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# The Gumboot dance: sell-out or symbol?

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The gumboot dance, or *isicathulo* (lit. shoe), is a performance style from South Africa. It is a spectacular, exciting style, danced by a team of men who, clad in heavy gumboots, stamp, slap, clap and kick their heels in perfect synchronization. A leader calls the names of composed and pre-rehearsed sequences which are performed against a beat provided by musicians on one or more of an ensemble of instruments including guitar, piano accordion or concertina and violin. Team members come into their own through the performance of «singles», or solos, when they demonstrate their individuality and talents in a traditionally competitive way.

## Two video clips were shown

The style is possibly not totally unfamiliar to an international audience: gumboot sketches are frequently included in international musicals; the opening ceremony of the Rugby World Cup held in South Africa in 1995 featured a performance by a gumboot team. In other words gumboot is frequently used to place an event and mark it as South African. During the 1980s trade unions began to feature gumboot performances for entertainment at rallies; this is in keeping with its history as a workers form of expression, and indeed may be seen to have been instrumental in the crystallization of gumboot's role as a symbol of South African migrant culture. And attempts have and are again being made to introduce gumboot into secondary and tertiary education in Kwa Zulu-Natal (with varying success), allegedly initiated by the Inkatha Freedom Party in the early 1980s (or the Inkatha Movement as it was then) as a symbol of Zulu cultural identity (Muller and Topp 1985, n.p.) On the other hand the patronage of the style by white corporation managers has sparked a debate concerning the true place of gumboot performance within the racially inharmonious South African context: were performers «sell-outs», pandering to the white bosses techniques for oppression? This paper will look at the history and structure of the style within its social and political context to explore its contemporary place in the «new South Africa».

## Origins

Several theories have been suggested about the origins of the gumboot dance, some claiming it began in the docklands at Durban, others that it has its origins on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. It is very likely that whatever the urban setting was, it may well have been connected with the earlier introduction of footgear at rural mission schools «which produced a distinctive sound in comparison with other [barefoot] dances...» (Tracey, 1952:7). Based

on personal research with players in Durban and on analysis of the structure and meaning of the dance, this analysis suggests the dance started on the gold mines and later spread to Durban, and the docklands and railways in particular, with the industrial expansion of the 1920s. Despite obvious «traditional» elements and the contemporary occurrence of the style throughout South Africa, «the environment most crucial to the formation of gumboot was the peculiar social space of the gold mine in and around the city of Johannesburg» (Muller 1996:3) and the continued migrant labour experience of industrialized apartheid South Africa.

The gumboot dance started way out in the Transvaal with the advent of gold and diamond mines. There was a lot more movement from rural into urban areas. Now, Africans by nature, have their own traditional dancing. They couldn't bring these things along, so the only thing was to find out something that could give them a sound, and sing with it and dance to it. And ultimately, gumboot dance was originated. (pers.comm.: Mr Sangweni, head teacher of Ohlange High School, 1985)<sup>2</sup>.

Gumboot developed, therefore, as a hybrid form amongst migrant labourers working on the gold mines. It began during leisure hours as an informal activity; performed for fun but serving as a release of energy as an expression of experience.

The following points briefly describe, on the one hand, links with rural practice, and on the other, reflections of mine/migrant culture. These are further elucidated elsewhere (see Muller and Topp, 1985; Muller 1996).

### Links with rural practice

The structure of the performance is dominated by a leader-chorus format which is characteristic of much music-making in the area and the rest of Africa.

The dance comprises a number of rhythmic sequences performed in unison against the regular beat of instrumental accompaniment, a feature which is characteristic of much Nguni<sup>3</sup> dance.

Performers compete with one another in «singles» or solos, each trying to outdo the other with impressive manoeuvres. This is a feature that runs through many «traditional» performance styles and has been brought into numerous so-called neo-traditional dance genres<sup>4</sup>. The use of ankle rattles, or *amakhehlese* on the boots, a feature characteristic of many performance genres throughout Africa.

The audience frequently shows appreciation by throwing money at the performers. This encourages the dancers to fire up their performance. Such community support is typical of many performance styles in Africa.

1. Research on the gumboot dance, which forms the basis of this paper, has been carried out by the author and Dr. Carol Muller through 1985 and on numerous trips over the past ten years.
2. In the mid-1980s this school in KwaZulu-Natal had introduced gumboot as an extracurricula activity.
3. The Nguni language group includes Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi speakers who historically inhabit the south-eastern region of Africa, now, politically comprising Kwa Zulu-Natal, Transkei and Swaziland.
4. See Clegg 1982 and 1984.

## The dance is constituted from everyday life experience

### *Mine culture reflections*

Evidence of social control in regimentation of performance. Between sequences the leader asks the dancers to mark time with a call of «Lef-right!», and a common sequence is called «Attention!» which requires the dancers to raise their hands to their caps in a salute, military style. Mining compounds and hostels were strictly monitored by compound police.

Tap dancing, jitterbug and other performance styles of the 1930s and 40s and the importance of Fred Astaire. Many uniforms were imitations of American cowboys. Films of the period were shown on mine compounds for entertainment.

Many sequences make reference to urban life experience. The sequence called *Isihamba na Dali* (Go with you Darling/girlfriend) is reference to the fact that, as it was explained by the dancers, it was easier to walk along the street with a woman because two men walking together were instantly suspicious. As far as authorities were concerned they could only be up to no good!<sup>5</sup>.

