

In Search of Recognition:
Youth Participation In 'Traditional' Dancing In Nyanga,
Cape Town



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Zulu dance performed by members of Iziqhaza Art Combination at Kasi RC dance competition in Khayelitsha organised by Mandisi Sindo in 2020, captured by one of the group members.

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Abbreviations

ANC: African National Congress

IAC: Iziqhaza Arts Combination

IAM: Imvelaphi Arts Movement



Iziqhaza Art Combination Group Logo, designed by some of the group members.

“Shield” represents protection against the social, emotional, and physical challenges we face daily, using arts as a tool to overcome these issues.

“Spear and Stick” are our tools—dance, music, drama, and poetry—that we use to address the problems affecting our lives and communities. We pass on these skills to the next generation to improve living conditions and equip youth with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become better individuals.

The “Yellow” part symbolises our unique, impactful style of performance and the initiative we’ve been developing over the years.¹

¹ Excerpt from a conversation with Wandile on February 20, 2023, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

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Introduction

In 2015, I was in my Grade Twelve, and I was not at school anymore. But I was still a dancer. And gigging, doing whatever I could. At least when there was a sun, when the season was hot, we said, “Let’s go and mingle. Let’s go and busk and earn money. We have got skills.” So I brought everyone around, and we stuck to that.²

I.I Introduction

This ethnographic study examines the experiences of young Black South Africans in seeking recognition through participation in what is framed by them, their clients, and the communities from which they come and live as ‘traditional’ dance. Based on six months of ethnographic research with a group of young ‘traditional’ dancers in Nyanga township, Cape Town, this study investigates the strategic use of a ‘traditional’ dance approach deployed by a group of young people to gain recognition as valuable social humans (Taylor, 1994) who have come of age and as accomplished social adults (Fokwang, 2023). In a context in which young people must compete to fit across various ever-shifting expectations of accomplishment, ‘traditional’ dancing offers them a creative space to activate collective agency, negotiate visibility, affirm being human, and participate in community. Ethnographic studies on youth often highlight their roles as “fixers” (Fuh, 2012) and “social shifters” (Durham, 2004). Research on South African dance has primarily focused on its aesthetic, ritual, and socio-historical dimensions (Castelyn, 2012; Maqoma, 2011), linguistic and cultural symbolism (Erlmann, 1996), historical and workplace functions (Firenzi, 2012; Impey & Nussbaum, 1996), or biographical narratives (Maqoma, 2023), often emphasising societal dynamics (Rani, 2013; Firenzi, 2012; Maqoma, 2011; Clegg, 1982; Erlmann, 1990; Larlham, 1988), and youth-specific experiences or their engagement with traditional dance pedagogy and meaning-making (Green, 2007; Shapiro, 1998; Banks, 2010). This highlights the methodological, contextual, and conceptual limitation in examining not only youth participation in fluid ‘traditional’ dance practices but also how individuals and collectives seek recognition within conditions of socioeconomic marginality and urban uncertainty. The research revealed that they do not only participate in dancing, but also use it to accomplish other social and cultural expectations of becoming. Building on research about youth, dance, and recognition, I argue that youth in Nyanga employ economic, artistic, ethical, and organisational strategies in their ‘traditional’ dancing to gain recognition as valuable social adults. These strategies enable them to accumulate resources, express emotions, claim space in the community, and gain a sense of dignity as respectable young people.

I.II Challenges of Recognition in a Shifting Capitalist Economy

Youth today navigate multiple identities and localities due to various factors shaped by globalisation (Nyamnjoh, 2018). They are expected by multiple entities—family members, peers, elders, and communities—to meet various criteria in order to gain recognition within their respective contexts. One crucial aspect of this recognition is the ability to make moral decisions and manage emotions without letting them dictate behaviour. In the township environment of Nyanga, however, this becomes especially challenging, as youth face temptations and incitements that often lead to unethical decisions, driven by both peer pressures and community expectations. This challenge is exacerbated by the systemic issues of low school graduation rates and high youth unemployment—

² Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

legacies of structural violence that limit opportunities for many in the community. Elders and community members, who have their own moral codes, may view these decisions as failures to adhere to the values that have traditionally governed behaviour.

Furthermore, in the globalised, capitalist world that many of these youth inhabit, material wealth is often considered one of the most significant criteria for recognition (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000). Financial resources, therefore, become a critical necessity for youth who wish to be seen as capable, responsible adults. However, despite the promises of democracy and equal opportunity in post-Apartheid South Africa, young people in this study still face marginalisation, with limited access to stable financial opportunities. These opportunities are necessary for youth who are driven by the desire to be seen as both capable and responsible adults. The black 'consternation' has been superficially freed from the Apartheid regime, but the systemic inequality it left behind has been exacerbated by neoliberal policies (Saul, 2001).

South African youth, particularly in marginalised areas like Nyanga, aspire to belong to the country's social body (Bray et al., 2010), but the country lacks the resources to meet these aspirations (Swartz et al., 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001). As a result, they are often perceived in ways that mirror the treatment of their ancestors during the Apartheid era—lacking the recognition, protection, or support that is typically afforded to other members of society. This lack of resources deprives youth of opportunities to follow conventional pathways toward recognition (Appadurai, 2004; Honwana, 2014). Yet, despite these challenges, youth in Nyanga continue to strive for recognition in various ways, seeking to overcome the structural barriers that limit their chances for success.

