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‘Ungazilanda in so many ways’ – Theory-making in African languages

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In this interview, conducted over Zoom on 13 February 2023, Robyn Tyler (RT) is in conversation with Athambile Masola (AM) and Nondwe Mpuma (NM). Both Athambile and Nondwe are published South African poets as well as full time academics. Athambile published ‘Ilifa’ in 2021 and Nondwe published ‘Peach Country’ in 2022. The transcript of the interview, which has been edited by all three authors, follows, interspersed with reflections by Robyn on the content (in italics).

In order to preserve and foreground the voice of the multilingual speakers (Tyler, 2021), we have included call-outs to gloss the isiXhosa speech in English for non-isiXhosa speaking readers, following Guzula (2021). These glosses appear for the first instance of the isiXhosa expression only.

RT: Please can I ask the two of you to start kudala when you were children, perhaps, and to reflect on your connection to this word ukuzilanda as you've grown up. What has it meant to you both?

A long time ago

AM: Yes, I guess, for me it started as the actual practice. You know ngozithutha. So growing up adults were never really interested in your name. They’d say ungumamni immediately so whether you’re at a taxi rank, or like any kind of social setting at church. In fact, I still remember the day my dad taught me iziduko zam, because there was the thing of people were asking me. My dad

To list your clan names

What is your clan name?

My clan names

never called me by my name. He always called me Mamgcina. All of us actually at home. And so it was always just there in the everyday kind of naming. And then one day he taught me, I think I was 7 years old, he taught me at least 5 of amagama, iziduko. So it was a very daily kind of thing, and even then people would be like, khawuzithuthe. So you would go to a family gathering and then people would want to know. If you're going to extended family or if you go to a friend's house and then kuthwe zithuthe. So you kind of had to be able to do this. And sometimes it's playful, and obviously there was a bit of judgment if you can't do it. So that was how it came about, but the word itself, I guess, is always kind of there like khawuzilande. I think I remember the first time someone said, zithuthe I didn't know what they meant, and then they explained it to me in that way: Ukuzilanda ngeziduko.

The names, the clan names.

Please list your clan names

You should list your clan names

to fetch yourself using your clan names.

AM later reflects that this conversation inspired the poem, "Coconut", in her collection "Ilifa" (Masola, 2021), which tries to evoke this conversation:

Coconut

Khaw'zithuthe!
Ndithini?
Zithuthe!
I don't know what that means.
Awukwazi ukuzithutha?
I don't know what that means.
Iziduko zakho!
Zitheni?
Zithini?
Oh! Is that what you mean? Well…
My dad only gave me 5. Said I wouldn't remember zonke.
Zithini ke?
MamGcina, Nokwindla, Xhamela, Ncancashe… Forgot the last one…

Helushe?

Maybe.

RT: Ok. So it was associated with ukuzithutha quite closely for you.

AM: People more often than not talk about ukuzithutha than ukuzilanda because xa uzithutha uyazilanda effectively.

when you are listing clan names, you are fetching yourself

During the interview, the words and attendant concepts of ukuzilanda and ukuzithutha are compared for how similar they are in meaning and also the nuanced differences between them. Nondwe picks this up in her next comment.

RT: Ok. Thank you. And how about you Nondwe?

NM: I'm pretty much the same. Yeah, immediately when I saw the

to list your clan names is to fetch yourself

to list your clan names

term I thought of ukuzithutha. The older I got and learned "proper" Xhosa, whatever that is, it was then explained to me that ukuzithutha kukuzilanda. But some people wouldn't ask you, ukuba zithuthe they'd be like khawuzilande. And then that sort of clicked in my head. But ukuzilanda for me was very generic. It was a generic word that was used to mean so many things like most Xhosa words. I do make the very obvious association between ukuzilanda and ukuzithutha. And also I think it's also my complex relationship with ukuzithutha.

please fetch yourself

RT: So it seems to me that in a way the two words overlap quite a lot. And would you say that there is a marked difference where ukuzilanda can refer to something different or more than ukuzithutha?