Many sequences make direct reference to mining locations, such as Germiston, Benoni, Johannesburg, and to urban experience, such as «Good Morning Baas», *Amaphoyisa*, *Abelungu* (white people) which sees the dancers on their knees in a praying position, and to mining experience such as «Danger!».

## The use of town instruments such as guitars and violins, piano accordions.

### *The use of gumboots, in other words, working regalia.*

The Gumboot dance should be seen, therefore, like the majority of its performers, as situated between tradition and modernity; rural and urban; pre-industrial and contemporary. But Gumboot should not be seen only as a mirror of society. «The very act of performance plays a socially constitutive role... Performers and audience, by enacting or appreciating a performance, may create themselves as groups in the process» (James 1996:1). The dancers use Gumboot to constitute their own identities. The remainder of the paper suggests some of the ways in which this is perceivable.

From the early stages gumboot was patronized by the white bosses as a means of boosting morale among the workers. They encouraged the formation of formal performance teams which would rehearse and compete with teams from other compounds. Prizes, supplied by mine management, ranged from live animals to cash. This patronage and the association of the style with tourist mine dance shows has led to an understanding, in some quarters, of the dance as a tourist trap manipulated by white businessmen. The following observation by Jeremy Marre and Hannah Charlton in their article which documented their Channel 4 TV series of the mid-80s, «Beats of the Heart», expresses a not uncommon impression held by «outsiders»:

5. Thanks to Carol Muller for this information.

Most publicized of all the tourist traps are the so-called miners' gumboot dances which we were asked to film one day. Nattily dressed miners in polished gumboots performed in a sort of circus for the avid, chattering tourists who photographed the show to take back as a «real slice of black South African life». It was, in fact, funded and staged by the mining authorities. This travesty is a political manipulation of *Ngoma*, a Zulu group dance with song. (1985:50). Certainly gumboot dancers, and team leaders in particular, could expect a degree of favouritism from management by being given white collar positions, for example. Not an insignificant consideration given the dangers of underground mining and the responsibilities many migrants had, and still have, for supporting large families back home in the rural areas. Certainly many elements of *ingoma* (traditional music/dance events) are seen clearly in gumboot performance. And its promotion may well have been part of the State's policy of keeping Africans as residents of rural reserves rather than allowing them to become city-dwellers. But being a gumboot dancer also enables people to establish personal networks and to create new identities within unfamiliar and an often hostile environment. Teams most frequently comprise members from the same rural areas. No longer able to live in close proximity, through participation in gumboot, individuals are provided with an opportunity to interact with people of a shared background and to project this identity within their new, heterogenous environment. They serve to orientate newcomers to the towns. Moreover, in today's South Africa, with limited opportunities for employment, being a gumboot dancer can provide the edge needed to find work; many large corporations sponsor their own gumboot teams which they need to keep competitive by making sure they have good members. Some older dancers are teaching their sons with this specific purpose in mind. I would argue therefore that performers cannot be seen as sell-outs. Rather, participation in gumboot was a way for Africans forced into urban environments to make sense of their new experience.

Furthermore, the development of new styles incorporating features from this new experience, such as their «natty» dress, the regimented aesthetic of the dance, and the incorporation of aspects of *ingoma*, are testimony to the inspiration of the creators of the dance and are indicators of the processes of cultural adaptation and change. I argue that it reflects and symbolizes, and is part of, the social identity of the participants. Through an analysis of dancers' and teams' stylistic and organizational aspects gumboot can be seen as an indicator of, an is used to create their personal orientation in society as semi-urban with all the connotations of class that this category evokes: for even though many have lived and worked in towns for 20 or 30 years, as migrant labourers their rural homes are considered by them to be their security.

But in contemporary South Africa gumboot performance is becoming part of extra-curricula activities in schools and of the repertoires of theatre/dance groups. Town-based performers have been known to teach rural-based children, thus taking the style directly into rural areas (normally to equip them for the job market); participants no longer come from a single ethnic group (originally *Bhaca* and *Zulu*); a number of girls gumboot teams have emerged (Muller 1996:15). Performance has thus moved out of the mining and industrial or migrant culture environments to become part of a much broader cultural experience. In

these contexts certain aspects of the dance have changed. A team made up of 13-18 year old boys and girls at Ohlange High School, for example, wore shiny cat-suit uniforms, used no ankle rattles, used much lighter (non-industrial) boots and performed sequences with names like «Soweto», South Africa's largest township. Carol Muller points out that some of the new girls teams have «changed all the names of their sequences to reflect the contemporary reality of 'shebeen' culture» (1996:15), a township environment where women play a central role as venue owners and beer brewers. For example *amablekjek* (slang for mine compound police and a standard sequence played by virtually all groups) has become *amablekjazz* referencing contemporary township jive which emerged from «shebeen» culture.

In summary, the gumboot dance is taken, for the purposes of this paper, as a case study to demonstrate the relevance of studying cultural expressive forms as indicators of emergent cultural identities and as tools in the creation of these identities. Through a study of gumboot and the surrounding *local* discourse, as of many other symbolic activities, we gain insight into the life experiences of those who participate in it. But more than this, we gain insight into more general cultural processes central to contemporary anthropology such as adaptation, urbanization, and the development of cultural pride and identity. Inextricable are the processes of musical (in the broadest sense) innovation, adaptation and assimilation, and the incorporation of styles as part of cultural heritage.

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