

Finding Spirit in the Work – *Ukuthwasa*

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To think collectively with other feminists about the power of healing and what it might mean for our movement-building and organising is both a privilege and a necessity. As we continue to ask ourselves, “How are women organising across the continent in subversive and radical ways? How are we learning from our own strategies and merging, eclipsing and adapting to our conditions?”, moments of reflection are necessary. These questions, along with others, such as the role that healing will play in our organising and subsequent collective liberation, bring me to this piece. I am on a spiritual journey; it had no definitive starting point and I suspect the end will blur with the beginning. As such, I am simply providing some perspective on where I am in this journey and what I hope it might offer a feminist praxis.

I am currently in training, *ukuthwasa*, to become a traditional healer (also known as a *Sangoma*), as practiced in southern Africa, particularly South Africa. My training, particularly intense in the past two years, has been characterised by varying ebbs and flows. The process is life-long: this phase of my training may come to an end, but walking and living the process of being a *Sangoma* means a commitment to be learning and unlearning constantly. My training as a traditional healer has involved a host of elements, rituals, ceremonies, dream interpretation, working with plants and herbs, divination, the throwing of bones, and much conversation and dialogue. I am currently finalising the last few rituals necessary to “graduate” as a *Sangoma*. Although the training has sequential elements – certain rituals can only be completed after others are done – it is also necessarily a process of discovery, allowing, dreaming, which is determined by the wishes of my ancestors. These are interpreted and understood by my trainers, spirit mediums, in conversation with me.

Before I delve into what I believe spiritual healing may offer our feminist movements, I will provide some grounding on who I am and how I come to this conversation. I was born in Kitwe, a mining town in north-central Zambia,

close to the DRC border. Both my parents were born and raised in Zambia, though my life trajectory has meant I have called various places home. We spent a few years in Zambia after I was born and then moved to England; this began the journey of learning to define home as more than geographic location. I grew up in London, New York, Gaborone and Johannesburg, with annual visits to Zambia forging my obscure relationship with it as home. I now call South Africa home, as the place I came into my womanhood. Through tales told by grandparents, I have also come to learn that, on my maternal side, my people came from South Africa and migrated to Zambia less than one hundred years ago. I think this knowledge, as well as my own rejection of the prominence of borders and what they have meant in separating us as African people, gave me some ease in wanting to train in a predominantly South African tradition.

Despite the feelings of dislocation and questioning of belonging that I have felt, having not grown up in the place of my ancestral roots, I have come not only to feel South Africa as home but to name it as such. At times, this naming is precarious, which might be primarily due to not speaking a South African language. My tongue is stuck in fear of mispronunciations and, like a scratched record, I have limited my speech to Hellos and How-are-yous. My mother tongue, Tonga, has been relegated to the realm of understanding only. Unable to express myself with the eloquence I dream of, this tongue too is locked in mispronunciations and fear. This lack of an indigenous African language has at times limited my ability to fully understand and connect to certain concepts in my training.

I attended university in Cape Town, South Africa, where both my feminist grounding and spiritual awakenings were happening side by side. I came into my feminist understanding as a young woman studying at the African Gender Institute. I am a descendant of an African feminist tradition. African feminist sisters have paved the way for critical discourse, knowledge production and dissemination that places women, specifically African women, at the centre – these helped me understand that my life experiences and those of my mother and grandmothers mattered as serious substance for knowledge and theory-making. Through rigorous study, reflection and dialogue with other sisters, I began to name myself as an African feminist and to commit to living the principles which I felt were enshrined in this theory and practice. Years later, and after some shedding and re-thinking of identities, I am a queer African

feminist trying to make sense of how to negotiate life, trying not to choke on the confines of capitalism and all the ways it is designed to erase my existence as human and replace it as purely labour. I am also trying to make sense of a black anarchism, which deeply understands my experience as a black woman. I am committed to the study of liberation theories and practices that value black experiences. My activism has been consciously centered on black people's lives, specifically black women's lives. I have been deliberate about building community with other black women across oceans, about meeting with and organising with black women as a means for our critical survival. I have come to understand and appreciate that my own way to navigate the minefields of a world which may not place me at the centre is to create and nurture community with other black folks.

To understand how and why my work as a traditional healer may provide something(s) important for women's organising, I need to provide some detail about what training has meant for me and why I chose and keep choosing to submerge myself in this path. I started training for many reasons. There is perhaps no single moment that launched me into what has become a completely different paradigm of living, one I am yet to fully understand. I think I have made major strides in having this journey feel intertwined in my life (as I work to smash the notion of separate, fragmented components of my life). When I came to know – through various guides, dreams, conversations, thoughts – that I may have a spiritual gift passed on to me, I spent much time wondering how to process this knowledge: What did it mean to have a calling, to need to train, to have a spiritual gift? These were questions without answer, but I was left with a need to pursue this idea and a feeling that it might allow me to do the kind of work I have wanted to do with more purpose and direction. I am still trying to find the words to explain what having or receiving a calling has meant for my own life, let alone what it might mean for others. Initially, I thought of a calling as a directive of sorts from my ancestors, like a command that I should train to be a traditional healer, but had I no substantial understanding of what that meant. Over time, I have come to understand a calling as more like a message from my ancestors informing me that I have been given a gift of healing that is passed down to me through my blood lineage. I understand now that this gift may manifest in many ways and that we all possess spiritual gifts,¹ however these may be expressed in our lives.

