



Chapter **04**

To Be Untitled: Rituals and Being

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Translation is a word often associated with and used within the context of language to communicate the meaning of a specific language text through an equivalent but different target-language text (Newmark 1991:1–4). A lesser-known meaning of the word is the process of moving something from one place to another. An example of this translation of relics within the context of the Christian faith and practice is the removal of holy objects from one site to another (Williams 1989:100). Ceremony and formality during the moving process were reserved for the remains of a saint's body. At the same time, items such as clothing were treated as secondary relics and thus did not receive the same treatment. All-night vigils and processions involving the entire community could accompany these translations (Williams 1989:101).

When translating something from one form to another, something from the original remains, such as the remains of the saint being translated. Does this skeleton or underlying structure support the meaning that needs to remain intact for the translation to be deemed accurate – with words having multiple meanings in one language and objects and symbols having just as many associations in a particular cultural context? A word or object with an overlapping meaning in one language or culture might not perfectly overlap with all the possible meanings it carries when translated to another (Newmark 1991:1–4). The structure of the skeleton is at risk of simply being a pile of bones that, in an attempt to be understood, are reconnected and reassembled into something they were not before.

So how could one go about reading these bones? Well, one could always elicit the help of a bone caster—those traditional healers (known as *sangomas*¹ in South Africa). They are gifted with the ability to convene with their ancestors through the reading and interpretations of bones. Thrown into a circle, they do not need to come together and form anything recognisable or literal to be understood. The things that can be gleaned from these interpretations are often related to how patients can address their issues by performing a particular ritual or act or

receiving a message intended for them. Some believe that the spirits of our ancestors communicating with us through the bones is a literal act and experience, and the *sangoma* is the interpreter of these messages. Others see it more as an act of projection where our subconscious tries to make sense of external symbolism (Cumes 2013:63).

Before embarking on my artistic exploration and examining myself, I read and interpreted the signs of an affliction that has plagued me from within the bones of the words I translate in my mind before speaking. What affliction, you may ask? That of a fractured self-identity.²

Introducing myself to myself³

My name is Teboho Lebakeng, and I am the son of a Xhosa woman and a Sotho man. I was born in the United States of America in Springfield, Massachusetts, even though my parents are South African. This happened because, during the fight against apartheid, my mother went into exile in 1976 at age 19, and my father went into exile in 1975 at age 17. This put them on the path to meet in Tanzania⁴ and spend their lives outside of their home country until they could finally return when apartheid officially ended.

My name is Teboho Lebakeng, and I grew up believing that I was named after my father, only to find out that that was not the whole truth. My father's legal first name is Josiah, and he was named after his grandfather, who was also named Josiah. But in the Southern Sotho culture, when you refer to someone named after an elder in the family, you may not address them by that very name as that would be considered disrespectful. Only the elder is addressed by that name while the other person adopts a second or a nickname. No one ever called my father by his first legal name Josiah. Instead, he was given the nickname Oupa, which means grandfather in Afrikaans.

When my father went into exile, he rejected these names and adopted one that better suited what he considered to be his growing black consciousness. As a result, he chose to refer to himself as Teboho

¹ Sangoma is a Zulu term used colloquially to describe South African traditional healers. ² The main text in this chapter will be that of self-exploration and self-examination. I will present the scholarly grounding of this main text as a para-text in footnotes in a bid not to interrupt the flow of the essay with any source references. ³ This article is a re-contextualised excerpt of Teboho Lebakeng's Master of Fine Arts dissertation titled "*An Art-Based Auto-ethnographic Exploration of Ritual as Identity Formation*". ⁴ Tanzania was considered a frontline state during the fight against apartheid despite it being geographically far from South Africa. Both the ANC and PAC were hosted in Tanzania when their freedom fighters were in exile and the parties even received land to start building schools and for refugee camps, making Tanzania a huge supporter of the liberation struggle.

