

Ukutshisa: Setting Fire to the Future

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I.

Ukutshisa: to burn, to set fire, to re-generate, to renounce material being for historical being.

Sth... we re-member the 15 September 1881, seven days after the full moon. *Sth*, as King Lobengula's induna uMagwegwe Fuyane sets fire to the King's palace, the Queen's dwellings, the Royal Enclosure, the sheds, stables, byres, coach-houses, and even the wagons of King Lobengula's father, the late King Mzilikazi. When his task is finally finished, uMagwegwe, koBulawayo's induna, shakes the hand of the missionary who accompanied him and says: "Ngilambile", that is to say, "I am hungry".

Sth, uMagwegwe has done well on the King's instructions. Three weeks ago, King Lobengula informed his people that it was his pleasure to transfer koBulawayo, founded by him in 1870 as the great capital of the amaNdebele state, the queen of the sacred Matobo Hills, from his residence at Amatshe Amhlope, the White Rocks near Matobo Hills, to the hills of Umhlabatini.¹

Sth, koBulawayo must burn because amaNdebele's King's capitals are never permanent. Our ancestors have taught us humility before the cosmos, nature, and time. We must not attempt to conquer the cosmos, nature, and time, through permanence. Instead, we must live in rhythm with them, for continuity, eternity and endlessness hold the centre of our cosmology and philosophy.² Eleven years since first arriving in Amatshe Amhlope and reaping from its surrounds, it is time we move on and allow nature to return to its rhythm and replenish itself.³

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Sth... we re-member the 3 November 1883, the climax of Umvukela wamaNdebele, amaNdebele's uprising against Rhodes' people. Just before fleeing north, we re-member as King Lobengula instructs his trusted induna Sivalo Mahlangu to leave last after setting fire to his capital koBulawayo.⁴

¹ Depelchin H and Croonenberghs C [1881] [AQ: this should be the year of publication of the edition used for consultation, please check] *Diaries of the Jesuit Missionaries at Bulawayo 1879–1881*. Publication No. 4 of The Rhodesiana Society, pp. 80–81. Gubuluwayo, 28th August, 1881; Gubuluwayo, 20th September, 1881.

² Nyathi P (2018) *Continuity, Endlessness and Eternity*. Keynote Address at the International Conference on Communication and Information Science, 21 August. Available at: <https://www.culturefund.org.zw/post/continuity-endlessness-and-eternity>

³ Depelchin H and Croonenberghs C [1881] 1959. [AQ: this should be the year of publication of the edition used for consultation, please check] *Diaries of the Jesuit Missionaries at Bulawayo 1879–1881*. Publication No. 4 of The Rhodesiana Society, pp. 80–81. Gubuluwayo, 28th August, 1881; Gubuluwayo, 20th September, 1881.

⁴ Pathisa N (2016) Chief Sivalo installed: A long established link with the Ndebele royalty. *Sunday News*, 26 November. Available at: <https://www.pressreader.com/zimbabwe/sunday-news-zimbabwe/20161120/281659664632979>

Sth, uMahlangu sets fire in four places and detonates koBulawayo's ammunition stores. *Sth!* A huge explosion! Rhodes' settler column descends on the inferno as large smoke columns ascend to the heavens.⁵ The column commander's galloper rides right into the inferno's centre but he sees nothing except for hundreds of dogs running about. Crestfallen for the lost loot, Major Frederick Burnham, the famed American scouting mercenary, will record with sorrow that the fire:

had burned up an immense amount of ivory and treasure, along with valuable hides, horns and skins that [Lobengula] had accumulated in his storehouses. We made a great effort to put out this fire, but it was impossible to do so, and we saved very little of what must have been one of the most extraordinary collections ever made.⁶

Sth... But.

A scavenger manages to save King Lobengula's iwisa made of rhino horn – "the great knobkerrie of Lobengula himself" – and presents it to Rhodes, who, despite the protests of his people decrying the lack of a major water body, demands that *his* Bulawayo is built atop the smouldering ruins of King Lobengula's koBulawayo. Burnham will go on to say: "It seemed particularly fitting that this emblem of authority should pass from the grasp of the most powerful black monarch of Africa into the hands of the strongest white ruler who ever dominated that continent".⁷

And so it is, as the November winds scatter the ashes of Lobengula's royal town, the British South Africa Company's mercenaries declare it the new seat of Rhodes' Cape to Cairo fantasy.