AM: I think they're interchangeable as Nondwe said. I think it depends on what's more colloquial and what is the meaning – the word and what it means and the word and what it does. I learnt something as simple as imbokodo now actually means a very specific rock, not just any kind of rock. (NM laughs). I mean it still means a rock but it gets more specific.

a boulder

NM: No I know, we had imbokodo growing up.

The discussion now turns to the connection between clan names and location, dislocation and dispossession because of South Africa's colonial and Apartheid past.

when you fetch yourself

Where are your villages?

What your clan names are.

AM: So, the specificity of it and I guess, of course, xa uzilanda then people want to know ziphi iilali zakho. That used to drive me up the wall. First of all, uyazithutha, somebody will then know ungumamni and then people must place you, like location. Because iziduko are actually quite location specific and the Zulus are always very confused when Xhosa people's surnames don't match with their clan name. Whereas with Zulu people, their names match their clan names. That's the kind of specificity that people want when they're using those words. And then kuphi kokwenu is the next one. If you say Sunnyridge, Amalinda[1] awuzilandanga people want uZingquthu and Ngqamakhwe and I didn't have that. Maybe Nondwe that's helping you with your complications. I grew up in the city literally. My mother was born on a farm which is now a suburb. My father never went home, and now I've learned that we actually moved three times before to Ezibeleni where we're now settled. But I've never been to the village where he's from, which is supposedly my village. It gets very specific in terms of what it is that people are actually asking for. So it doesn't just stop with iziduko, it goes one step further to be "amaGcina aphi? AseLady Frere?". There are places that you literally go and kuseMacibini apha useMaBheleni apha kusema, you know and not just the group itself but family groupings. That specific. I think that's what people are also meaning xa besithi khawuzilande. They want it to be site specific. But I once saw a beautiful quote by uBongani Madondo who was writing about Brenda Fassie, and he was talking that black people must always belong somewhere else.

Where is your home?

Names of rural villages

you are not fetching yourself

Where are the Gcina people? Are they at Lady Frere?

when we say please fetch yourself

there are Macibini here, there are MaBheleni here, there are

> Every black African everywhere is rightly or wrongly perceived to originate– a contentious concept in itself– from somewhere. Almost overwhelmingly, that somewhere is consensually assumed, indeed believed, to be an idyllic village perched somewhere far away in rural crevices. Even today, when someone asks you in the city, or at a dinner table somewhere in a little town, where you come from, your heart beats a millisecond faster than before… Does he want to know where I pay my taxes and my children go to school, or where my folks, mainly my grandparents, come from? It can be unsettling. (Madondo, 2014:18)

AM: Whenever people ask you where you're from it's never good enough. Are they asking me where I pay my taxes? Or are they ask me where my children go to school? Are they asking me where I live right now? Are they asking where my parents are from? Are they asking… what? Which place do you want? And I think that's some of my complication. I've used this Bongani idea of like, what happens when you can't place black people? What happens if I've got iziduko zam – ndizilandile. But then the place of it is not as specific because we've been dispossessed, because we've moved around, because we've been scattered. Nobody wants to accept that. So there's also this assumption that you must come with the whole story. And if you don't come with the whole story, then ulahlekile which is like the opposite of ukuzilanda. If awukwaz' ukuzilanda then automatically…

my clan names - I've fetched myself

You are lost

You can't fetch yourself.

RT: …ulahlekile

NM: For me it's both. Yes ukuzilanda is interchangeable with ukuzithutha. But also ukuzilanda is a verb that means to fetch. It's also a doing and the doing could mean anything. You could apply it to anything. You can fetch yourself in so many different ways if we were to translate that to English. Ungazilanda in so many ways and sometimes people invoke it in a spiritual sense like in a very Christian spiritual sense, and not necessarily in the sense of ukuzithutha. So there's that complication with the meaning for me. So if you like ndiyazilanda, ndizilanda from where? To where? Where are you taking yourself? And where are you taking yourself from? And just to kind of clarify my issues with ukuzithutha: I know how ukuzithutha I know how to do it, I know the doing. I grew, ndikhulele ezilalini mna unlike uAthambile ndikhulele ezilalini. But ndafunda edolophini and so there's that complex relationship between mna nelali mna nedolophu. I've never quite settled in any of the places because I'm always temporarily at a place and never permanently there.

You can fetch yourself.

