

**The Growth And Evolution Of Gumboot Dance:Examining Its Classification As A
Traditional And Contemporary Dance (A Case Study Of South Africa)**

By

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Abstract

Dance is a rhythmic movement of the body, often to music, for expression of feelings, thoughts, ideas or the sole purpose of enjoyment. Dance can be performed variously in accordance to context (Gloria, 2019). Gumboot dance is a notable type of dance in South Africa also traditionally known as Isicathulo which means shoes (Akumbo, 2016). It is a traditional South African dance which emanated from the roots of mining communities. This paper aims to examine the growth and evolution of gumboot dance, examining its classification as a traditional and contemporary type of dance. This study used a qualitative approach to investigate Gumboot dance as one of the prominent dances in South Africa, its modern influences and its tourist and cultural relevance. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study since it focuses on understanding the meanings, experiences, and interpretations that have shaped gumboot dance's evolution and function in contemporary South African society. The secondary research method/ content analysis is used to examine existing research studies and publications about gumboot dance. This method is suitable for offering a full account of gumboot dance's evolution across time, including current influences, as well as its contribution to tourism and cultural identity. The descriptive analysis focuses on identifying the trends, themes, and patterns in the literatures used. Instead of collecting new data, the analysis focuses on combining current research findings to address crucial issues about gumboot dance's evolution. Implementing recommendations will help preserve, promote, and further develop Gumboot Dance as both a traditional cultural expression and a contemporary performance art in South Africa, ensuring its sustainability for future generations.

Keywords: Contemporary Dance, Evolution, Gumboot dance

INTRODUCTION

Dance is part of many activities humans indulge in for the sole purpose of keeping the mind, soul and body sane. It is one out of many physical activities humans involve in for so many reasons including solving the human thoughts. It can be solely for the purpose of aesthetic, cultural entertainment, fitness training and it can be a good educational tool for children (Chelsea, 2018). Dance is therefore a rhythmic movement of the body, often to music, for expression of feelings, thoughts, ideas or the sole purpose of enjoyment. Dance can be performed variously in accordance to context (Gloria, 2019). In South Africa, dancing is part of their crucial means of identification which they seem to use in building their communities and most importantly fostering a collective chain break and healing. They make use of dance to fight for their freedom, just like the 2015 “FEES MUST FALL” where students danced TOYI-TOYI, a dance that symbolizes solidarity.

Gumboot dance is a notable type of dance in South Africa also traditionally known as Isicathulo which means shoes (Akumbo, 2016). It is a traditional South African dance which emanated from the roots of mining communities, particularly in the early 20th century when the discovery of gold in South Africa was eminent which led to both economical and political change in the country making immigrants flock in and want to have a share in mining the gold. In 1800 during the apartheid era, South Africa was led by the British colony leading to low economic and political participation of the South Africans. And at this time, the British colony was fully in charge of the resources that emanated from this country hence, all mineral resources were pocketed by the colonial government (Kaywood, 2021). Due to this, rural South Africa labourers were used in mining out gold for the colonial government and the immigrants through forced labour. The labourers faced hardships and oppressions in the mines at the hands of the immigrants. They were forced to work without any form of communication. They worked for three months at time mining in total darkness. Hundreds of workers were chained after labour and forbidden to have conversations with others. These workers were dying day by day due to work accidents, sickness, malnutrition or either being beaten to death. At the same time, the workers were forbidden from wearing their traditional outfits and rather they were given overalls and gumboots. Inside the mines, the workers started using the gumboots to communicate by stamping their feet and rattling their chains and this became a social activity and the employers started using the labourers to entertain their visitors (Tompkins, 2002).

This dance therefore evolved from the harsh conditions under which the workers labored and it transformed from a means of survival and solidarity into a globally recognized art showing resilience, cultural adaptation, and innovation. This made the Gumboot dance a clear means of communication and a popular type of dance through which they use in entertaining visitors. This practice performed by black miners working in the mines of South Africa under oppressive labor conditions, gumboot dance became a method of communication and resistance, using rhythmic foot stamping, body movements, and the distinctive clapping of boots. Over time, this dance evolved into a more formalized and widely recognized cultural performance that has found its way into contemporary dance forms, music genres, and global trends. The dance is now popularly performed world-wide to entertain, pass information and show off South Africa history (Houston, 2019). The dance comprises a team of men, they put on heavy gumboots, stomping, clapping, slapping and kicking their heels in perfect synchronization. They have a leader who pronounces their next step in accordance to their already rehearsed steps to which they’ll perform using beats provided by musicians. The instruments can include guitar, piano or violin. Team members also perform solos in what they call singles where they demonstrate their talents individually (Nicola, 2014).