Initially, I did not understand what it meant to train as a Sangoma. As with many life-changing experiences, you commit to an idea or practice before you know what it might entail, for the experience of it is the only way to really know. I probably only really committed to the process of training long after I “officially” began training. I did, however, decide consciously to pursue my calling in ways that would allow me to marry both the traditional and more modern elements of my life. One of the feelings that propelled me towards this journey was the desire to understand how to provide soothing, healing counsel and, at times, home, for those who had sought these things in my company. I had been doing this work unconsciously and I wanted to be more conscious and deliberate so that I could understand better how healing could work and why.

As feminist activists, I think that the core of our mandate is to work towards creating a world where people can live freely, without the weight and consequence of intersecting oppressions. To do so we will need to dream and imagine this world into being and I wanted to figure out where I fit in this imagining, particularly as a healer. In a context such as South Africa, heavily steeped in a history of violence, pain and fear, a country that has escalating rates of sexual and physical violence experienced by women, I propose we necessarily require varying modes of healing. Though I may be working in South Africa specifically, I think many similarities can be drawn across the world in terms of the experiences of black women. Histories of violence, oppression and subjugation exist across the world amongst black women and, as such, part of my thinking about liberation and organising involves finding ways to integrate political work and healing work. I am intensely invested in the process of understanding and learning how spiritual healing can be better integrated into our daily lives as a necessary means of survival and resistance. Organisations such as Harriet’s Apothecary² are working towards interventions such as these, marrying spiritual practices and political organising work.

Much of the work I have been involved in over the years has raised critical questions for me about how we organise as feminists and the myriad ways in which so many women survive daily iterations of violence. This points to themes such as how we address fractures in our lives and the importance of healing in ways that consider what it means to carry our heritage and histories while living in and through moments of modernity. I have worked in various spaces, from marketing and advertising to human rights organisations.

I have also been involved in the arts, performance arts specifically, and have been and continue to be deeply drawn to film, documentaries and fiction. I think we may need multiple approaches, especially those that appreciate our indigenous ways of knowing. Working with young women across Africa has certainly alerted me to the deep necessity for healing. We have experienced multiple forms of trauma that often sit in our bodies, on our skin, and find insidious ways of seeping into our consciousness and contorting how we may think of ourselves. These traumas often occur in our schools, in our homes, in churches. Some of our most intimate spaces are the most dangerous to women and I think one amongst the many resistance tools we have is finding and connecting with our own abilities to heal each other.

I am now beginning to see how the work of a traditional healer is to support and guide the healing of those around us. In order to do that, however, I had to first recognise the healing that I myself needed and bring to light those corners of darkness that do not always paint one in the most flattering light. Training is necessarily a commitment to radical vulnerability, unflinching honesty and a deep and thorough excavation of your insides. I did not know this when I began but have needed to surrender to many processes, to let go of how I thought things should be to allow for how they were meant to be. This has required deep currents of trust, in myself and in celestial beings, some known and some whom I have never met. Training has also required a piercing desire to be well. In the face of resistance to healing, Minnie Ransom asks in *The Salt Eaters*, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (Cade Bambara, 1992: 3). I have often asked this question of myself at the most challenging moments of this journey.

Training has compelled me to get comfortable with *not knowing* what will come next and, in a world of project plans, calendar invitations, holiday and work commitments six months in advance, this has been a challenge. Not knowing, however, is a counterbalance to a mechanical way of life and so I welcome and at the same time fear this challenge. This is merely a sliver of the story of my journey as a *thwasa*, to shed light upon what this journey has meant in relation to my feminist politics and what I envision this journey offering feminist organising. For me, spiritual healing is one amongst many important practices in combating the devastating effects of colonialism and neocolonialism in our lives. We have been ripped from our own ways of understanding and healing ourselves, and as women who so often are stripped

from modes of knowing, this is an essential area we need to understand, whether we practice or not. Healing is necessary for all of us.

Although I am following the necessary steps to becoming a Sangoma who can practice as a spiritual healer, I have also been training in unconventional ways. My trainers have taken deliberate choices to allow for a more seamless merging of my life as I know it and the process of training. Much of the training has required unprecedented (at least for me) levels of discipline and conformity at times. There have been many times when I have not always agreed with the messages my ancestors have provided. At times, these messages have directly opposed some of my feminist principles. What to do when you are walking a path that requires you follow requests (from non-material beings) which recall a time when women's roles and responsibilities were far more confining than they are now? About a year ago, I was required to wear only skirts and dresses (which had to be below my knees) and to cover my hair and my shoulders whenever I left the house. I also had to be home/indoors before sunset; this was to be the case indefinitely. Although this requirement may seem simple and banal to many, it represented much more to me. As a young girl, I had spent many years fighting the instruction that girls had to wear dresses. I hung on tightly to my dungarees, jeans and any trousers I could find, directly opposing the idea that, just because I was a girl, I had to dress in particular ways. Dress is far greater than the cloth it is cut from. It represents a level of bodily autonomy: the right to self-determine how you adorn is deeply political.