I fetch myself

I grew up in the villages

I went to school in the town

the me of the village, the me of the town

Nondwe goes on to introduce the idea of umntwana wentombi: being the child of an unmarried mother. She argues that this has implications for how these children understand their lineage and discusses how the lack of resolution of familial relationships can affect ukuzilanda. Because iziduko are patrilineal, and umntwana wentombi takes her mother's surname and iziduko, this adds a gendered complication to ukuzilanda.

NM: And also mna ndingumtwana wentombi. That also complicates how you then become. There was a period in my life where I lived kulo Tat'am, and then there was a period of my life where I lived kulo Mam'am. When somebody goes ezilalini they get very confused cause people will call me by different clan names. Some people will use my mother's. Some people will use my father's. And also then, I think it's a technicality that Xhosaness has never resolved: uzilanda kanjani xa ungumntwana wentombi? because it needs to begin somewhere. You don't go from your clan name to your grandmother's clan name which is effectively what I do. There's this thought process where you're supposed to go to your clan name to your mother's, and so forth. But then, what happens when there is that drop, that non-existence of. The issue here is that because the child typically inherits the father's surname then recites the matriarchal lineage. Now if the child does not inherit this lineage, then the mother and child become seen as siblings as they have both inherited the clan name belonging to the mother's father.

I'm a child of an unmarried mother

at my dad's

at my mum's

To the villages

how do you fetch yourself when you are a child of an unmarried mother?

AM: My mom is umntwana wentombi and that was the first time I really got to understand what that means. And for her and I actually don't know anything about her father - her biological father - and I got to appreciate that she didn't see that as a loss, because ungumtwana wentombi. And what it means for her kuba ngumtwana wentombi is that your grandparents then become your parents.

when you are a child of an unmarried mother

NM: Yeah effectively.

AM: But then it causes complications with the mother-daughter relationship because nothing is ever actually fully resolved because uAuntie is your mom, usisi wakho.

Your sister

NM: Even now I call my mother Dabs. And people don't understand why I do that.

Your mother

AM: Because it infantilises uMamakho. She's not fully your mother because uba ungumtwana wentombi. But then for my mother, what it did, it gave her protection. Because she knew that uTatakhe was her grandfather. To this day she doesn't call her grandfather uTat'omkhulu she calls him Tata (NM: me too!). Exactly. And you almost have to make that choice: I'm going to forego this person and take the identity of these elders in order to get that kind of protection and consistency and understanding of that. But it never really fully resolves the mother-daughter relationship. Similar thing happened with my sister because my parents were not married when she was born. I suspect she was also umtwana wentombi, and then, when my parents got married years later, she was like 8 years old. She had this identity crisis of like who's my mother and I can see their relationship has never been fully resolved because of that. But I can see the thought process with the lived up reality of: who is this person? What am I supposed to do with this person? So I've seen the consequences of what you are talking about.

you are a child of an unmarried mother

Her father grandfather

father

RT: Thank you both. One reflection I have, and it would be interesting to hear what you think of this is when you were saying Atha that you have to have a story about: where do you come from? It's really important. And that there is this idea of ulahlekile if you don't. Is it that black people can't be from here? Wherever here is, do you know what I mean? And it generally is the center of power. Do you know what I mean? So you can't be from here? You must be from another place. I wondered how much that's an element of it as well.

NM: I don't think it's always necessarily the case that black people don't belong at least in the South African Xhosa/Zulu sense. I know that sometimes when I meet a Xhosa person I will do that. It would be like ungumabani. And it's a way of connecting to the next person and in relationships it's a way of avoiding dating someone who might just be family even if they are a thousand times removed. So I think it's also a very practical matter of if you are a Dlamini, and I am a Dlamini all of a sudden we're family. We no longer just friends. There's more to the friendship automatically, almost. But yeah, that's just one portion of it, but the other side of it could be exactly that.

what is your clan name?

