

# Unsettling Spirits: An Unfinished Conversation Towards Provenance and Artistic Work

## Duane Jethro and George Mahashe in conversation

In this conversation, we present bytes of a longer conversation around the artistic approaches taken by Dr George Mahashe in his work, which flow from his consideration of *khilovedu* (*khelobedu*) and the archival context around the *Vhalovedu* (*Balobedu*) nation of southern Africa.<sup>1</sup> As he explains, ‘*Khelobedu* is, amongst other things, the language, culture and religion of *Balobedu* from the north-eastern part of the Limpopo province in South Africa. I use it here without capitalization ‘*khelobedu*’ as a conceptual tool to deal with the complex and entangled imaginings of *Balobedu* by themselves, and by their neighbours; by successive waves of colonial agents over the last two centuries; and by myself, a contemporary *Molobedu* working as an artist and academic (anthropologist).<sup>2</sup> This approach draws on the idea that to engage *khilovedu* as an archival context demands a transdisciplinary practice that takes seriously the limits of contemporary disciplines, their interactions, or

[1] Within this text, I render the established *Khelobedu* language text using Kgotatso Seshayi’s experimental *Khilovedu* orthography currently being tested by the Bible Society of South Africa in their translation of the Hebrew Bible into contemporary *Khilovedu*. Where I am quoting a text that is already published or a place name, I retain the old popular orthography to minimize confusion. *Khi-* is a prefix denoting culture; *Va/Vha-* is a prefix denoting the people; *Mo-* is a prefix denoting a person; and *Bo-* is a prefix denoting place. Thus, *Bolobedu* refers to the place where *Vhalovedu* have their stronghold and where the seat of *Mudjadji* is located, where *Khilovedu* is spoken and one of the places where the practice of *khilovedu* is dominant. Similarly, I use brackets to indicate a popular orthography of the same word used in line with the new *Khilovedu* language orthography. I spell the word *khilovedu* in lower case when it denotes an idea and concept and with a capital letter when it refers to the language or religion.

[2] See George Tebogo Mahashe, ‘Walking towards a Camera Obscura’, *Critical African Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 218–36.

reforms'. In this southern African paradigm, the ancestors (vadimu) can be seen as vivacious entities actively operating in the material world as contemporaneous subjectivities, including in museum and heritage settings. It takes seriously a holistic metaphysical perspective that sees cultural work as an expression of an ever-unfolding ancestral vision. This conversation makes the case for an appreciation of more diverse spiritual ontologies that may be operating in heritage and museum settings and reflects on their manifold affordances for rethinking provenance and art practice today.

Spirits, spectres, apparitions, and ghosts are frequently cited in debates in heritage and museum studies, particularly in reference to provenance. Hauntings are invoked as a metaphoric and conceptual indicator of illegitimate ownership and as-yet unestablished traceability. The spectres of museum objects – such as collections of African objects gathered under questionable circumstances during colonial times – can signal unresolved questions of provenance.<sup>3</sup> In these literatures, spectres are often grounded in a conceptual genealogy that starts with Jacques Derrida's notion of haunting and hauntology.<sup>4</sup> For Derrida, a spectre is the persistence into the present of the afterlife of ideas from a socially and culturally different past. It disrupts linear, conventional notions of time and being. This formulation of the spectre has been widely and productively taken up in literatures that attempt to deal with epistemic and structural issues of power around institutions holding problematic collections.

Despite the productive work in this area, this notion of the spectre and the general notion of provenance are decidedly Eurocentric and culturally limiting. Provenance, for example, depends on widely accepted evidentiary forms, such as documents and images, and ownership is framed as a matter of property. This neglects conceptions of custody that may be much broader than legal definitions of ownership. Moreover, the Derridean understanding of spectres is informed by a Christian religious worldview about the nature of being and the afterlife that does not accord with cosmologies from which African collections may originate. There is, thus, a need to rethink the homogenous notion of provenance and its relationship with notions of spectres, spirits, and ghosts. In this conversation, we surface different frames of reference for provenance

[3] The striking through of words indicates that the author disputes a word that is currently in popular use. It indicates that the word is inaccurate while signalling that it is not the author's current intention to go into the politics of finding and explaining a preference for a new appropriate term. The strategy is used throughout this text.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

and art practice that are informed by a southern African cosmology in which beings referred to as ancestors play an active role.