I.III Gaining Recognition Through Dancing

Some youth organise 'traditional' dance as one of the means by which to gain social and cultural recognition as accomplished persons in various contexts. The community based group on which this dissertation is based, Iziquhaza Art Combination, provides a space where youth can engage in activities that enable them to be dignified as humans and to actualise their aspirations. By sticking to dancing in the middle of precarity, they survive the everyday odds (Maqoma, 2023:44), gaining respect and dignity (Rani, 2013, pp. 2-3). This is achieved through various strategies, such as being creative, negotiating identity, managing emotions, and making moral decisions while increasing aspirational capacities (Appadurai, 2004). One of the study's focal points is the investigation of young 'traditional' dancers' strategies to gain some income; this enables them to actualise their aspirations related to the acquisition of goods (Appadurai, 2004) and upward mobility. Another focal point is the way youth seek to be recognised as dignified humans by being part of a moral and artistic group (Fuh, 2012, p. 521). Overall, youth engage in 'traditional' dance to be dignified as accomplished adults in society. This research examines how young people use dance to search for acknowledgement, respect, and inclusion.

I.IV Youth Agency

Instead of perceiving youth as passive agents who are in constant need of external intervention, this study attempts to conceive youth as intentionally navigating an uncertain environment. As plenty of ethnographic research demonstrates, youth are capable of determining their own rules in their community and associating with other people (Fuh, 2012; Durham, 2004) in order to try out those rules and position themselves accordingly. Youth in this study are located in the complex and contradictory interplay between structural violence and freedom, and careful examination is required to convey their narrative. I will use Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) definition of agency in that they are able to make decisions in the present that reflect the past and future prospects within "regulated liberties" (Bourdieu 1991). While acknowledging the power dynamics that shape what kind of dance youth practice and

perform, it is worth focusing on their agency to utilise or resist it (Ota, 1993, p. 386; Mahmood, 2005). Through this lens, I will situate youth as an autonomous navigator in both politically contested township, tourism, and entertainment industries. The concept of agency and its relation to this study will be discussed further in the literature review in Chapter 1.

I.V Outline of Chapters

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, this dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the different concepts and theoretical frameworks that situate this ethnographic work around youth, recognition, precarity, and ‘traditional’ dance. The literature review presents how marginalised young people located in the complex landscape of inclusion and exclusion have been studied, while demonstrating how they deploy their agency to navigate uncertainties. It also shows the anthropological significance of this research and its contribution to the body of literature on youth, dance, and recognition in the context of precarity.

Chapter 2 outlines the ethnographic approach used in this study and provides a detailed account of the various qualitative methods employed. It describes my entry into the field and my experience engaging with the youth of Iziqhaza Art Combination through dance. I discuss the dynamics of conducting fieldwork in the township, reflecting on the challenges of interpreting and understanding the world from the participants' perspective, as defined by their own lived experiences (Roberts, 2004:134). The degree to which these complexities were successfully navigated will also be assessed.

Chapter 3 unpacks precarious situations in Nyanga and the challenges youth face in their pursuit of recognition, centring on the biographies of three members of the Iziqhaza Art Combination. It illustrates how precarity penetrates across time and space as well as how the nation's failed provision of socioeconomic resources is materialised, hindering youth's attempts to gain visibility in various contexts. It also introduces the complex geography of inclusion and exclusion that young black ‘traditional’ dancers navigate in the entertainment industry.

Chapter 4 illustrates various strategies through which youth at Iziqhaza Art Combination seek to gain recognition and survive uncertainty by participating in ‘traditional’ dancing. The chapter explores how youth in South African townships leverage their artistic, creative, and marketing skills to generate economic capital, while employing organisational strategies to build cultural and social capital. This process helps them navigate the expectations of consumer culture, one of the multiple social spheres they inhabit. In doing so, they find ways to fulfil the diverse expectations of the various communities of which they are a part. It shows how the youth in this study navigate various aspects of the entertainment and tourism industries as well as everyday life in Nyanga—and their attempts at actualising these for upward social mobility. Drawing from Victor Turner's (1969) notion of ritual as unstructured yet meaning-generating performance, and René Devisch's (1993) emphasis on the co-authored, reflexive nature of embodied knowledge, this chapter also reads the youths' improvised performances as ritualised responses to precarity. Rather than being passive actors within commodified traditionalism, they emerge as agents who actively re-script their realities through creative, affective, and embodied practices.

Chapter 5 examines how youth attend to their emotions through dancing in the midst of various individual and collective struggles. When unstable income takes a lot away from youth who have multiple responsibilities and expectations, going to dance practice and moving their bodies becomes a

means to be vulnerable, an outlet to let go of the “cry” they carry. Dancing becomes a ritual that offers therapeutic experience for them to process these emotional burdens, as Devish (1993) argues. By overcoming uneasy everyday life, they actively shape new rules (Fuh, 2012) to make the collective dancing space safe and encouraging. The chapter also demonstrates various approaches that young men deploy in their pursuit of social adulthood to acquire manhood, particularly through opening up their emotions in the dance space. This chapter further explores various aspects of youth experiences of the community dance group and the processes by which they seek to gain respect through outpouring their emotions.

Chapter 6 examines how youth seek recognition by upholding moral boundaries and extending invitations to younger individuals to join the dance group. By involving younger youth in dance, they not only foster a sense of discipline and skill development, but also create a ripple effect that can positively influence community dynamics. This approach counters the perception of 'troubled' youth by offering an alternative path, whereby participation in structured, creative activities promotes belonging, resilience, and respect within the community.