AM: You're so right Nondwe ndilibele leyo yokuzalana because part of it is who you are. How do we locate you? But there's always a sense of you're trying to establish kin. So, for example, my paternal grandmother nguHlathi. If I meet another Hlathi, amaMfene, I'm automatically related to them and they will take it very seriously. Then they're like hayi ke ndingumakhulu kuwe. (NM: Ja!) We are constantly trying to find each other. And again, it's quite site-specific or like specific to places and specific to our age group. Because if I ask iintangazethu uNondwe ngumamni it gets very awkward, very quickly. Because people don't know what you're trying to do. Like are you being tribalist? Kukho loo nto ngoku. Why you being so old school? So it depends on who's asking, where they're asking, that is the thing. But at the core of it it was exactly that kudala ubuhlobo and once sidala ubuhlobo then immediately this is easier.

I forgot about the thing of being related

is Hlathi

I have the same grandmother as you

your roots, Nondwe, your identity

There is that thing now

we've been friends/relatives for a long time

NM: Like my mother has friends like that. Like deep friendship and it comes just from that: we're family.

Ngokuzilanda is not a neutral action. In this section of the interview Athambile describes that it can be painful when one's past and one's location in the world has included fracturing and dislocation due to the land dispossession and forced removals of the Apartheid and colonial eras.

my aunt married a Mazizini so we are related to the MaZizini

we are cousins

AM: Or okanye my mother's favourite one: *hayi uMakazi wam watshatela emaZizini siyazalana namaZizi*. I'm like: *hayi bo*. All you have to do is like as anyone who's like tangential like hayi bo *ngocousins bethu. Hayi sinomalume owendela apho*. It's always like that, networking. But I have found that the location part of it is what the gripe is for me. Because why is it not enough for me to say actually *NdinguMamgcina waseMonti* and

No ways

No we have an uncle who lives there

I am of the Mamgcina from East London

it ends there? That is the ultimate story. But I think it is because there is now this one hundred, two hundred year history of being displaced and it comes with a lot of anxiety. And some of it, I don't think, came from a place of choice. I don't think people wanted to migrate to certain places. So when you can't get that original place it's less authentic. But it's also marked with a level of trauma. And I don't think I'm yet to meet someone who simply accepts xa ndisithi ndiMamgcina ndikhulele eMonti and that's it. Because it's also like kuphi kokwenu and if I say ndikhulele eMonti people are like…

when I say I'm of the Mamgcina and I grew up in East London

NM: O! I have to respond to "where are you from?" Because nobody ever ever recognizes my first clan name, because it's one of those obscure ones.

What is your clan name ?

AM: ungumamni?

NM: NdinguMas'nama on my mom's side. On my Dad's side it's simple. If I just say ndinguMaDlamini there's no other question after that. I don't need to explain it. The most somebody will ask is omphi , you know. I have to go to that extent, and then, if people are like, no, we don't know him. Then I'm like, okay, ndingumXesibe and then that's very site-specific without me having to, so automatically by me saying ndingumXesibe people already locate me in a specific place if they know the Eastern Cape that is, and people assume that they know the Eastern Cape until you realize people actually really don't.

I'm a Mas'nama

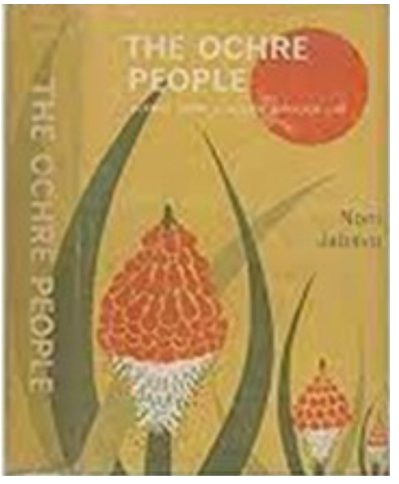
From where?

At this point in the interview the conversation moves into a discussion about the creation of academic concepts such as ukuzilanda in African languages.

RT: So I just want to move it into the discussion around the academic use of this term now. Atha maybe to start with you. I first came across ukuzilanda from your work, from your Phd. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to incorporate that concept as an academic concept in your work?

AM: An academic concept! This thing has really established a life of its own. Nondwe suhleka! I didn't see it that way. Even as I was having conversations with my supervisor, because it was in the context of Noni Jabavu's work, I was trying to explain why I'm going with this line of analysis about *The Ochre People*.

Nondwe don't laugh!