The gumboot dance is energetic as they make use of their bodies including their hands, legs, heads to make rhythmic sounds and movements. It involves feet stomping in synchronic order and fast paced, thunderous boot and hand clapping to bring out a good rhythm (International Library of Africa Music, 2019). The dance is performed in a line formation with the dancers moving in unison and breaking into solo performances known as “singles” (Anyawu, 2022). Gumboot dance solely relies on the sound produced from the body tapping and the foot stomping. The sound that comes from hitting the feet against the ground surface, rattling of the ankle chain, thunderous sound of the hand hitting the boot and the chest and also from the hand clapping provides a sharp sound that makes one feel the dance within the soul. (Janet, 1999).

This dance movement is an expression of the dancer's feelings and a vital means of communication for the dancers before the new era where the dance is now mixed with other dance styles, music or cultural traditions like pantsula (a South Africa dance that is characterized by energetic and athletic movement), Tap dance (a modern type of dance that's similar to the gumboot dance). This blending has contributed to the evolution of gumboot dance and created a new dimension to the traditional style. The dance was often spontaneous and a form of collective expression, reflecting the miners' shared struggles, frustrations, and aspirations. Over time, it also became a form of resistance, a way for workers to reclaim their agency and express defiance against oppressive conditions. In the mid-20th century, gumboot dance began to enter the public performance arena and into the South African township culture, resulting in global interest in African music and dance, which led to the art form gaining recognition beyond the mines. In the 1970s and 1980s, South African theater companies and performers like the South African Gumboot Dance Group began incorporating gumboot dance into performances that addressed the social and political theme creating a high energy performances and rhythm for the sole purpose of showcasing the resistance, identity, and unity the gumboot dance has brought to South Africa at large (McDonald, 2019). In the 1990s, after the end of apartheid, gumboot dance gained international recognition and was incorporated into the performances of major global theater and dance companies. It started being used in the entertainment industry, from theater productions to commercial music videos.

Gumboot dance holds an immense cultural significance for South African communities, particularly among descendants of mine workers. It acts as a living memory of the hardships endured by their ancestors. The dance has become a symbol of African resilience, unity, and the ability to make art out of adversity (Mason, 2014). For many, it represents an important connection to South Africa's past, particularly during apartheid when public expression was not regarded. Gumboot dance came out of the need for collective expression and unity among miners. Today, it continues to serve as a means of building community, whether among performers or audiences. In schools, theaters, and cultural festivals, it fosters togetherness and it is now used as a tool for educating younger generations about the history of labor struggles, apartheid, and South Africa's cultural heritage. The global rise of gumboot dance has shown the power of cultural exchange. The dance, initially started from the South African labor movement, and now has traveled the world, showcasing how art can move from its origins and connect to different cultures. International performances of gumboot dance contribute to the global talk about race, identity, and the experiences of communities. It has stayed and mixed with global dance trends which further improves its global appeal (Gritsch, 2016). The growth of gumboot dance in global theater, film, and music videos has created awareness about South African history and the struggle of its people. It is a powerful tool in arts education, helping people across the world understand South African history and its people's resilience.

The influence of gumboot dance has gone through other art forms, inspiring musicians, choreographers, and visual artists. Its rare type of rhythm and style are evident in contemporary African music and dance genres, including kwaito, hip hop, and even contemporary global performance art. Gumboot dance has led to collaborations with artists from diverse backgrounds, creating new works that build bridges between different cultural traditions. Gumboot dance performances have gained popularity worldwide, and now they contribute to the cultural tourism industry and serve as a tool for economic development in South Africa. Shows like "Stomp," which draws heavily from gumboot dance, have achieved international success and have given many dancers opportunities to perform on global stages, further spreading African culture.

This paper aims to examine the growth and evolution of gumboot dance, examining its classification as a traditional and contemporary type of dance, the way at which its performed and displayed to the people, the major cultural significance of the dance in the ancient time and present. This paper in addition will be examining the touristic value of this dance to its region and how the dance helps to foster identity and total building or development of the community or country at large. This paper will significantly examine the dance mixture with the modern way of dancing and the effect of modern dance on it.