(a name which means gratitude in the Sotho language) as an act of rebellion, which would serve as his struggle name. He wanted a name he could identify with and a name to project this new self-identity. However, his official legal identification documents still mention Josiah and were never changed. I was, therefore, not named after my father, I was named after the man he had chosen to be, and before my artistic practice, this is a name I struggle to identify with.

The artwork presented in this article relies on interpreting this identity crisis as a form of personal ambiguity or disorientation that can be navigated to create a synchronistic identity through hybridisation (Bhabha 1994:3–9). This does not negate the liminality but rather maintains it and allows for its projection through art-based methodologies onto a space that can manifest into a heterotopic space as a result (Foucault 1986:24–25).

Art viewed through an auto-ethnographic⁵ lens

In 2015, there was a family gathering on my mother's side organised to celebrate my cousin's return from the initiation school he had attended. The event was intended to welcome him back into society after his initiation into manhood. This is part of a rite of passage known as *Ulwaluko*⁶, which is a ritual circumcision that is considered sacred and family-orientated, which accounted for my invitation. Even though male circumcision can be done in a hospital or clinic (as I had done), this is not considered a viable alternative to the practice of *Ulwaluko* as it does not carry any of the cultural meaning or context of *Ulwaluko*. It is not enough to simply remove the foreskin in a similar manner. It is not enough to translate a word and expect the translation to retain all the possible meanings and complexities of the original word. Before a boy is seen off by his family, numerous ceremonies occur to request blessings. They are also exposed to ideas of what it means to be a family man within the Xhosa culture and the role they are expected to play in society. Their history is explained to them, but perhaps more importantly, they are reintroduced to their ancestors.

I had never been to such an event apart from a ritual done for me when I was a young boy (which involved having my forehead pressed against a goat while someone prayed over me, followed shortly by the slaughtering of the said goat). At the time, I did not know what it was or why it was happening. In fact, I still do not know why it was done, and the experience left me confused, to say the least. This inability to

locate myself in these specific cultural spaces left me with a feeling of dislocation⁷, a dislocation which stems from a fragmented self-identity. As a solution, I thought I might investigate my own cultural, racial and historical background to use those findings as a guide to help me decide to which group I owe my fidelity. But this turned out to be a superficial solution. It does not address how I feel when confronted with these societal structures at these family gatherings. Thus, in my practice, I examined how ritual as self-identity construction through art-making can be used to counteract the effects of dislocation felt due to a fragmented self-identity.

As part of my intention to negate and deconstruct the hegemonic effects of the cultural model of the initiation into manhood, I offer a reconsideration of the very signs used in this rite of passage. To reconcile disparate parts of my identity, I bring them together within the artworks being made. I do this through an art-making process that uses materials made from items that play a role in South African ritualistic practice. My process combines sculpture, printmaking, and installation. I combine fabrics often associated with the identities of various South African cultures with various items that I have a strong connection to, via memory and experience, but a lesser connection to, through meaning and understanding, and I make them occupy the same space. They undergo formal and symbolic transformation by blending shapes, symbols, and signifiers. The artwork becomes a new contact zone that facilitates the exchange and produces transcultural forms – a translation.

It is important to remember that traditions and rituals have always slightly changed and adapted with time. A good example is how young boys cannot take half a year off from school to complete the circumcision initiation ritual, which is more of a practical consideration. Not only that, but rituals have always been done a little differently from family to family and from community to community, depending on preference. Despite this, there are also some aspects of the traditions and rituals that have managed to remain consistent throughout time. One such aspect that remains consistent is the consumption of *umqombothi*. *Umqombothi* is a homemade sorghum beer and plays an important role in most prominent cultural occasions. In appearance, the beer is opaque and light tan. It has a thick, creamy, gritty consistency from the sorghum and a sour aroma. It has a very low alcohol content as it is made to be consumed out of respect for tradition, not to become intoxicated.