AM: She goes to Middledrift. She goes to Confluence Farm, and she goes to

Johannesburg. And she's just visiting family throughout there. And I'm like, what is she doing in this journey? What kind of visiting is she doing? And she's doing something very specific, because her father's just gotten married. She doesn't like the new wife that much. And her father can sense that tension and he says actually, go to your mother's people. They are going to be able to mend you better, because, your mother's people, because it seems like you need some maternal TLC. It's the whole mourning process that she's going through there, and abantu bakuloMama, and the maternal side of the family kind of becomes this collective representation of her mother. I was like, oh, uyazilanda literally. I didn't know any other way. I didn't know how to explain it in English. So I explained this to my supervisor, and she's like oh just use that word. I was like, okay, cool. Literally that's how it happened. But the way in which you then have to academise it. I think this is the thing: When does a word become a concept? Become a theory? I'm still on that journey.

tender loving care

her mother's people

she's fetching herself

Athambile then moves into a reflection on African academics' relationships with African languages as languages of theorizing. She offers the critique that the reason academics shy away from using African languages to coin concepts is that we do not consider African languages as vehicles of theory.

AM: Because then another friend challenged me, Makhosazana Xaba, and I was actually planning on writing about this, because she was like ngamagama ethu: these are words that we use every single day. You're now taking this. So does this mean that every time I use ukuzilanda that I now have to go to the way that you've used it? She's like that's not fair, and I was like that's because that's what academia does. So I'm like the word doesn't belong to me. I actually haven't even used it in any kind of particular way. I don't even think I've theorized with that word. It's literally still at a conceptual level. And if then I would say umntu uzilanda ngosiba then I add something to it. So it's almost like once you've actually padded the word, then does it become a theory? So it's almost like even with Latin, you know. When does the word habitus[2] become a concept, or is it a theory, you know? When are you theorizing? And it is because we are so far removed from our languages being languages of theory that when we do do it, it's like, oh, this is jarring because this is an everyday word. It is like the other quote that I use every time I use ukuzilanda is the idea of listing by Brittney Cooper. Now no one is going to say, Brittney Cooper, this is your concept. Yet I quote her every time I use the word listing because I really like the way she does it. But it's not her word. It's what she does with that word, and I think that's what I was trying to do. I was still kind of like at a very definitional level. But it's the thing now: I'm the go-to person for ukuzilanda. I'm like ngamagama ethu sonke lana. And so, if people want to use it in the way that I did, by all means they can, and then they can use it, for themselves and for their work. It doesn't always have to come back to me.

Our words

a person fetches themselves with a pen

these are all our words

NM: But I think then that was my tension with the word. We first begin at the definition level. Yes it's related to ukuzithutha but

depending on your usage then it takes on a different action, because it's a verb. So ukuzilanda ezulwini that would be somebody doing something that would be very different from umntu ozithuthayo or ukuzilanda ngomculo. Oh, that will also be very different, because ukuzilanda is a verb. And then how we use it as a verb is different.

a person who is listing clan names

to fetch yourself from heaven

to fetch yourself through music

RT: And how do you respond to what Atha said about our languages? We're not used to our languages being languages of theorizing.

At this point the discussion moves into the question of theorizing in African languages, the role of African language departments at universities and of academia more broadly.

NM: For me, I don't think that's the issue. I think I'm too unfamiliar with isiXhosa as a discipline to comment on Xhosa theory. On Xhosa theories used in Xhosa or otherwise. I think ukuzilanda might be the first word or concept that's been proposed as a concept or theory that I've come across in English. But I'm sure that there are concepts and theories in isiXhosa. And so if I knew what those were, then I feel like I'd give you a proper response to that question.

RT: I don't know. I have my doubts. I mean even people who are in the discipline of isiXhosa like in African languages departments, they are writing in English a lot.

NM: Which is then a disciplinary question and then you interrogate that. For example, I'm in an English department. I've tickled around with writing in isiXhosa. I've kind of dipped my toe in. Not even a toe, I've dipped a pinky in writing isiXhosa, in English, with English, alongside English. And for me that is a choice. And so I think as an isiXhosa department, I feel like there's a level of judgment that needs to be leveled at that kind of department that will decide to write in a particular language. Then what's the point of an isiXhosa department is then the question. They're trying to theorise Xhosa theories in English, which shouldn't be the intent of the Xhosa department.

