

Identity, Diversity, and Modernity in an Urban Cultural Cocktail

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*Originally Published in African Arts Journal (MIT Press)
Winter, 2011 Vol. 44, No. 4*

Abstract

As a black African dancer, I am constantly expected to conform to stereotypical perceptions of the Western world and of African traditionalists. Africa is widely perceived on the one hand as a war zone ravaged by the Aids pandemic and poverty and on the other hand as exotic, colourful and primitive. I propose to deconstruct this stereotype through my personal history, my work as a performer and choreographer living in a city and my research on urban popular contemporary intercultural dance forms.

I will first examine the development of my personal identity, and the broader perspective of cultural identities in South Africa, and then return to my personal cultural identity as a member of wider South African society.

Personal Anthropology

"We all see things through our personal histories, with their parts rooted in convention and their parts that became subject to change. These histories come to include reflections on what made us enter into them. Through such reflections I believe we become political, because they address questions of gender, race, class, nationality and family origins. With political consciousness...some knowledge of self and place...change becomes possible." (Johnson, in Gottschild, 1997: 167).

I was born in the township of Soweto, the microcosm or the soul of South Africa. To many in Western society, Soweto is a symbol of the black struggle for freedom in South Africa. However, to South Africans like me it signifies the country's main black metropolis and leading centre of black urban culture - a world on its own. Adjacent to Soweto is the city of Johannesburg, which I describe as a playground of shared energies, of hope and despair, of trials and tribulations, of joy and pain manifested by the diverse cultures embodied by this city. My history, which is also reflected in my dance works, is very much a tale of these multiple urban images.

My parents, however, were born neither in Soweto nor in Johannesburg. My father comes from the Eastern Cape, (Port Alfred) and my mother from the Lesotho mountains. Both came from places where their identities were clear and very much part of their society, where racial or ethnic interaction was not fashionable. They met in Johannesburg where they found a new environment, culture, values and norms. They became part of the community of Soweto and they adopted the culture, style, language, music and dance as an active choice. Dance and music became an important part of their culture, and they listened to various forms of music, ranging from African jazz and pop to American soul music.

Outside my home environment I was introduced to more styles of music and dance - Mbaqanga, Maskanda, Isicathamiya, and South African 'bubblegum music', which form the basis of my research work today. The rhythm of the music was not the only factor that categorised these urban forms of expression, but also how people reacted to that particular style of music in their dress code, language and dance. In the early 1980's I was searching for my own identity influenced by what was happening around me. It was as if everyone wanted to look, feel, talk and dance differently from the rest and at the same time I could

see this amazing uniformity, as if the world was moving in the same direction. Identity was a big thing, peer pressure mounted, and a sense of wanting to be seen and heard pushed me to find others who had the same needs as mine, with whom I could identify. When television was introduced in 1976, my life was flooded with pop icons like Michael Jackson, George Michael, and Prince. I wanted to be like them; I wanted to be a star; I wanted to dress and dance like them. I started reproducing their dance routines and mixing them with South African urban popular rhythms and styles. That was the beginning of my choreographic pathway, without even realising that I was in fact dealing with choreography. Five friends and I created a group of our own which was to learn and perform the reproduced fused steps/choreography. We gained respect amongst our peers, but on the other hand we were subjected to humiliation for not conforming to stereotypical behaviour and dress codes that adults demanded. Tinted hair, colourful t-shirts, torn stone-washed jeans and pop music created our identity. At home we faced disciplinary problems for insisting on creating these characters, which were not at all welcomed - not that we were unruly, but only because we were shockingly different all of a sudden. In later years, and perhaps today I do understand, the reaction of our community to our style. I realized that generally in a 'traditional' African household, a man is the head of the family and he leads by example. However, while I understand, I do not accept this concept of a man's role in society. Soweto housed many cultures that differed in traditions, norms and values, and at the same time that I was made to feel like an outcast, some of the youth, like a group called the Mapantsulas, who intentionally went against the 'traditional' structures, still managed to gain the respect and acceptance of the communities.