The greatest challenge along this journey has been perhaps that of autonomy, freedom of choice and agency to do with my life, especially my body, as I choose. No one has explicitly taken this away but, during training, my ability and inability to make choices about how I manoeuvre in the world has caused me much turmoil. Has my autonomy been compromised? To what degree? Am I over-reacting, can I let these beings whom I cannot see and touch dictate how I move my body, what I do with it and when? Is it disrespectful to even be asking these questions? The legacies of being a "good" African daughter linger in my questions and I sometimes cannot navigate myself out of this quandary. No one has forced me into this choice and here I am, back again down the slippery slope of trying to figure out where I stand, forgetting I am whole and one, and cannot be split. At times I've wondered if I might lose my feminist membership card by adhering to some of these ancestral

requests. As though word may get out and other feminists will think less of me for choosing to compromise on some of my beliefs.

Yet there are many ancestral requests to which I do adhere, which makes living as I used to not always possible. Living as I used to, however, was not exactly whole and marvellous. I have come to recognise that, during this time, I am necessarily fasting from many activities as a way of turning inward. So instead of focusing on the restriction, I focus on what it makes possible. The healing work I am to do means I need to connect, hear, understand, interpret, converse on levels I have forgotten existed and, to do so, I may need to shut some things out. Does this explain all the requests? Perhaps not, but here I am toeing the line between obedient *thwasa* and raging feminist, hoping the two will find healing and balance within each other.

I think feminists, activists, academics and organisers have done an excellent job in articulating the political conditions plaguing women's lives and have provided numerous solutions around these conditions. However, I am less confident about our abilities thus far to provide deeper understanding and awareness around the need for healing of our communities and us. I think healing work and political activism have met at certain points, but these meetings do not strike me as seamless and pursued with the urgency we require. In recent years, self-care as a political dimension of our work has grown in popularity and recognition. We understand more and more that at the core of any kind of liberation or revolution will be our individual and collective wellbeing. Unfortunately, however, most of these discussions around self-care are founded on capitalist constructions of the "individual" and prescribe bubble baths and long walks as a way of dealing with the oppressive machinery which requires that we act as robots to survive it.

Given this context, what processes and practices might be necessary for us – as activists, comrades, feminists – that take deep account of our need to be balanced physically and spiritually? How are we surviving this world in ways that understand our spirituality and that also draw upon our collective power? As people of colour, how are we drawing upon our ancestral knowledge in our organising? What might such knowledge inform us about our health, about plants and herbs? What is the effect of lavender and aloe on our bodies, and can we learn about these things without having to go to an organic store that has stolen our knowledge for its own profit? What might understanding the power of blood mean for how we organise? What

happens to how we hold space for young girls when they menstruate, once we deepen our understanding of the power of blood and when it is shed? What does it mean to spill blood, how many thousands of our ancestors have shed blood such that we could live these lives, what kinds of knowledge are found in this blood?

As a queer black woman, I occupy certain marginal spaces and recognise that my liberation is dependent on the liberation of all black women, so I am deeply concerned with our survival in this world. What is the work that it takes for us to be well in a world determined to profit from our dis-ease? How often do we not even realise we are off balance, only to find the elements of our lives imploding before we had the chance to understand why? Our organising needs to take into account our full selves, intellectually, physically and spiritually, whatever that might mean to us and not the fragmented selves we are encouraged to be in a world which assumes private and public are separate. What does queering our lives allow for – as feminist practice and in women’s organising?

A core element of my training is to understand energy and the power of energy in our lives, how to shift and harness energy. There are countless methods and ways we can go about working towards our liberation; such a bold task will require all of us to walk in that direction, however we get there, for there is no one path, just our intention, spirit and commitment. My journey is far from over and as I use this moment to reflect and better understand how far I have come and consider where I would like to move towards, I am reminded of agency, power and intention. I am propelled forward by the love of my community and the potential for our collective healing when we understand ourselves and each other better. I am a descendant of many healers and hope I can harness these gifts with humility and love.

Endnotes

- 1 Much of my learning about spiritual healing has been facilitated through my trainers, Mhkulu Mashini and Gogo Msibi. I reference them here specifically to note that all of this knowledge has been facilitated through their teachings over the years.
- 2 Harriet’s Apothecary – <http://www.harrietsapothecary.com>.

Reference

Cade Bambara, Toni. 1992. *The Salt Eaters* New York: Vintage.