⁵ Auto-ethnography is a research method that makes use of personal experiences to interpret cultural practices. In this chapter it allows me to use my biography and personal life experiences as a way to orientate the article and then reflect on my experience in relation to the practice of making the artwork. ⁶ IsiXhosa words, or words in the Xhosa language, will be italicised the first time they are being introduced to the text. ⁷ Also see Seabela's chapter, in which she explains the dislocation of cultural objects from the spirituality of their source community when suspended in museum spaces. What is the resemblance, and difference between the agency of a dislocated person and a dislocated cultural object?

There are traditions to be observed both in the brewing of the beer and the serving and drinking of it. The beer is traditionally brewed by women, made from maize, maize malt, sorghum malt, yeast and water, and has a distinctive sour flavour. One of the by-products of making the beer, *isidudu*, is porridge, while the grains left over from the process are used to feed chickens. Tradition states that the woman scattering the grain for chickens gives thanks to the ancestors while doing so. Sorghum beer is fermented for several days in a huge drum covered with a thick blanket, and on the day of the traditional ceremony, the beer is brewed and poured into a calabash, also called *ibhekile*. These customs are not written down in a rulebook. They are passed on orally and through practice.

Before anyone can drink the umqombothi, they must pour a small amount of it onto the ground to share with their ancestors. And then, someone ceremoniously opens the drinking by taking a small sip, which signifies that it is safe and everyone can start drinking. Within my family's Xhosa culture and practices, it is believed that the ancestors will not recognise a ritual that one is performing if umqombothi is not part of it. In some cases, it is a way of communing with the dead as they also used to make umqombothi. It allows one to connect with them by practising an act they once participated in. This notion is reflected in my artistic practice because the unconventional use of umqombothi as a material only takes place after I make it using the same processes my family used in the past. The connection here might not go directly to my ancestors as is traditionally intended, but through memory and remembering, it does tether me to my family.

It is important to take a moment to clarify that *Untitled Hlano* (Figure 4.1) is not intended to serve as a metaphor; it is instead a remnant, or remains⁸, left over from the art-making process. As an artist and practitioner, I am a hybrid. Not the work, but the work's symbolic value is built around me. I become that way through the process of making the art, so the experience of interacting with the materials changes me by giving me a new relationship with them that is not based on alienation.

In the book *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, the author Pierre Bourdieu (1977) explains his thoughts on habitus. In this book, the problem revolves around agency and structure. He states that habitus is something that is shaped by your position within social structures. But at the same time, that habitus works to generate action. This means that when you exercise your agency, you reflect the structures



Figure 4.1. *Untitled Hlano* (2018) by Teboho Lebakeng, 65 x 52cm, mixed media: isiShweshwe fabric, umqombothi, maize malt and sorghum malt. Courtesy of the artist.

⁸ See Jessica Webster's chapter for her discussion on remains resisting symbolisation, and how she relates the repetitive/ritualistic/reproductive acts in De Harde's artworks to a 'creaturely form of caring'. De Harde and I are looking into cultural practices in rather incomparable ways, but in our artistic practice there are moments when we look each other in the eye.



Figure 4.2. (above)
Audience engagement with *Dissolving Divisions* (2022) by Laura de Harde at Nirox Sculpture Park. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.3. (opposite)
Dissolving Divisions (2022) by Laura de Harde at Nirox Sculpture Park. Courtesy of the artist.

that have shaped you in whatever you do (Bourdieu 1979:78–79). This position worked well for my practice as I could mine from my experience of creating the work. Therefore, I was part of the practical exploration when I created my artwork. And exercising my agency through the work created, offered the opportunity for observation, contemplation, and reflection.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the irony therein that those cultural inner circles I envy, because I feel a sense of not belonging to them, may be the very confines that the people within them wish to escape from. This was sparked by reading *The Metropolis and Mental Life* by Georg Simmel (1997). One important point is how people in urban settings can feel a lack of restrictions and the kind of prejudices they would associate with smaller or more religious communities. This is exasperated when said urbanites find themselves experiencing rural life (Simmel 1997:181). I often ask if tradition is about closing ranks or bringing people in. Perhaps both or perhaps the one cannot exist without the other.