When I went to high school we were to face the same problem of having to fight for space and for our identity. It was not only space but also dealing with the names that were given to us like the 'Michael Jackson plastics', or 'punks'. We were seen as unruly and this perception of us created much confusion, since I thought that we were the most humble and the most vulnerable, and yet we were subjected to various forms of humiliation and discriminated against. We started missing school since it wasn't the best place for us, and anyway education was destroyed by school riots taking their toll in the townships. We had to learn with the South African Defense Force surrounding our school, and even present in our classrooms with their guns pointing in our direction. How on earth do you even dare to watch or listen to a teacher, while you are imagining a gun being fired in your direction - even by mistake? Our teachers had the difficult task of having to teach according to the textbook; anything else called for trouble. The students took great advantage of the situation, and they just caused chaos. If the soldiers gave chase to a student, that called for school 'out'. Great! It was a chance for my group and me to miss school without feeling any guilt for playing truant. We were not wasteful when it came to time; we directed our energies into something meaningful - dancing. We called ourselves 'Joy Dancers'. Vuyani means 'Joy' which happens to be my 'ethnic name'. My present company is called, 'Vuyani Dance Theatre ', a project based dance company that performs my works in Africa and the rest of the world.

When I finished my matric, I wanted to study medicine but lack of funding determined otherwise. At that time I was already with the Moving into Dance organization, which I joined in 1990 as a part-time student, and a year later joined the performing company. When a scholarship to study for a degree wasn't forthcoming, I auditioned at Moving into Dance to study in their full-time Community Teachers Training Course, which enabled me to teach in schools in the townships. However, dancing and teaching wasn't paying enough to provide me with adequate living expenses, and I was still dependent on my parents. When my mother became unemployed and my father was retrenched from his job, I had no option but to find a way of helping my family, as our culture expects. I left dancing in 1994 to study and work in an insurance business. I was placed with an Afrikaans company 'Prestasi'.

I lasted only a year then joined 'Allianz' Insurance, a German company with their offices in South Africa. I kept on dancing during weekends. A friend of mine Vincent Mantsoe offered me the opportunity to be in his choreographic works to tour with Moving into Dance to eight countries in Africa. This internationally acclaimed choreographer and dancer was the only one, apart from me, of the original five Joy Dancers, who continued to create and perform works. I left Allianz to tour and perform with Moving into Dance and from that experience I knew that I had to face my challenges and do what is right - dance. With the experience of my being in a youth group, which constantly broke barriers, and my experience of being in the so-called 'real world' or the working class, I carried with me a mission to express my multiple points of view without being self-conscious, and have generated attentive consideration from diverse audiences.

Apartheid Policy and Urbanisation

The apartheid policy in South Africa served as a catalyst for new creative artistic ideas. From most of my reading and understanding, I have realised that for generations the history of the black people in South Africa has either been written from a perspective that undermines a rich and vibrant past, or completely removes the many voices that make up the black communities in South Africa. I have also realised that many South African dance forms were created as a form of protest against the government of the time. These dances also expressed social integration within the cultural diversity of black Sowetans. One of these, Marabi, was the name, which was given to the exuberant new urban culture created by slum dwellers in the 1920's. Marabi became more than just music and dance; it created hope and showed possibilities for racial mix. It is a dance form that brought people from different backgrounds together.

Historically, South Africa could be seen as a 'migration country'. It is necessary to recognise that migration has, and continues to change the way of life, and the culture of its inhabitants. Migration in South Africa can be seen as two fold:

1. Urban Migration - Africans moved from their rural areas of birth, forced by their circumstances and living conditions. Imposed taxes, imposed civilization, imposed forms of trading, shortage of fertile land and natural causes like drought are factors that force people to move to big cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth. They bring with them to the cities their cultures, traditions, values and rituals. In this different setting they want to practice their own traditions but they face the challenges of having to live, work and share things with others who might be practicing different traditions and rituals, with different values and norms. A new environment however, does allow them to form a new community that sets new traditions, cultures and value systems. This is evident in their urban developed dance forms like isicathamiya.