Chapter 1 Theoretical Frameworks and Key Concepts

1.1 Key Concepts

This section introduces key concepts that guide the analysis of how young people in Nyanga engage in traditional dance to navigate uncertainty. These include *youth*, *precarity*, *agency*, *social imaginary*, *recognition*, and *aspiration*. Rather than treating these terms as fixed, the study approaches them as relational and shaped by lived experience. Together, they offer a lens to understand how dance becomes a means through which youth make sense of their worlds, assert presence, and imagine possible futures amid structural exclusion.

1.1.1 Concept of Youth

Definitions of youth vary considerably based on time and space. The United Nations defines youth as those aged between 15 and 24 years while, in South Africa, youth are defined as those aged 15 to 34 years (Statistics South Africa, 2020), making up roughly 34.3% of the county's population. Notably, a 34-year-old individual experienced their formative schooling years during a period marked by intense political conflict and upheaval, whereas a 14-year-old today is growing up amidst the tangible outcomes of reforms and achievements brought about by those past struggles (Human Sciences Research Council, 2009). Despite the diverse experiences an individual or collective has within this age range, youth can be categorised as the stage after childhood and before adulthood in a life cycle (Statistics South Africa, n.d.). Therefore, "Youth is imagined to be a developmental stage based on age, a process of becoming and having not yet become an adult" (Fuh, 2012, p. 317).

Thus, despite the seemingly self-evident age category (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014), many scholars have noted that youth as a concept is dynamic and contested (Honwana & Deboeck, 2005; Cole & Durham, 2008). As Durham (2004) argues, the definition of youth can vary depending on social and political contexts, with some viewing youth as passive or disconnected, while others see them as politically engaged and active agents of change. For instance, in Mahalapye, Botswana, some view youth as excluded from political processes because they are not yet ready to vote, while others, such as student leaders at the University of Botswana, assert that they should have the right to vote, pursue political goals, and take on leadership roles. This contestation demonstrates how youth is often framed in opposition to adult responsibilities. Although youth as a developmental stage is often defined by psychological or biological processes, the transition from childhood to adulthood should not be considered fixed and stable (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 10). Thus, meanings and manifestations of 'youth' arise in relation to specific social processes, cultural understandings, and historical influences (Mannheim, 1952). Therefore, the notion of youth is relative and embedded within a social context that involves elements such as knowledge, power, agency, and personhood.

Over the past decade, individuals aged 15 to 34 have consistently accounted for more than 70% of South Africa's total unemployment. The socioeconomic challenges faced by South African youth in the labour market have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified barriers to employment and worsened pre-existing disparities (Statistics South Africa, 2020). South African youth face limited employment opportunities that echo broader trends across Africa, where young people experience a state of "waithood," often occupying a precarious liminal space with limited choices and bleak prospects (Statistics South Africa, 2020; Honwana, 2012). Young people in Africa are defined as being in a stage of "iliminality" (or failed liminality) (Fokwang 2008, p. 11), as youth inhabit many worlds and yet often find themselves stuck in precarious

circumstances (Dahrendorf, 1979) in which they are characterised as either vanguards or vandals (Abbink & Kessel, 2005). Therefore, most young Africans experience “waithood,” a transitional phase that lies between childhood and adulthood (Honwana, 2012).

The lack of socioeconomic resources forces them to generate meaningful lives for themselves (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 10). African youth are not fully passive in the face of the challenges brought by lack of governance, education, public order, and economic stability. Instead, they are active and autonomous, shaping their own rules within their community, constantly incorporating and (re)configuring old elements in new ways (Fuh, 2012), making them social shifters (Durham, 2004). Mbembe (2001, p. 148) describes them as fixers: middlemen who are “responsible for setting things right,” “scheming,” and “carrying on negotiations.” Youth in urban Africa repair and mend the harsh situation into good conditions, exploring myriad strategies and alternative politics to create stability (Fuh, 2020, p. 5). Looking at the ways young people reconfigure “geographies of exclusion and inclusion” (De Boeck and Honwana, 2005, p. 1) and focusing on the intersection between their agency and social forces allows us to conceptualise youth as beyond the dichotomy of *at risk* or *as risk* (Stanford, 2014). They are actively navigating their lives (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 12) by creating new forms of sociality (Utas, 2005, p. 215). This conceptual approach helps to understand how Nyanga youth, for example, have used ‘traditional’ dancing as a tool to navigate the complex dynamics of freedom and oppression, gaining recognition and asserting their identity on their own terms.

1.1.2 Precarity

Precarity is a valuable analytical concept for understanding youth and the complex socioeconomic realities they navigate. It helps us to understand youth in the context of neoliberalism, township life, and cultural expressions like dancing. In Anthropology, the concept of precarity has been understood mainly in two interrelated ways: first, as the absence of stable employment and, second, as the vulnerability inherent in being human (Han, 2018). This understanding of precarity, particularly in the post-9/11 United States, is further elaborated by Butler, who describes precarious life as a common human vulnerability that arises from our embodied existence and interdependence with others (Butler, 2004). Butler extend this by exploring the relationship between precariousness (the vulnerability of existence) and precarity (the social and political arrangements that unevenly distribute this vulnerability) (Butler, 2016). Recognising these overlaps helps to clarify the complex economic, social, and existential challenges faced by young black individuals in society.