In the book, *Traditional Cures for Modern Conflicts*, edited by I. William Zartman (2000), the overall premise is the examination of traditional conflict management practices used to deal with the various effects of violent conflicts and the conflicts themselves. One of the sections is written by Laurie E. King-Irani and titled 'Rituals of Forgiveness and Processes of Empowerment in Lebanon'. In this essay, she discusses the power of ritual and empowerment through ritual. These ideas are explored through the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war and how the after-effects of that war have left many people feeling displaced in their homes as life around them has changed so much. She speaks of transformative social and personal powers that can be used to heal victimised individuals or societies and how these powers can occasionally be accessed through rituals (King-Irani 2000:130). The process here consists of a transitional rite of passage that would allow one to transition into something that would allow them to handle the aspects of their daily lives that are consistently changing (King-Irani 2000:134). The idea of transitioning or transforming into a state that grants you properties and characteristics that allow you to deal with a specific problem on various levels is what my artwork incorporates from the writings of Laurie E. King-Irani. In my case, though, the state of being that is transitioned into relies on simultaneously embodying the different cultural groups one belongs to. It is not a rejection of one





Figure 4.4.
Untitled One (2018) by Teboho Lebakeng, 76 x 48 mcm, mixed media: isiShweshwe fabric, umqombothi, maize malt and sorghum malt. Courtesy of the artist.

in favour of the other but rather a constant negotiation that allows a hybrid form to be born.

As I have already stated, a major component of my artistic practice is the use of umqombothi, but another material that serves as a core part of my engagement is the fabric print known as *isiShweshwe*⁹. One of the reasons for using *isiShweshwe* is that it is an appropriate material to explore notions of cultural identity formation in the context of my hybridity and thus serves as part of the foundation for my work (Leeb-du Toit 2017:1). The material is of German origin but has been adopted by Xhosa and other cultures in South Africa, such as in the Sotho culture. It first became accessible because it was brought to the country through trade, but now it is a part of these cultures' visual identity (Leeb-du Toit 2017:179).

Dissolving Divisions (Figure 4.3) by Laura de Harde is a mixed media installation for the *Good Neighbours* (2022) exhibition at Nirox Sculpture Park. The work overlaps with my own not only in the choice of material but, perhaps more importantly, in the reason for that choice. The cultural relevance and symbolism of the *isiShweshwe* fabric are a starting point and stand at the nexus of our processes. In this work, viewers are invited to become participants who use safety pins to pin different patterned *isiShweshwe* fabrics together.

De Harde's work explores the complexities of boundary negotiation and the impact those negotiations can have on those on either side of those boundaries. The use of different patterns of *isiShweshwe* fabrics hints at the nature of some of those boundaries found in the meeting point of different cultures. But by using black lines on the fabric that draw their visual vocabulary from our understanding of maps and topography, we understand that these boundaries straddle the line and weave in and out of being both geographical and cultural.

That said, the name *Dissolving Divisions* already positions the artwork as a unifier of sorts. Through this lens, I must look at the act of participants pinning the fabrics back together (Figure 4.2). The act is more than a surface-level symbol for putting two different things together; it is one in which participants get to have a shared experience that is facilitated by an object and their interaction with it. Even if a participant were to visit the work alone, the adjustments and changes that they make to the work would affect the way that the participants interact with it but would also be a reaction to those who came before them, creating a link that is embodied in the shared history of the material.

⁹ The use of fabric is another converging point between my art practice and De Harde's. In the *Inherited Obsessions* exhibition however, her focus is not *isiShweshwe* (which she has used in the *Good Neighbours* sculpture exhibition at Nirox in May 2022), but more closely on the sewing and fabric culture related to her own upbringing as a white South African of Dutch descent.