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- Examine gumboot dance a traditional or contemporary dance
- Evaluate the main elements that define gumboot dance
- Determine how gumboot dance reflect regional cultural and social values
- Determine the significance of the dance to the culture and community at large

Literature Review

Nicola (2014) in her study, *The Diversity of African Musics, Zulu kings, Khosa Clicks and Gumboot Dancing in South Africa* 2014; examined the historical origins and parallel of gumboot dance. Nicola F. Mason is a prominent scholar whose work on South African dance, particularly regarding traditional and modern interpretations, provides important insights into the evolution of performance art in the post-apartheid South Africa. One of her notable focuses has been on how traditional forms of dance, such as Gumboot dance, have transformed in response to modernity and globalization. The study explores the multicultural diversities in the musical, sounds and most particularly the dance in accordance with the beliefs and insights in South Africa. This empirical review examines Mason's study on how the study determines how traditional and the modern part of gumboot synchronize and cohabit, showing the history, culture and the invention that has been brought to South Africa dance styles like Gumboot dancing. Mason's research focuses on how Gumboot dancing retains its cultural importance while adapting to contemporary trends and practices by understanding its historical origins as a form of survival and resistance among South African miners, particularly under apartheid. Originally, this type of dancing originated as a means of communication for miners who were forbidden from speaking in the mine.

According to the study, the rhythm patterns that was created by stamping, clapping and kicking did not only serve as a defense against the oppression of the system but also poses as a form of solidarity between the miners which allows them to connect emotionally and socially while still adhering to the strict code of communication on them. Mason's study also examines the cultural preservation of the gumboot dance by showing how gumboot dancing is seen as a vehicle that connects the apartheid era to the modern time pointing out the dance remains a seen and evidence story of the apartheid era and what the people went through. Mason, additionally in

her study discusses the evolution of gumboot dance in the post-apartheid era, showing how the dance moved from its traditional identity to a more dramatic and marketable performance. This change made gumboot dance to be then seen as a contemporary dance mixed with it with different contemporary musical instruments. Nicola (2014), research made use of qualitative research design and purposive sampling to select ten participants for an interview in Johannesburg Soweto. Using an ethnographic approach, Mason observed how gumboot dancing is being displayed.

Janet Topp Fargion in her study, *The Gumboot Dance: sell-out or symbol*, argues that gumboot dance which originated from the South Africa mines has become a symbol of sellout due to the commercialization imposed on it by external forces. In this study, Fargion identifies some key elements that defines gumboot dance and one of these elements include;

Rhythm and Timing; gumboot dance according to Fargion, is characterized by a four- beat structure (1-2-3-4) where every dancer makes sure that every beat corresponds to a specific body position therefore creating a rhythmic experience through the stomping and clapping of the boots. Dancers use their bodies most particularly their feet and hands as an instrument to create the rhythmic sounds. Gumboot dance often makes use of polyrhythms that allows different rhythms to be layered on each other which then creates a sweet and dynamic sound to behold. (Fargion, 1998)

Footwork and Movement; The dance involves the use of complex foot work that include stomping of feet, tapping and slapping the gumboot to produce the perfect synchronized pleasing and rhythmic sound. (Muller, 1999).

Costume and Adornment; Dancers wear overall farm/mining clothes with gumboots embellished with bells so as to ring when the dancers stomp their feet on the ground just like in the apartheid era where the miners had chains on their legs in which makes sounds whenever the stamping communication commences. (Erlmann, 2017).

This study employed the use of a qualitative approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and participant observation. The researcher conducted its fieldwork in South Africa by observing the gumboot performances, interviewing the dancers, the community leaders and cultural & historical leaders. This research provides a more valuable insight towards the dance showing how the dance has become a symbol of South Africa culture and identity. The dance gaining international recognition has become a sell-out symbol of South African culture thereby preserving the culture.

The study, *Gumboots: An explosion of spirit and song*; Ida Hanni Brandt researched Gumboot Dance as a South Africa dance that is under-researched and thereby posing as a challenge for its cultural contexts and movement. The study reflects that Gumboots dance evolved from its origins as a survival tool and grew into a strong cultural representation of South African identity and through the foot stamping, clapping, and chanting, all of which are based in African musical traditions shows the intimate link between rhythm and community.