Neoliberalism, as described by Comaroff and Comaroff, is both an economic system and an ideology that emphasises market-driven solutions, deregulation, and the reduction of state intervention in social welfare. It encourages individual entrepreneurship, competition, and self-reliance, which often exacerbate existing inequalities by focusing on personal responsibility over collective social welfare. In this light, neoliberalism reshapes how individuals experience identity and opportunity, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and systemic violence. The term “precariat,” which comes from “precarious proletariat,” indicates a person with an unsecured job; originally, the term pointed to social troubles prompted by the neoliberal market, thus situating it around work (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Waite, 2009). However, since stable employment secures not only income but also identity and lifestyle (Allison, 2014, p. 5), precarity cannot be understood solely through the lens of labour, but must also consider the long-lasting impacts of global conflict (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005, p. 6) that engender material, existential, and social uncertainty.

In the African context, neoliberal policies have intensified the precariousness youth face by fostering uneven economic development, mass unemployment, and a growing informal economy. These conditions make it harder for young people to access stable jobs or social mobility, reinforcing the vulnerabilities they experience. In South Africa, despite the promise of a democratic nation, deep-seated inequality and poverty persist, making it one of the most unequal countries in the world, with nearly half the population living below the minimum living income level (Swartz et al., 2012, p. 27). Within this context, the lives of young people in the study are shaped by a lack of resources and opportunities due to enduring violence. This is especially true for young men. Even as part of a “born free” generation, they remain victims of oppression that is exacerbated by structural violence and global capitalism (Saul, 2001).

Chabal (2009) observes that violence in Africa manifests as a process of dehumanisation, encompassing three key aspects: the degradation of the human body, the collapse of shared values, and the breakdown of social order. He likens this violence to a “low-grade fever” that inflicts long-term psychological effects. Exacerbated by financial instability, these lead to poor health and increased brutality. Detached from their roots and lacking self-respect, individuals may resort to crime, as they seek alternative forms of identity and community. This erosion of shared values undermines the sense of belonging crucial for both identity and socio-political connections, pushing individuals towards violence in their search for respect. Although modern liberal democratic principles are formally adopted, traditional values still heavily influence political action. In fact, the collapse of the social order is often fuelled by the failure of modernity to provide a sufficient moral framework, leading to a ‘re-traditionalisation’ of society.

A lack of access to socioeconomic resources disables youth from pursuing traditional pathways to adulthood (Honwana, 2014), which were once marked by ‘initiation’ rituals (Abbink & Kessel, 2005). While significant processes like physical transformation through *ulwaluko* (initiation) are crucial (Qambela, 2021), the ability to earn a living remains one of the key factors in defining adulthood in many modern societies (Botha & Ratele, 2015, p. 16; Correia & Bannon, 2007). For young men, the absence of stable income complicates their journey to manhood, shaking their identities as accomplished social figures. Deprived of essential building blocks such as education, employment, housing, and relationships, they find themselves in a transitional zone between childhood and adulthood, waiting to become socially recognised adults (Honwana, 2012).

Historically, the integration of black men into the wage economy in South Africa has been shaped by issues of race and class (Morrell, 1998). In the townships, where most black South Africans live, a mixture of cultures and beliefs (alongside Western influences) creates a complex landscape. As youth navigate these influences, they often face multiple forms of humiliation and discrimination, compelling them to fight for their identities (Maqoma, 2011, pp. 66-67). This vulnerable positioning not only affects their self-perception, but also forces them to strategise in order to carve out meaningful lives for themselves (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 10).

Precarious youth are often framed as dangerous and violent, caught in liminal states with inadequate life chances and bleak prospects (Dahrendorf, 1979). Due to this oppression and exclusion, they are frequently theorised as “lumpen youth” (Abdullah and Bangura, 1997), lost (O’Brien, 1996), discarded, and “the bane of society” (Warnier, 1993). This positioning casts them in a dichotomy of being both victims and perpetrators. They are viewed as “victims” deprived of opportunities and security; thus, they are “fragile” (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005) and “dependent” (Thomas, 2000), requiring external intervention for salvation. Conversely, as “perpetrators,” they are labelled as

destructive (Boothby and Kundson, 2000) and unlicensed “soldiers of fortune” (Fuh, 2012), driven to violence by their frustrations (Frederikson & Munive, 2010). Within this binary, youth are often portrayed as lacking agency (Reynolds in Daham, 2004).

However, the realities of their everyday lives are far more complex and nuanced, and they should not be reduced to mere passive victims of structural violence. By employing a “lens of affect” (Stanford, 2012, p. 16), we can examine not only the impact of precarity, but also the potential for recovery and agency. This perspective allows for a deeper analysis of how young people navigate and create futures despite the constraints imposed upon them.

1.1.3 Agency

Instead of locating youth in temporal and transitional phases, this study attempts to conceive youth as intentionally navigating uncertain environments. Often located against structural forces, agency is associated with terms such as freedom, creativity, and selfhood. To focus on the structural dynamics of agency is to overshadow the character of agency itself, failing to illustrate the raw experience (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This definition of agency is useful in analysing how Nyanga youth form new trajectories through ‘traditional’ South African dance, which is discussed in the following subsection.

1.1.4 Social Imaginary

To understand the agentic youth’s quest for recognition in a complex environment full of possibilities and contradictions (Maqoma, 2023, p. 1), it is crucial to understand the imagination of their surroundings that inform their actions. Derived from the term “Sociological Imagination,” introduced by Mills in 1959, and later rephrased as “social imaginary” it serves as a tool to understand the intricate connection between individual experiences and the wider sociocultural and historical environment. “Social imaginary” indicates how “people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Social practice and social imagination shape one another, as “we inhabit an imagined world, and the process of inhabiting a world is facilitated by imagining it (Weiss, 2002, p. 94). Thus, what we call fantasy is social practice (Appadurai, 1991, p. 1).