*And yet....*It is not enough.

After centuries of terror, all white settlers understood – *military conquest is good, but spiritual conquest is ultimate.*

And so, amidst the 1896–1897 Umvukela-Chimurenga, the anti-colonial war waged under the prophetic leadership of amaNdebele and maShona spirit mediums, a *New York Times* headline declares on 25 June 1896: "Killed the Matabele God: Burnham, the American Scout, May End Uprising".⁸ On behalf of Rhodes, the famed American mercenary assassinates amaNdebele's spirit medium and leader, Umlimo, in his sacred Matobo Hills shrine.

We re-member July 1898: the British South Africa Company hangs the Shona spirit mediums Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi in Salisbury. Their heads are presented as trophies of conquest to Queen Victoria and taken to the British Museum of Natural History where they lie today.

Still. It is not enough.

⁵ Davis A [1896] [AQ: this should be the year of publication of the edition used for consultation, please check] *The Directory of Bulawayo and Handbook to Matabeleland, 1895–1896*. [AQ: Please insert name of publisher here, could be Books of Zimbabwe, if this is the same edition: <https://www.abebooks.com/9780869202074/directory-Bulawayo-handbook-Matabeleland-1895-1896-0869202073/plp>] — yes that is the correct edition, p. 14.

⁶ Burnham FR (1926) *Scouting on Two Continents*. London: Heinemann, p. 144.

⁷ Burnham FR (1926) *Scouting on Two Continents*. London: Heinemann, p. 152.

⁸ Killed the Matabele God: Burnham, the American Scout, May End Uprising. *New York Times*. June 25, 1896. Available at: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1896/06/25/108240032.pdf>

So obsessed is Rhodes with Matobo, a portal to the black ancestral world and historical being, that he enshrines his spiritual conquest by instructing his burial atop those very sacred ancestral hills. For Rhodes so fears the black spiritual world, that he gives his own body, his own afterlife to its desecration, his own material and spiritual being, so that whiteness will not perish but have eternal life. By entombing himself in Matobo Hills' sacred ancestral shrine, Rhodes embodies and enshrines the perpetual desecration of black physical and spiritual life, and consecrates settler colonialism's divine ordinance – *the ongoing ritual of anti-black violence is necessary for the psycho-spiritual perpetuation of the white world.*⁹

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Sth... we re-member the 18 April 2021, south-easterly winds blow as a bushfire breaks out on Table Mountain's slopes and catches on the alien Stone Pines Rhodes insisted on planting on indigenous soil, rolls down to Cape Town's densely populated neighbourhoods, the Rhodes Memorial Restaurant, the University of Cape Town's middle campus, displaces 4000 students and soon engulfs its library, burning down the African Studies Library and its material archive of rare African collections. The fire of Rhodes' Pines reduces capital H History — rare books, hard to find volumes, more than 1300 sub-collections of unique manuscripts and personal papers, a 26 000 title [pamphlet collection](#) — 800 of which are rare or old titles in European and African languages published before 1925 — and one of the most extensive African film collections in the world¹⁰ — to ashes. Over the fire's crackle there is a cacophony of cries:

“An incalculable loss!”

“A tragedy!”

“This is a cleansing! The ancestors have spoken!”

“Rhodes has fallen through fire!”

“Fire has been set to our Future!”

“The fire of Rhodes' Pines' completes the fire of Rhodes Must Fall.”

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Sth... we re-member July 2019, the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo's inaugural *Queen Loziba Lecture*. I am now answering questions about my lecture on the portraiture of the Ndlovukazi Lozikeyi Dlodlo “Last King of the Ndebele”, who led her people after her husband King Lobengula fled during 1893's Umvukela wamaNdebele.

“Why are you using colonial archives to tell our history?” a young woman demands of me. The gallery, filled to capacity with Bulawayo's young and old, murmurs in agreement.