Duane:

George, could you tell me a bit about how you first came to think about provenance?

George:

My first encounter with provenance in the art world was with a debate around some unsigned photographic prints by a famous photographer that were released on the auction market by the photographer's master printer. The photographer was long dead, but their work continued to turn up at art auctions. This raised the question of what the difference is between work sanctioned by the photographer and work produced through the same means but without the express – documented – consent of the photographer. This led to the development of provenance research protocols to authenticate authorship in reproducible media like photography.

What was fascinating for me in this particular case was that provenance became a way of narrowing down possibilities for what could be considered authentic – in other words, a limiting exercise and not a process of accepting and grappling with the complexity brought by photography as a democratizing practice.

Duane:

And so, then, what does provenance mean to you?

George:

Ultimately, the question of provenance [as a technical and discursive practice] is connected to European understandings of collections that do not belong to them enacted, in the process of trying to do best practice in matters of repatriation and restitution in a museum settings. I also appreciate it as an exercise in how to avoid the process' difficult implications for European institutions.

It also has to do with certain things that I have been shown by those – the *vadimu* – I walk with that are hard to mediate in the format of a book chapter in a focused publication. These are things that are caught up in the custody of museums, and ethnographic museums specifically. But I have to emphasize that in my artistic and scholarly journey, provenance has not been about finding those things per se, but about finding out why those things are important. The point here, which is driven by *vadimu* themselves, is that I should pay attention and ask

the question “why are artefacts important?” rather than answering it or taking them as self-evidently important.

So, for me, provenance is really about comprehending complexity rather than finding something concrete.

Another way of answering this question is: if you ask me about provenance, I will meander – I will tell a tall tale with many irrelevant tangents. That is to say, we have to discuss many other things that are unruly before we can get to the question of provenance itself. That is because if one restricts a discussion on provenance to being straight-forward, then it is not a conversation I can participate in, as the format buys into a set of shaping assumptions that provenance rests on – that is, linearity, traceability, evidentiary certainty, and so on.

For me, provenance is meandering, following the leads, not consolidating them. That means, it is not an argument that has an outcome. It is a process of practicing the act of finding out. Paying attention to what do you learn along the journey that changes the assumptions about how transactions and exchanges play out. To a degree, this is also the thing that makes me uncomfortable about the current emphasis on provenance research by European museums, which in my view has an effect of amassing a new archive on the provenance context being investigated, leading to new objects in the form of contextual data whose access will have to be negotiated and resituated later – so, effectively trapping those demanding restitution in a conversation that has not changed from colonial/imperial days.

In my context, of South Africa, and as directed by my conception of *khilovedu* – about which I say more later – we traffic in responsibility and ‘custodianship’. We are not in the business of finding out who owns something but, rather, who does the responsibility for things fall to? ‘We’ in this case is like the royal ‘we’- aka *vadimu* and I.

Duane:

Using an example, can you explain what role provenance plays in your work?

George:

In my artistic work, I have explored ideas related to provenance and evidence through the media and practice of photography. In my second body of work around the *Vhalovedu* – in the work *Dithugula tsa Malefokana* – I followed some breadcrumbs in the form of the photographic work done by early nineteenth-century anthropologists. But I was not trying to understand anthropology per se. I considered why it was important to consider the anthropologist as a particular archivist deemed viable by *Vhalovedu* in the 1930s.

The resulting work, which I will discuss in more detail later, was in principle my engagement with a series of ethnographic photographs taken between 1930 and 1945 in Bolobedu, my hometown, taken by Eileen and J. D. Krige, both South African anthropologists in the Malinowskian tradition. The photographs drew me from within the old anthropology wing of the South African Museum – or rather, from the storeroom of the Iziko Museums of South Africa.

Duane:

Is photography, then, an entry point into provenance for you, since it connects your professional life as a practicing artist and your personal life in this sense?

George:

Yes, in a way. My journey to the photographs come from my time as a photographer commissioned by a fashion house, which used nineteenth-century photographs, like those of [Alfred Martin] Duggan-Cronin, as references for a fashion photo shoot. The fashion label Sun Goddess was trying to recapture or reimagine ‘precolonial’ Africa from what they found to be consistent with a persistent aesthetic sensibility that spoke to autonomy and self-love.