In looking at how dancing youth in Nyanga imagine their social world, it is necessary to note that they are part of the globalised world, and what they experience is informed partially by the shared global imaginary. People’s daily existence is comprehended based on more specific localities, which are circulated through images of the global (Weiss, 2002, p. 96). Global and local imaginaries always reciprocally interact and shape each other. This is because things are always in motion (Nyamnjoh, 2013; Appadurai, 2000), and objects, persons, images, and narratives are catalysts in transforming the social imaginary (Taylor, 2004, p. 29).

Through an investigation of sociality in and around barber shops in urban Tanzania, Weiss (2002) demonstrates the circuit of imaginary production, arguing that the global imaginary is engaged by locals according to their practices of “here” and “now,” which then creates the ways in which locality is produced. Similarly, South African “born-free” youth are located in a complex interaction between the global imaginary and local reality (Swartz et al., 2012). To become part of a world that embodies multiple layers of imagination, one needs to be equipped with skills and strategies that are acceptable at any given time and space.

1.1.5 Recognition

We are who we are and who we want to be because others treat us in certain ways, and youth in this study are not the exception. They aspire to be part of democratic South Africa by dreaming about the future and attempting to make it come true. However, their socioeconomic condition often leads outsiders to misrecognise them as either *at risk or as risk* (Stanford, 2014, pp. 15-16), failing to acknowledge their ability to navigate uncertainty. Their pursuit of recognition does not align with mainstream social norms, which often results in their contributions being undervalued compared to those of other groups with higher socioeconomic status or greater access to resources.

A few scholars have argued the significance of recognition for human existence. The term “recognition” comes from the philosophy of Hegel, specifically the phenomenology of consciousness. It entails “an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects in which each sees the other as its equal and also as separate from it” (Fraser, 2003, p. 10). This relation is deemed constitutive for subjectivity: “One becomes an individual subject only in virtue of recognising, and being recognised by, another subject.” (Fraser, 2003, p. 10; Goffman, 2016). Extending Hegel’s framing, Taylor (1992) empathises with the deep connection between recognition and identity, claiming that recognition entails an understanding of who a person is and their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. Thus, non-recognition or misrecognition “can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (Taylor, 1992, p. 25). Similarly, Honneth states that the absence of recognition is equal to oppression, as the person is unable “to count as the person, which he desired to be in terms of his EGO idea” (Honneth, 1995, p. 199). In this context, the absence of recognition or the sense of inferiority towards oneself disables them from making use of the opportunities that lead to recognition (Taylor, 1992, p. 25)

While empathising with the urgency for everyone to receive recognition, Taylor (1992) points out the dilemma of seeking its equal distribution in a world where people are treated unequally. From the 18th century to the rise of democratic awareness, the focus of acknowledging people shifted from giving “honour” to distinct individuals to distributing “dignity” to each citizen. With this change, the emphasis has been on universalism and the equalisation of rights, which are often translated by civil and voting rights. However, Taylor (1992, pp. 37-38) employs the “Politics of Difference” to challenge the notion of universalism, as it ignores the very distinctness of individuals or groups and forces assimilation to the dominant identity. The notion of equal dignity is based on the premise that “all humans are equally worthy of respect.” This is underpinned by the basic human potential, argued by Kant (1968), that humans are rational enough to direct our lives through rules, which makes us worthy of respect. Ideal politics, or recognition discourse, is a world where differences such as ethnic, racial, sexual, gender, and disability perspectives are not forced to assimilate to the majority to gain respect (Fraser, 2003, p. 7; Taylor, 1992, p. 41).

Respect, which all humans deserve, is often distracted because of power. Certain populations have historically been deprived of their rights. The human potential of non-Western populations is denied with a distorted idea that they are incapable of nurturing something valuable. Black people have been oppressed by false recognition of being “uncivilized” by the colonisers and their lasting mind-set (Taylor, 1992, p. 25). Absence of recognition has been internalised (Taylor, 1992, p. 36) and been intensified with failed dreams. This rejection of fundamental human ability, perpetuated through colonial oppression, not only denies young black South Africans agency in their attempt to gain respect and recognition, but also denies their humanity. Asymmetrically distributed recognition needs to be flattened out in order to access universal rights (Taylor, 1992, p. 40).

The equal distribution of recognition, however, cannot be conveyed without its relation to redistribution discourse. Fraser (2003, p. 11) argues that the “Category of distribution fails to capture the full depths of capitalist injustice because it neglects the relations of production and fails to problematize exploitation, domination, and commodification.” In the Fordist era, justice was mainly discussed through egalitarian liberalism. 9/11 revealed the urgency to attend to struggles over nationality, religion, and gender, which pushed the need to be examined in relation to redistribution (Fraser, 2003, p. 2). South African black youth are subject to an extreme socioeconomic circumstance due to the de-recognition and misrecognition that colonial and Apartheid oppression have created. They are at the intersection of failed redistribution and recognition, part of which was caused by the decoupling of cultural politics from the social (Fraser, 2003, p. 9).

Having discussed critical theories needed to understand recognition, is recognition truly a positive experience? Butler critically engages with the concept of recognition framed positively by Taylor, Honneth, and Fraser, arguing that it is also oppressing and constraining. They argue that experiencing recognition is ambivalent, rather than solely positive, because of its relation to power (Butler, 2005). In their work *Gender Trouble* (2002), Butler engages with the concept of recognisability in the context of identity, performativity, and social norms. They demonstrate that norms and regulatory practices form the recognition of identity. Recognisability is a process affected by societal norms, which define what is accepted in terms of identity. Thus, recognisability excludes certain expressions or performances that are deviant from the norm, leaving those who challenge or subvert these norms to experience non-recognition or mis-recognition. In terms of gender, heterosexual identity serves as the norm that filters out others who do not fit into either “male” or “female” (Butler, 2002, pp. 1-91). While it is significant for individuals and collectives to receive recognition, it can create problematic social orders that eventually force people to make sacrifices to gain it.