I go on at length about archives and access until the historian Pathisa Nyathi intervenes:

“How many of you have seen iwisa leNkosi uLobengula?”

The gallery's silence answers.

⁹ Following on from Frank B Wilderson III's argument that anti-black violence is necessary for the psychic health of the world as articulated in his memoir, Wilderson FB (2020) *Afropessimism*. New York, N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

¹⁰ <http://www.specialcollections.uct.ac.za/african-studies-book-collection>; <https://lithub.com/the-university-of-cape-towns-african-studies-library-ravaged-by-wildfire-needs-your-help/>

“You haven’t seen it because it was taken by Rhodes after Nkosi uLobengula burnt his capital koBulawayo when he fled the war with the British South Africa Company. After the British conquered us, African material culture was demonised, despised, and denigrated, so our people wanted nothing to do with it. When you ask about archives, you must know that the question of colonial archives is a question of material culture”.

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Sth... we re-member that both sites of King Lobengula’s koBulawayo were burnt as part of our cosmological and spiritual traditions. The royal capitals of amaNdebele Kings were never intended to be permanent. The philosophy of our African material culture demands humility before the cosmos, nature, and time, and so demands living in rhythm with them. AmaNdebele moved when their Kings died or when the rhythm of their natural surrounds – grass, game, water – became exhausted. Whenever amaNdebele Kings moved capitals, the previous sites was burnt to the ground, leaving no mark of their corporate existence. Royal capitals were spiritually fortified. These medicines could not be allowed to fall into the hands of evildoers and so everything was fired when the Kings left.

To speak through uNyathi’s mouth: “A settlement that has been deserted bears the cultural signature of the people who once lived there”. This is to say, the settlement bears isithunzi seNkosi. In isiNdebele, isithunzi is the “shade”, “shadow” or “aura” – that is, the aura cast by people as they go through life, the shadow that grows when a person does good or diminishes when they do bad. As black people, we are constantly aware of the shadow we cast, and so, we fiercely guard our isithunzi as our reputation, “dignity”, “integrity” and ultimately, the legacy we will leave behind. Beyond the notion of an “aura”, isithunzi is best captured existentially as “being”.

The King’s capital is the embodiment of isithunzi seNkosi, the being of the King. Like the body of the King, the capital of the King is never meant to be permanent. To capture a part of it is to capture his being. This is what amaNdebele wished to guard against when they burnt an abandoned settlement – the capturing of their being. Their being could not be allowed to fall into the hands of evildoers and so everything was fired when the King left. The settlers understood this too. This is why they rejoiced when they found King Lobengula’s iwisa among the ashes and handed it to Rhodes, who wished to usurp the material, spiritual, and historical being of amaNdebele.

To speak through uCedric Robinson as he reflected on the amaXhosa Prophetess uNongqwa’s infamous 1856 Cattle Killing, the destruction of providence enfolded in the midst of the British Wars of Dispossession, in *Black Marxism*’s much misunderstood and therefore controversial seventh chapter on the nature of the Black Radical Tradition, ukutshisa is then “the renunciation of actual being for historical being; the preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social, or psychic senses”.

To burn koBulawayo was to renounce actual being for historical being.

To burn koBulawayo was to renounce material being for historic being.

To burn koBulawayo was to preserve the ontological totality of our people.

II.

Ukukhumbula: to miss, to remember, to re-member, to re-member historical being.

Sth... we re-member March 2015, as a crane lifts the bronze mass from its stump, crowds gather rapt, ready for Rhodes' Fall, S'thembile Msezane rises in the spirit of Chapungu, the Great Bird of Zimbabwe, eight soapstones of which were looted after Rhodes commissioned Great Zimbabwe's excavation. Seven were returned, the eighth still lies in Rhodes's bedroom in Groote Schuur Museum.

Msezane does not seek our ancestors' permanent domination of the landscape. Rather than erect permanent monuments in the vein of Rhodes' arrogance, Msezane re-members our ancestors' humility before the cosmos, nature, and time: we must not attempt to conquer the cosmos, nature, and time through permanence – we must live in rhythm with them, for continuity, eternity, and endlessness hold our cosmology and philosophy together.¹¹ Msezane re-members the historical being of our ancestors, she does not turn to bronze, iron or clay, she turns to spirit.

