, Guga S'thebe, Langa, Cape Town.
Iqhiya Elimnyama, Makukhanye Arts Room, Khayelitsha, Cape Town.
Cabaret Crawl, GIPCA Live Arts Festival, Cape Town.
Between Subject and Object, GIPCA Live Arts Festival, Cape Town.
Between Subject and Object, Michaelis Galleries, Cape Town.
Credo, Freedom day celebrations, Artscape, Cape Town.

2013
Inkululeko, Theatre Arts Admin Collective, Cape Town.
Inkululeko, Youngblood/Beautiful Life, Cape Town.
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Francois Knoetze
Babusi Nyoni
Aaron Samuel Mulenga
Lwanda Sindaphi
Christy Van Zyl
Nomusa Makhuba
Thembinkosi Gonwane
Maryanda Manana
Siphelele Mngqana
Masello Makhepa
Yolanda Tumi
Katlego Mhlongo
Luhle Macanda
Linda Makgabutlane

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