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Sculpting iLobola: An artist's journey

For her latest exhibition, 'iLobola', ceramic artist Zizipho Poswa takes a closer look at her culture, and explores the customary practice and evolution of ilobola, and why it was never simply about paying for a bride. By **Malibongwe Tyilo**

"I knew I wanted to tell a story about ilobola. Because I was clueless, I needed to know how the whole process worked, especially because this was something that would be a part of my life; if I'm not the one for whom lobola will be paid, then it will be for my daughter, or if [I have a son] he is the one that will pay lobola. So somewhere, somehow, I will be involved. It's part of who I am; it's my culture," says ceramic artist and Imiso Ceramics co-founder Zizipho Poswa, referring to her latest body of work, which is on show until 1 July at Southern Guild Gallery in the Silo District at Cape Town's V&A Waterfront.

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iSazimzi (Introductory Gift).
Photo: Christof van der Walt/Southern Guild

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The exhibition, which features 12 sculptures, is titled *iLobola*, after its subject matter, the customary practice whereby the bridegroom's family makes a payment of an agreed upon number of cows to the bride's family. The practice has, at times, come under criticism for being akin to buying a bride. That criticism is further encouraged by the fact that in contemporary times, when most families do not actually keep cows, the exchange is now a financial one. The value of an individual cow is decided upon, and then the bride's family will state how many cows they want, to reach the final amount.

Followers of Poswa's work might be familiar with the story of her cultural background, especially as it played a significant role in 2018's *Umthwalo*, the seminal series that launched her transition from smaller, functional pieces to large sculptural work. Prior to *Umthwalo*, those early functional ceramic pieces were largely informed by her background in textile and surface design, as well as the reality of establishing Imiso Ceramics. She founded the business with celebrated ceramic artist Andile Dyalvane and three other partners, who left the business earlier on. Dyalvane and Poswa were not in a position to hire new people to handle various parts of the company, so they decided that Dyalvane would focus on production, while she focused on the business side of things, from accounting to retail and eventually to human resources as they grew the team: "I was working six days a week, only resting on Sundays. But I enjoyed it, and eventually things went well."

Over a decade since its founding in 2006, Imiso would grow to be one of the country's most significant ceramic studios, and Dyalvane's work would go on to gain critical acclaim. By 2016, the team had grown and Poswa could begin to dedicate more time to her creative journey.

In 2017, Southern Guild, which represents both Poswa and Dyalvane, invited her to create sculptural pieces for a group exhibition titled, *Extraordinary*. Says Poswa: "I needed to come up with something different. I needed to go and think." That was December, and like many who hail from South Africa's Eastern Cape, she left Cape Town where she is based, to visit family for the holidays in the Eastern Cape village of Centane.

As is the case with many Xhosa families during December, there was a ceremony for her brother to welcome him back from initiation school. The home was a hive of heightened activity.

As she joined in the activities, such as going to fetch additional water for the event from the river and carrying it in a bucket balanced on her head, her attention was drawn to these tasks that women in rural villages took on, tasks that had been part of her life growing up there; be it fetching water, fetching firewood, planting, harvesting, or maize milling: "I thought going home would just give me enough time and space to think, I didn't think it was going to be the inspiration behind the work."

That visit would inspire the *Umthwalo* series; the word *umthwalo*, referring to the practice of carrying a load on one's head. Depending on the context, the isiXhosa word can also be directly translated as "a load" or "a burden". In Poswa's case, the resulting sculptures were both a reflection on the actual practice, as well as a recognition of the strength and resilience of these women who carry loads, literally and metaphorically.

It is perhaps telling of the times that for Poswa, a Xhosa woman who grew up in the Eastern Cape between rural Centane and



Dutywa, one who is proud of her culture, that when it came to one of the most ubiquitous practices in Xhosa culture, *ilobola*, she found herself, as she says, "clueless".

"There's a lot that we don't know. As much as I grew up in the rural areas, when I think about our customs ... and admittedly some exclude women ... there're many things that I don't know," says Poswa. "Obviously *ilobola* is paid for the bride. But I needed to know the full story, like why that is? And why cows?" Like many of us when in search of information, the first place she turned to was the internet. "There were so many images of cattle. I wanted to see more and I started searching for different types of cows on Pinterest."

While the web would serve to inspire the visuals that would inform the shapes of the horns on the sculptures, to truly learn about the practice, she would need to draw on the knowledge of those who were familiar with the process, starting with her mother, for whom *lobola* had been paid. "But she got divorced and came back. So I asked her accountant how the process worked – he is a traditional man and he's been a [*lobola*] negotiator for the longest time. I was fortunate to have him" – through to her uncle back home. "I called him and he was so happy and proud because I would be sharing stories of our culture on a global scale, because he knows the work sells internationally. With regard to certain things that he didn't understand, he would ask friends and neighbours to confirm, because as things evolve, some practices are not the same as they used to be."

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One of the key lessons from that learning was that *lobola* is not a way to buy a wife, but rather, as she says, a way to build relations "between the two families; to unite them. The groom, as the person who paid the *lobola*, can make demands on how this *lobola* should be spent, which is [partly] meant for your wedding ceremony. The *lobola* doesn't belong to individual people per se, here. It should help the couple start off their lives, get some basic things, for example, buying a new bed. The families knew that whatever they'd received, they will be investing in the lives of their children ... the couple. Now it's more twisted; people don't look at it like that. They look at it as though one is buying a [wife]. And there's a bit of greed."

The 12 sculptures that make up the exhibition are in "voluptuous shapes as a reference to women," with varying designs of bronze horns. Each one of them is named after different parts of the custom as well as the people involved, from *umyeni*, the bridegroom, to *umakoti*, the bride, through to *oonozakuzaku*, the negotiators.

"And the reason why I've decided to focus on cattle for the sculptures, and not on anything else, is because I wanted to shine a light on that authentic way of doing things and also to educate myself and others in the process," Poswa explains. **DM168**

Zizipho Poswa in studio painting the ceramic sculptural pieces that make up 'iLobola'.

Photos: Christof van der Walt/Southern Guild