Responding to this limit, Butler considers intersectionality (introduced by Crenshaw) in “Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex” (1993). Individuals inhabit multiple subject positions (such as race, class, and sexuality) and negotiate multiple forms of recognition and misrecognition. They claim that recognition needs to be incomplete. Contrary to the focus on categorising difference, as Taylor and Honneth (2009) attempted to acknowledge, recognition needs to be figured with open questions. Instead of asking which recognition an individual would fit into, we should ask what someone seeks when they try to determine “the content of our personhood” (Butler, 2005, p. 31). In order for us to navigate recognisability without being oppressed, we need to place existing categorisation within cultural domains that are “unintelligible and impossible” (Butler, 2006, p. 203).

In the millennium capitalist world in which youth find themselves, material wealth is a significant criteria to be recognised (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000); thus, financial resources become necessary. In the literature on recognition within urban Africa, it is evident that youth aspire to gain acknowledgment through various channels, with material wealth and community involvement being central criteria. Urban African youth often perceive material success as a key indicator of social status and respect. Accumulating wealth not only enhances their economic standing, but also serves as a tangible marker of success that resonates with both traditional and contemporary values (Afolayan, 2005). This material wealth is complemented by active participation in community life and a conscious effort to avoid behaviours perceived as sexually loose or disrespectful, as noted by Diouf (2000). Engaging in community activities and adhering to traditional norms demonstrates

commitment and responsibility, qualities highly regarded by adults (Mohan, 2013). Therefore, the subjectivities of urban African youth—shaped by their aspirations for both economic success and social contribution—inform their strategies for gaining recognition. They navigate the complex terrain of modern urban life while aligning with traditional expectations, thereby seeking validation from both their peers and older generations. This dual pursuit underscores how recognition is intricately tied to the interplay between material achievements, communal involvement, and the avoidance of behaviours that may provoke moral concern.

This study seeks to explore how young people in Nyanga who participate in dancing experience recognisability and navigate multiple identities (such as age, ethnicity, gender, and race) while negotiating the complex intersections thereof.

1.1.6 Aspiration

Aspiration—connected to wish, want, need, and desire—is shaped by social imaginaries. In the neoliberal world, one's aspiration is often discussed in relation to economic advancement (Appadurai, 2004). Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) argue how the neoliberal ideology of consumerism in post-Apartheid South Africa reshapes individuals' identity by linking aspiration to the acquisition of goods. In a similar vein, Newell (2019) notes how marginalised urban youth in West Africa express aspiration for upward mobility through conspicuous consumption. Pink (2015) states how sensory experience serves as the development and the expression of aspiration. Aspirations are embedded in materials and senses, influencing how individuals interact with their surroundings. In her exploration of middle-class experience after the civil war in Angola, Auerbach (2020) demonstrates how sensory experiences manifest in consumption, aspirations, and hopes. For example, sensory information such as the scent of foreign perfume conveys a person's aspiration to get an education abroad (Auerbach, 2020, p. 44). Appadurai (2004, p. 67) describes aspiration as the capacity to be looked at in relation to cultural processes, rather than solely economics. Aspirations for a good life are systems of ideas located in the social imaginary. While acknowledging the general tie of aspiration to a good life, Appadurai points out that an individual's capacity to aspire is not equally distributed. Economically well-resourced individuals tend to have more opportunities to explore the future and gain experience in the relationship between aspiration and outcome, which equips them with a capacity to navigate complexity. Under-resourced individuals, on the other hand, have fewer chances to experiment with their wants and wishes, lacking nodes and pathways with which they might actualise their wishes (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). In such a challenging environment, it is crucial to develop the capacity to challenge the norm by debating, contesting, inquiring, and critically engaging. This capacity to raise a "voice" (Hirschman, 1972) is part of the process of the capacity to aspire. It is by increasing aspirational nodes through "voice" that people can strategise and actualise their dreams.

1.1.7 Conclusion

In sum, the key concepts explored provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how young people in South Africa engage with traditional dance not only as cultural expression but as a means of navigating social, economic, and emotional landscapes. These concepts help illuminate how dance operates as both a creative and strategic practice through which youth construct meaning, claim visibility, and respond to conditions of marginalisation. Together, they offer a critical lens for analysing the intersections of identity, power, and belonging in the lived experiences of youth in contemporary South Africa.

1.2 Literature Review

Traditional dance has long been a vital component of African social and cultural life, functioning not merely as a form of entertainment but as an essential mode of communication, knowledge transmission, and community cohesion. As a deeply embodied practice, dance has served to mark transitions in the life cycle, affirm collective identities, and articulate worldviews. This subsection reviews key literature that situates African traditional dance within its broader anthropological, social, and historical contexts. Drawing from studies in dance anthropology, African performance studies, and ethnomusicology, it foregrounds how traditional dance in Africa embodies epistemologies, cosmologies, and social relationships that evolve with time and across place. The following section builds on this foundation by turning to the literature on youth in South Africa, with a specific emphasis on how young people navigate recognition, belonging, and marginalisation in the post-Apartheid era.