In my and De Harde's approaches to our artworks and creative practices, there is the search for connection (Figure 4.4). The question of whether culture and boundaries are about inclusion or exclusion is imprinted in these works; whether it is through physically connecting one fabric to another, connecting with the meaning embedded in the fabric, connecting to one's culture through the material, or connecting to people by way of the medium.

A crucial part of my art practice involves my interaction with the materials. Unlike in *Dissolving Divisions* which encourages audience participation, my interaction with the material is undertaken in solitude and does not require input from anyone else. The isiShweshwe fabric is used in conjunction with the umqombothi by pouring it onto the fabric to make it wet and malleable. The fabric is shaped when I dance on it in the traditional Xhosa dance known as *ukuXhensa*, which involves stomping the feet (Figure 4.5).

Various types of *ukuXhensa* are performed for specific occasions such as weddings and even dances reserved for specific genders. The one used in creating this artwork is called *umguyo* and is performed by young uninitiated boys before they leave to enter the initiation process in the mountains. The performance of the dance itself is seen as a symbol of one's start to transition from boyhood to manhood. The dancing is done to a rhythm dictated by a song from my childhood. Through this act, the fabric begins to move under my feet and take on a shape created by my movements. After the dancing stops, the fabric has taken on a wrinkled shape created by my stomping, and I leave it to dry as it is. Because the umqombothi has starch in it, the fabric becomes firm and keeps the shapes that have been created from the stomping. The umqombothi (a link to the past and family) helps the fabric retain the memory of an act that requires the practitioner's memories to perform. It retains and preserves proof of my movement and direct contact with the fabric.

The last step has to do with the use of the left-over sap from the umqombothi preparation (something that would usually be thrown away). I apply it onto the fabric's surface to help harden it and allow me to engage with the textural qualities of the artwork. The transcultural aspect of this process has to do with the origins of the materials as well as their treatment rather than only what the material is. Due to my upbringing, I did not engage with these materials and symbols outside the occasional ritual circumstances. The engagement remained hollow

and lacked meaning for me. Therefore, I used the materials in a way that they were not intended to be used – to claim my own personal relationship and understanding with them and to create a relationship that I did not have before. By using the materials to make artwork in this manner and creating an artistic context, I am imbuing them with meaning to which I can connect.

This artistic practice as a whole was facilitated by not giving in to any pre-existing model of societal expectations but by creating something that combines objects and symbols from different cultures. The postcolonial writer Homi K. Bhabha (1994) takes a deconstructionist approach to culture and the social sciences in that he is anti-dichotomous in his views. He rejects the binary views of writers such as Edward Said (1978) as advanced in *Orientalism*. Bhabha (1994) is instead concerned with hybridity, as he describes in his book *The Location of Culture*. He asserts that one can form a mixed identity by mimicking someone's culture. The idea is that oppressed people can mimic the culture and language of those colonising them as a form of political resistance as the act gives the person being mimicked a destabilising feeling (Bhabha 1994:56, 85–92).

The catharsis I thought I was looking for by creating this work is very different from what I sought. In making these works, the goal was to connect and form a deeper bond with my culture but what happened instead was that the connection allowed me to let go. It opened me up to experiencing a sense of completeness within the incomplete state I perceived within myself and an understanding that what I sought had less to do with being recognised by others than with recognising and acknowledging myself.

I use mimicry in my work in that I mimic the dancing and practices found in my mother's culture, things that I am not supposed to have access to because, in the Sotho tradition, I am meant to take after my father. This mimicry is meant to help facilitate the crossing over into cultural liminality and transcultural space. It is also aimed at destabilising the patriarchal and hegemonic structures that force the binary imposition of being man or boy and all the statuses. This translation, my movement into the liminal, allows me to read the bones of my work and commune with the meanings that my materials and objects carry. This translation is supported by the skeleton of our original understanding of the function and symbolism of the objects we explore, not in hopes that we may simply read them but in hopes that they may speak to us.



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Figure 4.5.

Photograph of the artist dancing on isiShweshwe fabric as part of the shaping process. Courtesy of the artist.