RT: Atha you said we're not used to our languages being languages of theorizing. Are there isiXhosa words that are words of theory, of academic theory? Because we were saying the isiXhosa departments or the African languages departments are writing in English. They are not even writing, theorizing in isiXhosa. What can you say to that?

AM: I would say African languages in general, the words and people - often you'll say isiXhosa sityebile right? The language itself is a language that can be theorized. Not so much that can be theorized, but there is theory in the language. How then it shows up in academia, though, is the problem. So whether or not it happens in academia, and I think academia needs to account for this. The language doesn't necessarily need to account for this. I think this is a problem of academia rather than the language itself. We want to make this as though isiXhosa siyashota if we're not using it as a language of theory. But that's not what's happening. I think into eshotayo for me is

isiXhosa is layered

isiXhosa is lacking something

the thing that is lacking

academia itself, and it's lack of accountability for what it has done to African languages, or how it has shrunk African languages. For how African languages are just languages for classifying and for defining and for doing lexicons, and for figuring out the native. Right the native in the way of what Bantu studies did, but in and of itself I think any language does that. This is the question of theorizing the world. I think theory is also a doing thing. It is an everyday thing. So by bringing in those African language words, and making a claim that I'm living like this and so I'm going to theorize what I'm doing. Because these are the words that are available to me rather than the other way around, when we must take other people's words to try and explain what we're doing. Which is what has happened with academia until now. So I think that's why people have inkrinkam-nkrankam when we start using other words that are not French, that are not Latin, that are not English to start explaining the world. Because that's what we're doing when we theorize, we're explaining the world, right? At least that's how I understand it. So it's then a question of who gets to understand the world, and who does that world say is understandable?

complications

Athambile goes on to make visible the assumed link with global North languages and authoritative knowledge through the example of the concept 'habitus'.

AM: When I did my Masters I was using the word habitus. We don't even use that in our every day, you know. Why must I now, to explain what I'm seeing in this classroom, why must I now go fetch a Latin word that is no longer in use from a language that is no longer an everyday language? But somehow, because we have elevated Latin - and even though we say that it is a dead language - somehow a dead language from the global North can still be a language of theory, but a living language right now in the global South, with some millions of people doesn't do that. Why? And then, when someone says I am going to do it, everybody is like: Hey, hey, hey, what are you doing? It was the most trippiest thing for me. It was like an unanticipated consequence when people started attributing it to me, because that's what academia does, now you own that idea. But what happens if I came to that idea through communication and through a communal practice? I got that enlightenment through a communal practice[3]. I could never tell you who was the first person who I heard the word ukuzilanda from, because, in fact, then I should be quoting that person if I go by academia's rules.

NM: For me, I've never been able to get around theory as a general thing. I try to avoid theory as much as I can. Throughout my studies up until now I have been able to kind of sidestep theory, because I find it so convoluted, and it just don't make sense to me. But I think if we are going to have African languages departments, then they should write in African languages, so that African languages can write how they see the world in the language that they see the world in. We are stuck in this place where an African language has to have a place in a foreign language which is English. English is technically a foreign language. So we find a place for African languages in English as opposed to the other way around where English finds a place in an African language. So even if we use ukuzilanda in English

I feel like there are so many pitfalls. For example, a few days ago I was doing a survey for some linguists. And then they ask you to translate a series of questions. And all these questions deceptively look simple. It's like a man washes a woman. and then you translate that to isiXhosa. It took me at least 15 min of thinking to translate that because I was: I know what this means. But what's the word for woman? There is no context here, it's just an English sentence. A man washes a woman. How do you translate that in Xhosa? You have to decide on the identity of the male figure and the female figure in order for you to be able to translate it? Are these: is this a boy? Is this a man? And if it's a man, is it a married man? Especially the woman. Never mind the man, cause the woman could be inenekazi. It could be inkosikazi, it could be so many things. And so ukuzilanda that has that quality for me where it's one word. It's a verb that can be used in so many different ways, and how it's used to affect the understanding of it. So if people are attributing you to ukuzilanda, it's all well and good, but they have to be ascribing the meaning that you ascribed to the word. So if that's how theory and concepts work, then I'm all for it. But if that's not how they work then there's pause. I have questions, and I'm not sure what the questions are, but I'm confused.