1.2.1 Literature Review on Traditional Dance in Africa

Dance in many African communities has historically been more than a form of artistic expression—it has functioned as a social, spiritual, and political tool deeply embedded in everyday life. Kaeppler (2000) argues that anthropologists studying dance must examine not only the movements themselves but the wider systems of meaning they carry, including gender, power, and identity. African dance has traditionally accompanied major life events such as birth, healing, war, initiation, death, and recreation (Snipe, 1996; Nicholls, 1996), reflecting its centrality in the sociocultural and spiritual functioning of communities. Dance is often an embodied way of managing transitions and collective experience, a view supported by Green (1996) and Primus (1996), who regard it as vital to ritual processes that mark life cycle passages. Nicholls (1996) similarly locates dance in African contexts as a “functional social instrument” that helps people navigate a range of life situations such as rites of passage, planting and harvesting ceremonies, and communal celebrations. It is also a mode of cultural and emotional expression, enabling people to articulate hopes, fears, frustrations, and aspirations through shared movement (Snipe, 1996, pp. 23, 63, 68). As Impey & Nussbaum (1996) show, this expressive role of music and dance also extends into workplace settings in Southern Africa, where it contributes to wellbeing, cohesion, and collective identity.

Dance is also a repository of knowledge—not only historical but ontological, epistemological, and performative. According to Mabingo (2018), African dances carry layers of knowledge that reflect people’s lived experiences and are shaped by environment, spirituality, and intersubjective realities. Walker (2019) emphasizes that African dance is not a static inheritance but a complex, evolving cultural language. This embodied knowledge is often passed down intergenerationally through practice, with children taught both technical movement and aesthetic critique by elders. Thompson (1974) and Opoku & Bell (1965) show how children learn not only to move, but also to evaluate bodily beauty and expressive meaning through critical observation and feedback. These aesthetics are deeply tied to group identity, land, and social relationships. Hanna (1973) notes that each ethnic group holds its own aesthetic criteria to judge bodily beauty and performance, and that these are embedded in childhood education and social feedback. Children are taught how to interpret and express meaning through movement, reinforcing both aesthetic values and social norms (Thompson, 1974; Opoku & Bell, 1965).

Moreover, dance in African contexts serves as a mode of community-making and belonging. As Livingstone (1858) noted, movement and rhythm often define collective identity. Dance forms are tied to physical geography and environmental rhythms, cultivating ties to both land and ancestry. The social roles within a community such as leadership, gender identity, and intergenerational

responsibilities are often choreographed through dance (Comaroff, 2013; Rani, 2018). Dance is also closely tied to identity and place. Livingstone (1858, in Glassman, 2012) observed that dance articulates relationships to land, ancestry, and belonging. In this sense, movement is not only aesthetic but geographic and political, embodying communal memory and social imagination.

Overall, dance in Africa is an integral, tenacious, and dynamic cultural expression that carries epistemological, historical, and ontological knowledge (Mabingo, 2018). Rather than treating communities as passive reflectors of inherited practices, dance must be seen as a process that actively constructs meaning in response to shifting contexts (Walker, 2019; Begho, 1996). This study follows Vansina's (1990) view of tradition as "a moving continuity," shaped by both past and present realities. Glassman (2000) similarly argues that tradition emerges through constant interplay between rooted memory and contemporary adaptation. These views align with Ranger's (1993) influential concept of "invented tradition," which frames traditional practices not as fixed relics, but as imaginative and strategic responses to modernity, history, and power. As such, African dance is not only a reflection of culture—it is a mechanism for negotiating it.

1.2.2 Literature Review on Traditional Dance in South Africa

South African 'black' dance is particularly fluid due to critical historical events. Dance in South Africa has been transformed in the past 200 years through pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras (Welsh Asante, 1996) that were, in turn, influenced by Christianity, migrant labour, Apartheid, urbanisation, and Western culture (Rani, 2013). For example, Zulu dance served to demonstrate the ultimate power of the king; it was then altered to project British authority in the mid-19th century (Etherington, 1986). Later, South African indigenous dance, including Zulu dance, was labelled as "sinful and barbaric" by Christian missionaries (Gardiner 1966) and was not recognised as dance (Hanna, 1973, p. 165). During the time of mining, tribal identities were manipulated with dance activities that exerted control (Larlham, 1985; Hanna, 1966) and were decoupled from their original contexts (Larlham, 1985, p. 48, Maqoma, 2011, p. 69). This contributed to miners' construction of their identities (Clegg, 1981; Erlmann, 1990; Larlham, 1985). During the time of Apartheid, when ethnic particularity was exaggerated, the value of indigenous culture as a shared concept was represented in dance performances like *Toyi-Toyi*, which was used as a manifestation of resistance to white supremacist ideas derived from the Apartheid government (Rani, 2013, p. 17). This aligns with what Castelyn (2012) argues, the "*Toyi-Toying* body" embodies a choreographic vocabulary of resistance, where the politics is inscribed onto the performing body. In her analysis, *Toyi-Toyi* is not merely a war dance of protest but a performative claim to citizenship, presence, and power. It blurs the boundaries between aesthetics and activism by asserting Black visibility and mobility in public space, historically denied by the Apartheid regime. These analyses highlight that what is referred to as 'traditional' dance in South Africa is not static or singular. Instead, it is fluid across time and space (Firenzi, 2012; Friedman, 2013), shaped by overlapping artistic, political, and economic processes. Scholars have shown how dance engages with questions of identity (Maqoma, 2023), labour and visibility (Impey & Nussbaum, 1996), and youth expression (Rani, 2013; Clegg, 1981; Larlham, 1985). This underscores the need to investigate how young people engage with 'traditional' dance within contemporary, and often contradictory, realities.