2. External Migration - the second form of migration, where people from other countries immigrate to South Africa, particularly to cities. You find that Africans from other parts of Africa are also forced to emigrate by their circumstances and issues that unfold in their own countries; issues like war, politics, and the demands of Western civilization. We must also remember that most of the African continent was colonized by the British, French, Portuguese and the Dutch. The settlers from these countries brought with them their cultures, languages and ideas that were money-driven, hence creating tension amongst the indigenous people. As a result the country was divided by power-driven wars.

Some immigrants move to South Africa from already developed so-called 'first world' countries, seeking opportunities to use cheap labour, to spend their money on cheaper property and to enjoy an exclusive lifestyle.

City Recreation

Migrant labourers were moved from occupying slums in the city of Johannesburg, to Soweto, a township, which houses many ethnic groups. In 1931, the new African township of Orlando arose in the heart of modern Soweto - 15km southwest of Johannesburg. The prime reason for the location was its distance away from urban areas. Why? To prevent further integration and racial mix in the city of Johannesburg. Orlando housed many different African ethnic groups. In Soweto, the Nationalist apartheid government that came to power in 1948, segregated people according to their language not their preference. Hostels were built inside the township to accommodate the influx of mine workers coming from all over southern Africa. The pressures of urban life gave rise to new social organizations, dance forms and political movements.

"The rich and varied associational life of urban Africans has long included performance as a major focus of identity formation and cultural patterning" (Coplan: 1985: 239). Music and dances kept people going and in touch with their culture. Identity in Soweto was an important social marker, and it is still, to some extent. Your dress code, your way of walking and the way you conducted yourself in public was enough for people to know your identity. By the late 1960's three distinct styles could be distinguished - that of the 'Hippies', the 'Ivies' whose names reflected their particular style of dressing and sophistication and the 'Pantsulas,' the most respected and feared of the three, who created their own unique expression in movement, language and behaviour. Later they were known as gangsters and were not welcomed by many. The word still exists today in a dance form called Pantsula, a township urban form that fuses American tap dancing, Marabi, break-dancing and traditional African dances. Today there is an additional style called the 'retro', which is basically the mixture of the three.

The distinctive feature of the 'Hippies' at that time was bell-bottomed trousers, tight t-shirts and pointed shoes or boots. The 'Ivies' searched for sophistication. Their trousers needed to go at least above the bellybutton; they used perfumes and visited trendy places and sheebens and were called sissies by the 'Pantsulas'. 'Pantsulas' were identified by wearing expensive clothes showing off their designer labels and wearing cotton caps called 'sporties'. The three groups had their own 'hang outs', mainly shebeens in the townships. The shebeens provided havens from the harsh realities of daily life. On virtually every street one or two homes were turned into all-night, seven-days-a-week drinking houses. They were run by 'shebeen queens', usually single or divorced women courageous enough to defy the laws which forbade the sale of alcohol in the township outside the municipal beerhalls. In the heart of all this, were the hostels which abounded with of song and dance on the weekends. Dance competitions were also held to promote culture. More and more forms were developed in the hostels, mostly by Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers who used their circumstances to create new forms like isicathamiya. Isicathamiya means 'in a hunting approach' or 'to step lightly' and refers to the tiptoed position used in the dancing - like a cat stalking its prey, very aware of its surroundings.

The world renowned and internationally acclaimed all-male acapella group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, brought isicathamiya to the world through their collaboration with Paul Simon on the Graceland album. Isicathamiya incorporated Zulu ingoma dance with the synchronised structure of a line. They moved in the same manner and dressed in the matching sport jackets, shirts, gloves and shiny shoes which replaced the Zulu traditional skins and spears. Paradoxically, one can say that urbanisation in our diversity is made possible by 'choices' that people make - however these 'choices' don't necessarily make them urban.