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Like the endless music that accompanies spiritual ceremonies, the philos-praxis of spirit possession — those in the present communing with those in the past about the future to come — is the syncopation of time's rhythms, re-membering past, present and future in historic simultaneity. To speak through the mouth of the ancestor John S. Mbiti:

A person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living dead, and no other term can describe him better than that... They belong to the time period of the Zamani [past] and by entertaining individuals in the Sasa [present] period, they become our contemporaries. The state of possession and mediumship is one of contemporizing the past, bringing into human history the beings essentially beyond the horizon of present time.¹²

This is the living archive. The archive that exists beyond the Western conception of the archive as material archive. This is the historical being that Rhodes sought to usurp in not only murdering our spirit mediums, the living archives of our historical being, but in entombing himself in the sacred Matobo Hills, the portal to our cosmological being.

Ukukhumbula – *the practice of re-membering our ancestors* – is an intergenerational archival technology of historical memory and the preservation of historical being. This is why we are asked to khumbula our ancestors. To re-member our ancestors. In turn, we ask that the ancestors khumbula us. For them to re-member us. *This is why our people lament those who do not have kin* – you will have no one to re-member you, who will pour libations for you when you die?

Ukukhumbula, to remember, is an active form. This is to say, ukhumbula is a call for an honouring action. You re-member/miss your sister, you give her a call, and say, “Ngiyakukhumbula”. You re-member/miss your mother, you show up at her door, “Ngiyakukhumbula”. You re-member/miss your grandmother, you go to her grave, and say, “Ngiyakukhumbula”. *I re-member you. You are re-membering her being.*

¹¹ Nyathi P (2018) *Continuity, Endlessness and Eternity*. Keynote Address at the International Conference on Communication and Information Science, 21 August. Available at: <https://www.culturefund.org.zw/post/continuity-endlessness-and-eternity>

¹² Mbiti JS (1970) *African Religions and Philosophy*. Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books.

Ukukhumbula – to remember, the praxis of the living archive is intergenerational memory. In African cosmology, we understand that water is where memory lives. Water re-members our roots and routes. This is why water holds spiritual practice across Africa and Afro-diaspora together. Water is more than two thirds of the earth’s surface — our bodies and our ancestors re-member this science and its centrality to life, death and the breaths in between. Water is the saturation of everything that has existed. Water was here first, before many of our lands. Water holds history and communicates beyond our recent memory. This is why, after five hundred years separated by the sea, African ancestors can speak through Toni Morrison when she describes *ukukhumbula* so:

[T]he act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, that valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.”¹³

Morrison spoke in the tongues of Yoruba ancestors who teach us “Humans are like water that always flows to its beginnings”. To re-member is to flood the world as bodies of water do. “Re-memory” is to journey “to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply”. If we remember this, nothing of ours can ever be lost in a fire.

The seeming paradox is that continuity, eternity, and endlessness hold the centre of African philosophy and cosmology, and yet this is not achieved through material being. Our African cosmologies and philosophies hold that though they are deeply connected, we cannot mistake material being for spiritual or historical being.

Where is our humility before the cosmos, nature, and time?

Let us set fire to the Western obsession with the historical archive as material presence and permanence — the conquest of cosmos, time and nature. Let us re-member and re-imagine the historical archive beyond materiality.

Living in rhythm with the cosmos demands humility before the elements, no longer imagined as forces of material destruction, but as forces of spiritual renewal: water as re-memory, fire as re-generation.

Let us set fire to the future, and flood the world as bodies of water do.

Ukuthsisa: to renounce actual being for historical being and preserve the ontological totality of our people.

Ukukhumbula: to remember our historical being.

Tshisani. Khumbulani. Renounce our material being. Re-member our historical being.

**I am grateful to the historian Pathisa Nyathi for our discussion on the burning of koBulawayo in 1881 and 1893. This discussion and his vast body of scholarship on African philosophy and cosmology have been invaluable.*

¹³ Morrison, Toni. 2008.[1995] “The Site of Memory” in Morrison, Toni. *What Moves at the Margin : Selected Nonfiction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.