This encounter with the ethnographic image as fashion reference plunged me into research around colonial photography, canonized through Duggan-Cronin’s series *Bantu Tribes of Southern Africa* (1928, 1937, 1956, 1966) and the work of anthropologists like the Kriges, whom I just mentioned.

From there, I became interested in producing what I now understand to be a ‘halfie’ ethnography of sorts of Balobedu, which was missing from Duggan-Cronin’s collection.<sup>5</sup> I was later able to find these references in the archives of the Kriges and in the archive of the missionary Fritz Reuter. The question there was, Were the photographs anthropological objects, or were they traces, technologies – spiritual or otherwise – left by my ancestors in order for me to comprehend what they did in the 1940s and earlier?

[5] The idea of a ‘halfie anthropologist’, and by extension ‘halfie ethnography’, refers to a situation in social anthropology where the subject and researcher are the same person at the same time, subjecting them to accountability to multiple constituencies (1991: 466–470). L. Abu-Lughod, ‘Writing against Culture’, in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. R. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137–62. See also Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa: Reproductions of Photographic Studies* (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1928).



*Dithugula tša Malefokana*, installation view at Gae Lebowa Fieldworks, Bolobedu, South Africa, 2015. © George Mahashe

Within the context of the fashion label Sun Goddess's appreciation and referencing of Duggan-Cronin's photography, I could say that his images are gold in terms of their postcolonial capacity for negating their initial context. Despite the accepted reality of their problematics, such as the unethical conditions of their production, they still hold great appeal for me and my generation because of their capacity to image a moment filled with a confidence unimaginable to us. This goes to show that

the author's intentions are not absolute, that despite the conditions of their production, the photographic event and the audience's agency are still rich and generative. This is what is interesting about photography in the decolonial moment and the role that provenance research played in my foray into photography as a contemporary art practice. In other words, the provenance process of following the initial fashion-shoot reference image into the wider colonial archive led to a process of multiplying my understanding of the complexity of photography's promiscuity, its capacity to infiltrate all disciplines and fields, its democratizing effect, and its capacity to overturn the photographer's initial intention.

Duane:

This is fascinating. Could you say a little more about what you actually did in the exhibition?

George:

The exhibition, *Dithugula tsa Malefokana*, was an interactive installation that aimed to actively resist the finished photograph. The audience was invited to enter a specially built darkroom in a gallery space, where they were handed a random undeveloped photographic print from the Krige collection. They then had to develop the image themselves using chemicals placed before them inside the darkroom and continue to handle the fragile, wet image and hang it up on a wall in another brightly lit room. The image developed really quickly, ultimately getting overexposed in a matter of minutes, as they moved the unfixed photograph from the photographic darkroom to the display space.

Through this process, I had hoped that the audience would not have enough time to dissect the image presented on the unfixed print. They could not consume the image, so to say, but they were burdened by the technicalities of the photographic process itself, before the image faded from being unfixed as a developed photograph.

The development process is very quick. It lasts only a minute and a half, to be exact, during which time the image appears clearly for a brief moment, before blackening and becoming obscure. Essentially, visitors were burdened with the cumbersome nature of analogue photography, having to process an image that they were not able to see long enough to appreciate its evidentiary qualities. One could say, they could not refer to what they had briefly seen with any sense of certainty.

Duane:

What were the evidentiary properties of the image itself and its relationship to provenance? And what had you hoped to achieve through this process?

George:

A proper, clear fixed, fully developed image is available for provenance research. You can use it to trace things. But I had hoped to interrupt that process through burdening participants with the process of making a photograph that they ultimately would not be able to fully see and read as the anthropologist intended.

Through this process, you end up with an overdeveloped photograph that is not available for easy reading. It is only there for you to see a very brief glimpse but not for you to dissect – so, hopefully, making it unavailable for certain types of analysis and scrutiny.

Duane:

You also travelled to Berlin for your research. What were you doing research on?

