

# Memory and Ukuzilanda

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The concept, better yet the word ukuzilanda comprises several meanings and must be understood as a word in two parts, “landa” as being the lexical item and “ukuzi” as a combined prefix. This understanding is by no means grammatically correct or posing as though it is from a linguist. By combined prefix, I mean that “ukuzi” can be broken down further to “uku” and “zi”; one indicating the act of doing and the other indicating an individual subject respectively. With this in mind we can draw several conclusions about the meaning of the word as well as the conceptualisation of the term in this context. I must add that “landa” means to collect, fetch, bring or recall. Therefore, in this brief breakdown of the word “uku-zi-landa” means that an individual is fetching, bringing, recalling or collecting themselves or something about or related to themselves. This personalised understanding of the term allows me to question whether ukuzilanda is the process of making the self or rendering “the self” whole. Can the interrogation of personal history create a fully realised self through ukuzilanda, as the process involves reconciling with collective histories that are communal rather than individual?

One of the ways in which ukuzilanda is understood is when it is used synonymously with ukuzithutha per the discussion in the interview with myself, Athambile Masola and Robyn Tyler (this issue). A case in point for how ukuzilanda forms part of a collective history that cannot be disregarded if one is persuaded to use the term with this meaning in mind. Ukuzithutha is a process in which one situates themselves within the family. Here, ‘family’ is used liberally as it is inclusive of those who have passed from generations ago. Describing ukuzithutha as a process may even be too mechanical and not reflective of the layers of meaning and enactments employed in the use of the term. Ukuzithutha locates one not only within the history of family but that of the clan that one might have belonged to and the physical space that one is expected to be located according to various histories of migrations within Nguni cultures. I must note that ukuzilanda nokuzithutha exist, albeit in different ways, in all South African Nguni languages and this is not exclusive to these languages either. Although the act includes a wide familial grouping, it is mainly concerned with placing, in other words, fashioning the self. In this formulation of ukuzilanda there is a defined beginning and a defined place where one can land.

Listing my clan  
names

Wander with me for a moment, imagine that I was a child begotten from a marriage situation and I was asked ukuba ndizithuthe. I would begin with the clan name which I would have inherited from my father, follow that up with my mother's clan name then my grandmother's and her mother's until I got to a point where the family history is murky. In this scenario my inheritance would be my beginning and where I end would have given the listener enough information that they would be able to make several assumptions about who I am and where I come from. This would be a relatively solid matriarchal lineage that tells of my father's people as well as my mother's people and possible relations through their lineages. The assumptions made from *ukuzithutha kwam* would then fashion me in very particular ways that may not have much to do with how I fashion myself. So, can we understand this fictional personal history to be a realisation of who I see myself as or does it fashion me for the person that has asked *ukuba ndizithuthe or ndizilande?* If we are to take this as part of creating the self that is me, then am I rendered whole because of my knowledge of this very personal history? I feel the need to remind you that this is just one understanding of ukuzilanda.

That I fetch or  
collect myself

There is one more understanding of ukuzilanda that I want to explore, this is the most general and the most confounding for me. This understanding is directly related to the working definition of ukuzilanda as an individual fetching, bringing, recalling or collecting themselves or something about or related to themselves. One of the things that becomes an issue for me is when we use the word as a concept, does it retain its individual nature or does that change and if it changes how does it change? As you can see, I begin spiralling, and then there is no end or useful engagement with the concept. I also begin to ask myself if the concept is only applicable in research that clearly implicates the self or are there ways in which the concept survives outside the self, outside of individual recollections. But then again, I begin to consider that all research is individual and is borne of individual interest which, perhaps, makes the term seem more pliable than I have considered. As I have been thinking through this paper, I considered other concepts that can be in conversation with ukuzilanda and landed on literary memory and Toni Morrison's formulation of rememory (Morrison, 1987). For Morrison, rememory is exemplified by Sethe's inability to forget about the past of slavery and her actions during slavery and is instead reminded of the past in all social interactions. In *Beloved*, rememory is narrated as being like when "a house burns down, it's gone, but the place--the picture of it--stays, [...] but out there, in the world" (Morrison, 1987:25). So, memory is an active force that remains, ukuzilanda remains even when the house is gone.

Let us put ukuzilanda alongside literary memory and rememory for a moment, keeping in mind its working definition proposed in this paper. I will use novels as examples as there is no form of art that attempts to reconcile with the self as excellently as literature does. I will use some of my favourite books as examples beginning with Noni Jabavu's *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life*, a 1963 memoir, where Jabavu recounts her time back in South Africa visiting relatives. There are several moments in the book where she reflects on what she remembers of the past versus what is happening during her trip. Throughout the memoir it is as though by remembering the past, she attempts to make sense

of herself as much as she is keenly aware of how the remembering both affects the past and the present:

I have mentioned the chasms that yawn at your feet even while you rejoice in the framework that produced you. Their influence abides whatever happened. My cousins and I and all those who make up that life pattern share certain denominators: hesitations, prevarications, obduracy, step forward, step backward. One hacks a path out of the wood and considers alternatives routes within the systems that now exist. (1963:261)

Is Jabavu fetching herself through this visit or is this merely literary memory that has little to do with collecting one's self or is this re-living memories? What I think is clear from the book is that the self is consistently in the process of making, there is no conclusion as the "systems that exist" are always subject to change.