All these people bring with them their cultural practices that lead to a constant exchange of

culture that enriches the South African 'rainbow culture'.

Cultural Identity, Diversity and Modernity

In many places in the world, people feel that political pressure defines cultural identity in ethnic terms, and cultural diversity in political terms. Cultural identity, however, cannot be defined in terms of race and ethnicity alone. It is a complex subject and it is complicated further by such factors as gender, class, generation, sexual and religious orientation and the tension between tradition and modernity.

Our contemporary moment in the world of art is particularly interesting and exciting, despite the quagmire that is South African dance and its political standing in the area of funding. I am conscious of the idiom of the contemporary with which I am working. I am also aware that art is a domain of reality in which social and emotional conflicts can be brought out into the open and made available for public discussion. I am aware that I am controversial at times. I sometimes create discomfort within comfort. I am also aware that I am ironical in my theatrical approach. I am furthermore aware that I am a black South African male and a dancer, which is on its own a phenomenon. While, sometimes it is to my advantage to be black, at times it is awfully inconvenient!

As an artist I am constantly inspired by these complexities. It is from these tensions, confrontations and mixing of ideas and artistic forms that we create new and innovative art works. I have freed myself from demanding traditional values and cultural identities. It is in this regard that traditional hierarchies are being challenged and confrontations have become visible. I have allowed other cultures, traditions and forms, by choice, to form part of my anthropological cocktail. I bear the heritage of a monolithic tribe/tradition with certain norms, value systems and traditions. I do acknowledge that connection, and have great respect for it. I am quite aware that I cannot be the sole representative of that indigenous tradition since it is different from what I regard as my current identity. However, I do explore these traditional aesthetic forms and ethical values in a personal and stylistic manner and without doubt I still refer to certain expressive traditions, community values or societal issues as a reference in my work and choreography. The question is, does it make me or the work that I present any less African in my culture, if I wear ballet shoes and dance to the music of Bach? If this should be the case, then the word 'culture' certainly needs to be clarified. 'Culture is not only a set of symbols, values or beliefs of people, but also a response to circumstances' (Glasser: 1990).

Identity in our diversity makes it difficult to define whom we are, where we come in our development as a country and as a nation. The history of South Africa is bounded by its political past, especially the role of apartheid, as we move into a transitional period. Presently our society is challenging the cultural hegemony, questioning what it is to be a South African in our diverse society. Without doubt, migration to cities leads to urbanisation but being in the city does not automatically constitute one as being urbanised. I believe urbanisation is by choice - you choose to live in a city, conform to the new lifestyle, the culture and value systems, or you choose to work in the city and still practice your 'traditional' beliefs and retain your value systems within the new circumstances. It doesn't however make one less African or more African than the other.

Conclusion

It is my belief that people of different backgrounds can transcend cultural barriers and create a new and dynamic culture; at the same time it is my belief that cities do not necessarily define a person or a nation. In a city you fight for individuality and in our

diversity you fight for identity. " People are what they are by virtue of how they actually live, produce and reproduce themselves, how they actually shape and reshape their everyday world". (Zegeye : 2001: 320). A city like Johannesburg provides a platform for cross-cultural production especially in terms of dance. Living in a city we are bound to conform to its rules and its transitory nature, but it does not make us any less 'traditional' or 'African'. Having said that I also challenge traditionalist by saying that it is not possible, or practical, to expect me or any other person brought up in this 'cultural cocktail' to represent a single culture of one clearly defined community in our diverse human landscape. My recent work, in collaboration with Faustin Linyekula of Congo, 'Tales Off The Mud Wall' tends to override the 'African Formula' and the stereotypical expectations. It is a work that fuses mud huts, internet and globalisation; it focuses on silence, tolerance and honesty. In our quest to express our true identities, we searched for a real reflection of our identities, searching inside rather than outside where everything else is happening in isolation. Being true to who we are also acknowledges the many centuries of social and political heritage. We can't just erase that.

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