George:

I was searching for photographs taken of my home town in the 1880s. Missionary Fritz Reuter facilitated photographic opportunities for the Berlin Missionary Society's marketing and fundraising activities. I had travelled to see the resulting archive, which was a desire on my part to see those that came before me, those who were imaged in these photographs.

Duane:

To then circle back for a moment, your artistic work is strongly influenced

by your cultural background and the metaphysics of the Vhalovedu. I am interested in the ancestor as a being and figure, and what it is and how it influences your work. Could you share a bit about this?

George:

I would not call it metaphysics, just simply the reality of what *khilovedu* as a contemporary practice demands of one's critical thinking skills. For me, how I've understood the concept of the ancestor through my research over the last twelve years has always been around that very idea that one is an ancestor – what we refer to in the *Khilovedu* language as *vadimu* (*badimo*) or *mudinwana* – when one understands that one is outside of time as we know it. Most people reach this after death; some reach it while still alive; others are simply born as *vadimu*.

*Vadimu* refers to those people that recognize their capacity to devise means. So, when they say 'mudinwana' or 'thoho tshweu', referring to the natural greying of one's hair associated with old age, they are generally pointing to an advanced ability to devise means based on lived experience. And I think that is what's at stake; for me, the implications of the designation *vadimu* is the capacity to make means, to secure a future for your children, and to facilitate the dead through their difficult aspect of their experience of having lived. This is important because by some accounts, death does not make you an ancestor, and much must be done by the gifted (healers or those walking with the old ones) to recover you, should you pass on without attaining the designation of *vadimu*.

*Vadimu* are those that acknowledge their capacity to devise a way to persist, despite the limits imposed by the experience of living. They are not ghosts or spectres.

For me, a ghost would be someone that, despite *vadimu*'s concessions, refuses to acknowledge and survive the reality that they comprehend upon death, the reality that you are not bound to the body, that one is not bound to time in the way that our physical bodies make us bound to time and, by extension, space.

Duane:

One other interesting observation for me in provenance discussions is that in all of these definitions of provenance, there are notions of property in play – that is, artworks, objects, and human remains are considered to be someone's possession. But in the South African context, I'm thinking about the importance of land and provenance around claims to ownership of land.

George:

That is the main question, ultimately, because for me, the work that we, as artists and people, do starts from that point of view. The issue really starts with the question of land and, you know, whom the land ‘belongs’ to, right? Did the land belong to us? Or does the land belong to vadimu? To say that the land belongs to vadimu is also to recognize that in some cultures, you really do literally ‘own’ the piece of land you are buried on, and it is your home, and your body become the land you are buried on. So, in most cases, we are living on top of graves – we are living on what remains – in time and space – of our ancestors.

Duane:

It makes a lot of sense to me. We started our conversation earlier thinking about artistic objects as property and provenance as means for securing value in those objects. Now we are at the point of thinking about land and custodianship and its relationship to being.

George:

The question of land is central. It all boils down to land. If we are talking about coloniality, for me the fight is not about being treated as human; I don’t care about being treated as human. I care about having the land so that I can see to my own humanity. All my practice is ultimately interested in how do I go back to that moment when I am not under the custody of someone, when I can direct the flow of life as directed and inspired by vadimu. So, land is central.

But when it comes to land and the apartheid regime, the paradox that is there for me – and especially if one is thinking about conceptions of past, present, and future – the Afrikaners ‘conquered’ (if you believed the battles to be over) the people they found here in the 1860s up to the 1950s. They did not conquer vadimu, the ones that provide us – the ‘conquered’ – with the land. Therefore, their claim and provenance protocols to the land under that regime, and their contribution through their dead, don’t count. And this is where, for me, the ‘dead’ become more important, as the ancestors *are* the land and its ‘custodians’.

Duane:

This is a complex notion of the land. But on a point of clarification, do the ancestors reside *in* the land, or are they connected *to* the land? Can you explain that relationship between the ancestors and the land?

George:

I think the ancestors as an expanded complex of ideas *are* the land.

Literally. The ancestors are the land; they are tethered to it. One should not attempt to separate them from the land. Sometimes when they say they are the providers of the land, it is that literal, because they are the land by virtue of having died and been buried there. That is one response.

The ancestors are the land, but I also like to subscribe to the idea that they are beyond the land and everything we can imagine. Some people like to say the vadimu reside in the future, not in the past.