Another book that I find evocative for this discussion is Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), where Dana, the protagonist, is transported between the past (antebellum slavery in 19th century Maryland) and the present (1976 Los Angeles). In these travels she learns about her family's complicated past and ultimately comes back missing an arm (it must be noted that the prologue reflects the epilogue so the novel ends where it begins). There is the physicality of being able to return as is suggested by the meaning of ukuzilanda that is possible in *Kindred* because of elements of sci-fi that are present. There is also an inversion here that is not implied by the word ukuzilanda, Dana does not come back to the present having gained something, instead she comes back having lost something. When using ukuzilanda there seems to be a call to restoration which is not possible in self creation as we are always selves in progress.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is the final novel that I want to discuss as Morrison coins the term rememory in said novel where Ashraf Rushdy notes that "Toni Morrison always likes to understand the self and the past through the community: hopefully situated within the context of rememory" (Rushdy, 1990:304). Sethe's family is haunted by Beloved who represents the past in many ways and drives Sethe to insanity when she disappears. In this novel, the scar that is American slavery comes to visit which does not fit into the mould of ukuzilanda but is an act of re-living memory which I suppose is similar to ukuzilanda.

As this paper is one concerned with questioning. I sit beside ukuzilanda and my teaching self and wonder what conversations might be had in this meeting. Ukuzilanda has never been a consideration for my becoming as it has always felt innate, like a limb. I would describe my teaching self as influenced by the need to create and fashion myself rather than the need to collect myself from somewhere. I suppose this is the trouble with attempting to grapple with the creation of the self versus ukuzilanda. I cannot discount the teachers who have conscious and subconsciously fed into who I am as an educator and researcher. I come from a family of teachers where curiosities have always been welcomed and fostered. My mother is a librarian, my aunt a mathematics educator, my grandmother and aunt, former foundation phase educators (following the matriarchal example of lineage that I made earlier) and most members of my family completed matric. There is an aunt of mine who has worked as a domestic worker and she too has been

my teacher, she taught me the things that matter beyond books such as patience, kindness, humour, and empathy. In life, the women in my family have not been my only teachers, I grew up with my grandfather elaborately quoting Shakespeare while we fixed the chicken den or debated politics and the bible while washing dinner dishes in the kitchen. My uncles have sat long hours with me pouring over mathematics and science questions and sometimes arguing over the state of the country until wee hours of the morning.

It is not only my family who have shaped my teaching self. I recall all the lessons from Mrs Mdliva, my grade one, two and three teacher who taught me something about responsibility and is partly responsible for my competency in reading and writing isiXhosa; Mrs Adams, a soft-spoken lady who is partly responsible for my comprehension of the English language; Mrs Govindsamy who recognised and reinforced my potential; my primary school Arts and Culture teacher whose glorious curls and fashion sense are so clear in my mind's eye but I cannot recall her name, she taught me something about the importance of individuality; Ms Norval, my high school Geography teacher, a force of nature whose love for geography was contagious; Mrs Van Niekerk an unorthodox mathematics educator whose neural pathways connected to mine and made maths make sense; Mrs Barnes, a visual arts educator who allowed me to realise that I was, in fact, an artist. I could go on and there are worthy names that have not been included. This small act of recalling my teachers, is this ukuzilanda? Is ukuzilanda, in fact, a making of the self through a recollection of the past? Is my self-making actually so embroiled in the reconciliation of the past with the present that it becomes an evolved formulation of ukuzilanda that is independent of general understanding of the term? Perhaps as an obsessive reader and insatiable seeker of knowledge, ukuzilanda sits quite comfortably with what I know to be my teaching self.

This exploration is only able to respond to a singular question posed in the beginning about how it is almost impossible to arrive at a fully realised self. Even though the conceptual framework of ukuzilanda suggests a certain level of restoration, the process may only end in revealing the multiple fractures that make up an individual. These are individual as well as communal fractures that are encompassed by the middle passage in African American history and this is shown through colonialism and apartheid in South African history. What this paper is unable to adequately engage are other ways in which ukuzilanda can be used as a concept that are expansive and are not only concerned with the self or how the term can be broken down to its lexical item to suit multiple formulations. So, I end on an invitation to think through what it is to make or envision the self, what concepts can be used outside of drawing from the past, outside of collecting, how we fashion who we are to each other and those we will ultimately leave behind.

## REFERENCES

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