The dance therefore incorporates components from numerous African civilizations and demonstrates a common heritage of resilience and togetherness (Foster, 2012). The study suggests that the dance serves as a reminder of the power of music and dance to preserve and express cultural identity. This dance thereby reflects how significant it is to South African culture. And in the case of its Regional reflection of the dance, the study shows that the dance originated in South Africa from the mining regions of the country. Hence, the dance is purely a South African dance even with different contemporary dance mixed with it. The study emphasizes on the significance of gumboot dance to its society (Ngcobo, 2010) Gumboot dance

has evolved into a form of storytelling, capturing the collective experiences of the black working class.

Gumboots dance, which uses music, lyrics, and movement, depicts the hardships that miners suffered during apartheid. But it also represents hope, empowerment, and resistance. Today, the dance continues to address societal concerns like inequality, injustice, and the struggle for rights. It has evolved into a cultural performance that addresses current issues while remembering the past. The study employed a qualitative approach making use of relevant theoretical concepts and perspectives to examine the gumboot dance performers using observation, interviews and analysis of performance.

Carol Muller's research on gumboot dance offers a thorough examination of its significance in both South African culture and the larger community. The research reflects how Gumboot dancing started in South African gold mine labor camps, where workers were unable to communicate vocally due to severe working circumstances and apartheid rules, so they devised a unique method of communication through rhythmic clapping and stomping on their gumboots. What started out as a practical necessity has grown into a cultural emblem of resistance, togetherness, and identity. Muller's work investigates how this art form has evolved to signify far more than its humble beginnings, representing a history of struggle, solidarity, and pride for the communities who still practice it now.

Gumboot dance is historically significant in the context of South African labour movements. During apartheid, workers secretly communicated and expressed their dissatisfaction with the oppressive system through the rhythm of their boots. This kind of expression served as both a form of resistance and a means of maintaining agency in the face of a system that was designed to silence them. According to Muller's research, gumboot dance has been incorporated into national festivals to convey a message of communal power and solidarity, commemorating not only the fight for liberation but also South Africa's rich and diverse cultural identity. Gumboot dancing is often seen as a community's pulse. It serves as a vehicle for social cohesion, bringing together people from many origins and walks of life to celebrate their shared struggles and triumphs. Dancers form a profound relationship through rhythmic sounds and synchronized movements, connecting them not only to the past but also with one another in the present. Muller's analysis of this community feature focuses on how gumboot dancing promotes belonging and cultural pride, providing a sense of continuity from the past to the future (Muller, 2009). It is no longer simply about mining or labor; it is about communal solidarity, cultural preservation, and social togetherness. Muller's approach to studying gumboot dancing draws on a variety of methodologies, allowing her to interact fully with both the dance and its larger cultural background. The researcher's approach is heavily encompassed in ethnomusicology, a science that studies the cultural importance of music and performance. Muller immerses herself in the communities where gumboot dancing is done as a participant rather than a spectator. This practice allows her to witness directly how dance serves as both a means of communication and a performance of resistance.

The rhythms and motions of the dance while also comprehending the cultural and emotional significance they hold for individuals who participate. Carol Muller's research of gumboot dance brings light to its cultural, historical, and social relevance of the dance in South Africa. The researcher uses anthropological approaches to demonstrate how the dance functions as both a symbol of resistance and a celebration of community and identity. Muller (1999), presents a full explanation of gumboot dance's role in South African culture by connecting its rhythmic elements to its broader cultural and political meanings. The dance, which was

previously used to communicate in the face of tyranny, has evolved into a strong symbol of resilience, solidarity, and cultural pride that continues to play an important role in South Africa's social and cultural life today.

Over time, the once restricted medium of communication and expression has evolved and changed into a powerful art form with contemporary elements that represent South Africa's diverse and vibrant culture. There are many modern influences on the gumboot dance which includes; Cultural Blending and Popularity One of which is the most notable changes in gumboot dance is the incorporation of different dance genres. Gumboot dancing is now commonly included into urban genres such as hip-hop, jazz, and contemporary dance. The end effect is a fresh, modern take on classic rhythms and motions that appeals to a wide range of audiences. Gumboot dance has become more dynamic as a result of the merging of diverse genres, which is appealing to younger generations who are drawn to its energy and variety (Van der Merwe, 2018).

Global Exposure Through Media: Platforms such as YouTube and Instagram have helped gumboot dancing reach a global audience, resulting in performances all over the world. Its inclusion in global theatrical productions, such as those featured in "Stomp," has helped to promote this distinctively South African dance genre beyond the country's borders (Gqola, 2017). As the dance gains popularity, it evolves into new forms that combine its rich past with contemporary performance art.