Duane:

What I hear you saying is that there is a different cosmology and notion of time in operation in the realms in which the ancestors operate – but also in the different temporal-scapes that they shape. It follows that if we adopt an ancestral view of the ways in which objects circulate, then the restitution of objects matches the ultimate preconceived vision of these ancestors.

George:

And there we get into the terrain of prophecies. Because the story of the prophecy is exactly the agency: the fact that vadimu imagined and saw the future in the way that they have seen it, and that they prepared our way to resist the type of death that we are imagining ourselves in, is the reiteration of their efficacy in the present.

Duane:

Can you give me an example of a prophecy, and perhaps maybe even from your practice, of how you work with prophecies?

George:

I follow mythologies, which I appreciate as prophecies subjected to time, as well-crafted formulations that resist the constant fluctuation of power. I have been chasing one prophecy that I no longer understand. There is a prophecy that is mostly attributed to the isiXhosa-speaking geography – you never know who a person is these days; they might have been in an area where most people speak isiXhosa. And the prophecy says that they will come – ‘they’ being the Europeans – and that they will land and make inroads into the land. So, first, it’s acknowledging that they have been coming for a very long time, but this prophecy speaks about when they come to stay. They will bring with them a button – or something that people refer to as a button, and what others have interpreted as a coin – and a book. The book is interpreted as the Bible – not as the contents but rather as the skill of inscribing into something decodable, a traceable reference: in the 1860s, for a lot of the Black communities,

the Bible symbolized a written account – it doesn't matter what account. You see it more and more in research when you discover that a lot of nineteenth-century southern African elders used to produce written notebooks on a variety of topics, because they understood that the book relies heavily on other books. So, for us Balobedu to take the book and reject the coin was a way of being in control of contemporary power play based on the written word and its many archives. Automatically, this prophecy tells us how we are going to survive. I'm not going to say win, but to outlast this documentary – or, in our current context, provenance – age. For me, this is quite impressive.

But at the same time, there's another prophecy that comes from Mokoto, who is acknowledged as the last male ruler of Vhalovedu, which basically says, 'I am tired. I am going to sleep. I do not like to sleep in public, but before I go, here is a song'. In the song, he laments, 'They will come, the black ants. And the black ants you will overcome. The red ants will come. You will not overcome them'. Of course, there are debates around who the red ants are. Some say they are Europeans; some say ... actually, let me not get into that one. But generally, the song points out that outsiders will come and the only way to survive them is not to be drawn into an open fight with them but – as I understand it – to let them run their course. I've been really trying to grapple with these two prophecies. On the one hand, the prophecy says 'embrace' the documentary, 'embrace' the fixed record. The other one says be permeable. And they're all referring to surviving the same onslaught: nineteenth-century colonialism. So for me, the work [*Dithugula tša Malefokana* (2012–15)], and others that follow from it, tries to grapple with the tension of fixed–unfixed things and their roles in navigating and persisting beyond the current onslaught, which is Western colonialism and its many afterlives. My work at the moment tries to grapple with these propositions.

The darkroom of this installation (*Dithugula tša Malefokana*), where I had photographic images that would appear and fade into blackness, was also about that idea that one should not be able to fix the moment, in time. Or at least the fixed moment should be of such opaque quality that it is not easily drawn into the regimes of provenance. That's sort of the work.

Duane:

As we wrap up, perhaps you could reflect on the importance of provenance for society and the future?



*Dithugula tša Malefokana*, installation view at Gae Lebowa Fieldworks, Bolobedu, South Africa, 2015. © George Mahashe

George:

I think the work of provenance research is important for the current moment, when dispossessed communities assert their demands for restitution and repatriation. But this idea of provenance should be directed by the cultural context of our respective cultures. It should not be dictated by global northern expediency and rationality – to flog a dead horse, so to speak. The ideas coalescing around the practices associated with decoloniality are not for dialogue and negotiation, or for

Western sensibilities asserting their realities, but rather for a process where ‘others’ are left to address their own context and should be free to create and solve their own problems. So, let’s stop wasting time reinventing colonial disciplines and instead pay attention to what ‘others’ have imagined to solve problems that we all face.





Edmund de Waal. © Tom Jamieson