a lady

a married woman

RT: But Nondwe, don't you think that's how theory development works in any language? So somebody will use the word decoloniality and then another academic will write in a certain way about it and the next person will say no that's not what he meant by decoloniality or that's not what she was saying. And we kind of argue and we cite other sources to define it and narrow it. I mean, in my work translanguaging is such a classic term as an example of that. People kind of start to narrow it or broaden it, or just change the meaning and argue a lot about different meanings.

NM: Yeah, I'm not arguing that. I understand that's how theory works. But I'm just saying if we're talking about ukuzilanda, there's no point in arguing that Athambile has come up with the term. If you're agreeing with Athambile's usage of the word her terminology like how she uses, and it invokes ukuzilanda, then, sure enough, you're gonna quote it in the way that you find the term useful. But if the term is not useful to you in the way that you want to use it, then there's two options. You're either gonna challenge it or you're gonna dismiss it.

Athambile goes on to make a case for contestation in theory-making. Perhaps we are too precious or protective about words in African languages and should allow them to be interrogated and critiqued more?

AM: That's theory-making for me Nondwe. And what I didn't anticipate is that that's where we are when we do introduce amagama ethu, you know. Somehow it's easier to contest the word rather than to just allow it to play, allow it to move. Because we are so married to the ideas that we hold about what African languages can do. And that we want them to be uncontested at times. What happens when theory is a-

contextual? So even that this example, with the translation for me, I'm like, why would anyone give someone a-contextual translation? That's just weird, you know. But sometimes academia, or knowledge-making, it's this idea of universality. And once we can't make something universal then siyaloka or we make the problem the language. There's another book I came across, Dilip Menon's book[4]. In the department right now we're working with this idea of the lexicon. The people who work in this area, they're dealing with this very thing. What is it about other words that they are able to travel? So even if you think of the word feng shui and how it's been able to travel or the word karma. Those are not English words, but they've been able to travel. In the African context they chose uhuru ubuntu. If I say ubuntu in the UK, because of what Nelson Mandela did with that word, it was able to travel. It seems as if we can only have x number of words from the global South that are able to do that. And the minute you introduce a new word like ukuzilanda it's like, what do we do? I'm doing the exact same thing that I did with ubuntu, except I'm not Nelson Mandela, so I'm not as famous. They'll quote the sentence and the way in which Nelson Mandela or Desmond Tutu have used that word. But they'll never say it's their concept and that's the complication with me, with how people have received this word.

we can't proceed

NM: For me the one time I did kind of foray into theory was when I did some decolonial stuff when I was in my Honours. What happened when I got into the colonial scholarship was that there were so many different definitions of decoloniality. It didn't mean the same thing in the same context to everyone. Technically, if a word has been sufficiently challenged it should get to that point. A word like ubuntu hasn't gotten to that point, because it hasn't been challenged. So I think we are also seeing the challenge as a bad thing, and I think the challenge itself is fruitful. It's what academia should be doing. If it goes and it gets used unchallenged, then how useful is it really, if we all just agree on the meaning of the word? So decoloniality has so many different definitions. So when you start writing about decoloniality you have to locate which decoloniality you're talking to, which scholars are you emphasizing, putting forward. So for me ukuzilanda needs definition. With decoloniality, there's multiple definitions. So then I can choose a definition. Then, that's when we begin ascribing definitions to scholars. So for now the only definition of ukuzilanda that exists is your definition, which is why people are coming to you, because that's the definition that they've seen. But if there's an alternate and another alternate, then it becomes fruitful, because there's different ways now of using the word. There isn't just this one way, and I think that's how words travel.

RT: So Nondwe, you're making me think around this issue of who gets to use words. And what makes Southern theory Southern? So is it okay for academics in the North who don't have a broad understanding of isiXhosa for example, or even myself who has some conversational isiXhosa, using a word such as ukuzilanda? What are the issues around positioning and the use of a term

like this?