Theatrical Interpretations: Gumboot dance has become an important part of theatrical plays, where it is frequently used to tell stories, express emotions, and enrich cultural narratives. For example, events at Durban's Playhouse Theatre have enhanced the dance genre by incorporating it into larger theatrical productions. This has helped to transform gumboot dancing from a community-driven practice to a more refined, theatrical art form that continues to attract audiences throughout the world. The Gumboot dance cultural and historical concept through its performance and story has opened the door to tourists. It has made itself a popular experience for tourists thereby leading to an increase in tourist's activities in South Africa.

Cultural Tourism: As South Africa's cultural tourism industry grows, gumboot dance has become a popular part of the experience for visitors. Tourists who visit the country often participate in gumboot dance performances as part of cultural tours that showcase local history, particularly the hardships faced by miners. In areas like Soweto, tourists are invited to watch or even join in performances, offering an immersive way to understand both the dance and the larger history it represents (Mokoena, 2015).

Community Engagement and Activism: The function of gumboot dancing in South African communities has altered, with modern dancers using it to advocate for social change. Dance organizations in townships and rural areas are employing gumboot dance to interact with local concerns, educate youth, and empower communities. This social activism aspect elevates gumboot dance from a mere form of entertainment to a means of connecting people to larger socioeconomic movements (Van der Merwe, 2018).

Economic Impact: As gumboot dance gains popularity, it has had a favorable economic impact. The increasing demand for performances at festivals, cultural events, and tourist sites has resulted in work opportunities for dancers, choreographers, and industry experts. Gumboot dance has also resulted in the establishment of cultural villages and dance schools, further bolstering the local economy.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate Gumboot dance as one of the prominent dances in South Africa, its modern influences and its tourist and cultural relevance. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study since it focuses on understanding the meanings, experiences, and interpretations that have shaped gumboot dance's evolution and function in contemporary South African society.

The secondary research method/ content analysis was used to examine existing research studies and publications about gumboot dance. This method was suitable for offering a full account of gumboot dance's evolution across time, including current influences, as well as its contribution to tourism and cultural identity. The descriptive analysis focuses on identifying the trends, themes, and patterns in the literatures used. Instead of collecting new data, the analysis focuses on combining current research findings to address crucial issues about gumboot dance's evolution.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of this study focuses on identifying trends, themes, and patterns in the literature. Instead of collecting new data, the analysis focuses on combining current research findings to address crucial issues about gumboot dance's evolution.

The findings of this study suggest that Gumboot dance is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that reflects the cultural, social, and historical context of South Africa. The dance style, which originated in the mines, the cultural Significance that shows Gumboot dance is deeply rooted in South African culture and history, reflecting the experiences and struggles of the working class (Mason, 2013) Social Cohesion: The dance style promotes social cohesion and community building, providing a platform for people to come together and share their experiences (Fred, 2024).

By examining the research through a qualitative research approach, the study provided an understanding of the cultural and social transformations that have shaped gumboot dance over time. This method allows the study to convey the richness of gumboot dance's history and modern day relevance without collecting primary data. The findings of this study have implications for the understanding of the role of dance in promoting social cohesion, and touristic empowerment. They also highlight the importance of preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Implementing these recommendations will help preserve, promote, and further develop Gumboot Dance as both a traditional cultural expression and a contemporary performance art in South Africa, ensuring its sustainability for future generations.

Recommendations

Cultural organizations and government agencies in South Africa should intensify efforts to promote Gumboot Dance as an important element of national cultural heritage. Festivals, cultural exhibitions, and tourism events should include Gumboot dance performances to increase awareness and appreciation.

Educational institutions should incorporate Gumboot Dance into performing arts and cultural studies programs. This will help younger generations understand its historical origins and cultural significance.

Government bodies and cultural institutions should provide financial and institutional support to dance groups that perform Gumboot dance. Such support can help preserve the traditional form while encouraging innovation in contemporary performances.

Author Contribution

Adeola Susan Akanji and Olumuyiwa Akande performed the introduction, the literature review, the method, analyzed the data, compiled the data, interpreted the data, prepared the manuscript text; I Opeyemi Olawumi Akinkuotu compiled the data and edited the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancy, have been completely witnessed by the authors.

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