NM: For me it's back to if we have decided on the definitions. I feel like it's okay for anybody to use it because they'd be very clearly defined like. I don't mean just like a simple dictionary definition, I mean, like a theoretical formulation of what the word means. And so I think, by reading a theoretical formulation of what that word means the scholar, academic, whoever's using the word has some grounding in what they saying, they know exactly how they are in using the word, even if they use it slightly incorrectly, but they have a grounding from where they taking the word. So that's how words travel. It's when other people get to use them, whether that's correct or incorrect. That remains to be seen.

In the following section, we discuss cultural appropriation of African concepts and language in popular Western-made films.

AM: Yeah. I mean at this stage I think I'm still anxious about what I've observed, and I'm anxious because we have a history of appropriation. And so there're power dynamics, and even with this idea of when words travel. It's when certain people use those words that's when they travel, actually. So, even with Wakanda and how isiXhosa travelled because isiXhosa also became the language of Wakanda like that was interesting for me. If you think of Shaka Zulu, the first series from the eighties, and how Zuluness then travelled into the world. The global North needed to say yes. Global South words don't travel without the global north, saying okay, we're going to choose this one. We're going to choose this group of people. Like how come Tshivenda doesn't travel the same way as Nguni languages, for example, or Sepedi?

NM: But before you say that. For example, they have travelled: The Lion King.

AM: But Hakuna Matata, they were anglicized. And Hakuna Matata is actually Swahili and I didn't make that connection because it was such an anglicized word.

NM: I saw this very offensive joke where they parody *The Lion King* when they sing that portion. And so this person superimposes a different meaning to what is being said and the comment section, the South Africans on the comment section were offended. And people were asking others to find humor in this. And I'm like, why should people find humour in something that is very clearly offensive?

AM: Right and that's the thing with appropriation. There's a thin line between appropriation and offense, because that is the power dynamic. So Hakuna Matata became Hakuna Matada. Like so far removed, you know. You just don't even link it to Swahili at all. It was another language because it was a Disneyfication of the word. So unless we resolve some of the power dynamics which I don't think we are. We still live in a world where I think the global North is still very careless. There's a weird kind of backlash, and some of it has to do with what Black Lives Matter has done. White supremacy is no longer just saying, oh okay, cool. We were wrong. There's a

> fight back. And I think we're going to see it in academia. We're going to see it in very subtle ways about who does get to theorise? Who gets funding? What kind of funding do they get? How long does it happen for? Like look at African language departments. You're talking about African language departments. There's no mistake why they are there. And sometimes it's not for lack of money. So for some departments it hasn't been a question of money, it's been a question of leadership. It serves the interests of certain people who are in leadership, because either those people push the agenda forward or they regress. Depending on what the institutional power wants to do, do we want to be progressive with this, or do we want to regress with this? And a friend of mine also once pointed out that it doesn't happen to Zulu words like Zulu people because of maybe the Zulu kingdom and how it's organized, and how sometimes Zulu people don't need the rest of the world to affirm them. So they just get on with it, and there is a weirdness with maybe other languages. It's almost like: are we waiting for the world to affirm us? We're just going to get on and do this, whether it's in theory, whether it's in a magazine, whether it's in Disney. We are just moving on and living our lives not needing these people to use our words or to even understand them. Like I've heard people talk about opacity[5], and what happens when we want to unpack everything that black people say, as though black people are not allowed to be complex. So there, I'm in two minds about it, you know. I want to go the route of opacity. But then I'm like well, I'm in the world. And how do I want to be in the world? Do I want to be understood? Do I want people to engage with me?

The interview ends on the idea of being in two minds. On the one hand, we as African academics want to get on and coin academic words in African languages even if we are opaque to non-Africans. On the other hand, we want people to engage with our ideas. Perhaps this reminds us that word-making is also world-making. The world needs to change, to be made along with the words we introduce.

ENDNOTES

1. Suburbs of East London
2. Habitus is commonly associated with the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu
3. See Umoya podcast: https://iono.fm/e/701983
4. Menon, D. M. (Ed.). (2022). *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South*. Taylor & Francis.
5. The right to opacity has been theorized by Édouard Glissant

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