Western influence and rural-to-urban migration have changed the physical, sociocultural, and ideological spaces in which dance takes place. These transformations are not only historical but remain ongoing, as urban youth today continue to use dance as a way to claim space, visibility, and rights within rapidly changing urban contexts (Grau & Jordhus-Lier, 2020). This reflects an ongoing legacy of what Castelyn (2012) termed "the politics of performance," where dance becomes a medium

through which marginalised bodies assert both spatial and symbolic presence. In post-Apartheid contexts, such performative acts often negotiate visibility in socioeconomically exclusive urban geographies. Their movements in public and semi-public spaces perform political claims to the city, often rooted in marginalised urban geographies and sociopolitical conditions of exclusion. As people moved to townships, cultures clashed and both hybrid and new forms were created (Rani, 2013, p. 16). Migrant labour undermined ethnically distinct practices and belief systems, creating a fusion of multiple cultures. Gumbo dance, a workers' dance that evolved in the mines, was influenced by these new social demographics (Sichel, 1997, p. 152). With the advent of modernity and urbanisation, American Jazz music had a great influence on South African culture, and Marabi was created by township residents around the 1920s (Maqoma, 2011, p. 68). Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers created a dance form called *Isicathamiya*, which was later integrated into *Ingoma* dance. New forms of township dance often turned to Western music; the Pantsula, for example, had “more power, beat, rhythm and instruments” (Myburgh, 1993, p. 21). Township black theatre, based on a fusion of “township musical” and “serious drama” (Larham, 1985, p. 205), emerged to protest the racist government. With modernisation brought about by urbanisation, shifts in beliefs were reflected in dancing. As different African cultures were mixing in the townships and adapting to new physical and sociocultural spaces, cultures were recreated according to urban forms. In the time of liberation from Apartheid, ethnic dance such as Reed dance was used to bolster the authority of the traditionally conferred Zulu king's political position, and it was shaped by people's intentionally selective adoption of constructed identities (Oomen, 2005, p. 15).

Yet even as urbanisation and hybridisation transform traditional forms, the concept of ‘traditional’ dance itself remains ambiguous and contested. Craighead (2006) cautions against backward-looking definitions that romanticise ‘authentic’ forms. Instead, as Rani (2012) and Opondo (2006) argue, tradition should be viewed as a “lasting play of history, culture and power.” Rather than a fixed heritage, traditional dance in urban contexts is often selectively adopted, reshaped, and recontextualised by young people as they navigate modern identities and aspirations.

The above studies demonstrate how dance in South Africa has been shaped by a history of colonialism, Apartheid, and subsequent sociopolitical transformations. From forms rooted in ethnic rituals to hybrid urban performances, South African dance is multi-layered and continually shifting (Friedman, 2013). Traditional dance, in this sense, is not a fixed cultural object but an evolving mode of expression, used both to remember and to resist, to assert identity and claim space—especially for youth navigating the fraught terrain of post-Apartheid life.

1.2.3 Literature Review on Youth Recognition in South Africa

In recent years, the notion of youth recognition in South Africa has become central to understanding how young people navigate systems of marginalisation, exclusion, and uncertainty. While youth are often portrayed through defiant lenses as unemployed, politically disillusioned, or delinquent, there is a growing body of scholarship that positions them as creative agents capable of crafting identities and claiming recognition in innovative ways (Swartz, 2010; Seekings, 2006).

Historically, South African youth have played a central role in political resistance, particularly during the anti-Apartheid movement (Seekings, 1993). However, in the post-Apartheid period, youth have found themselves caught between the promises of liberation and the persistent realities of poverty, violence, and exclusion. In this context, recognition is not merely about being seen but it also involves being valued and included as legitimate social actors (Fraser, 2000). For township youth especially, recognition encompasses both material concerns such as access to

education, employment, and mobility, and symbolic ones, including dignity, respect, and cultural validation.

This struggle for recognition is deeply tied to broader postcolonial realities. Mbembe (2006) argues that in the aftermath of formal liberation, South Africa remains marked by what he terms "postcolony fatigue"—a tension between democratic ideals and the unfulfilled social promises of the new nation. He suggests that youth experience this tension acutely as they sway between hope and disappointment. Sequentially, Fuh (2012) explores how African youth respond to the context in which precarity becomes routinised. Rather than surrendering to despair, young people develop affective, embodied, and performative strategies to endure and reimagine their futures. These informal, and often improvised, practices function as forms of recognition-in-the-making.

South African scholarship further shows that youth frequently pursue recognition outside formal institutions. Swartz and Arnot (2014) argue that young people create alternative platforms such as performance spaces, artistic collectives, and community projects through which they assert agency, self-worth, and visibility. These practices reflect what Appadurai (2004) refers to as the "capacity to aspire," where youth link imagination to action and produce culturally resonant forms of social mobility. For youth in spaces like Nyanga, creative acts such as dance are not only aesthetic or recreational. They become modes of economic participation, political articulation, and community recognition.

Moreover, youth deploy cultural expression as a strategy to reframe how they are seen and known. In their work on participatory arts with youth, de Lange and Mitchell (2016) show that artistic practices can amplify youth voices and enable them to co-produce knowledge, often in response to their own marginalisation. This resonates with Mahali et al. (2018), who find that youth in South Africa use everyday acts of performance which range from fashion to music to social media, to challenge the narratives that frame them as "at risk." (Standford, 2012). These performances act as symbolic and material claims to space, adulthood, and respect.

In this context, dancing becomes a particularly powerful strategy of recognition. It mobilises affect, memory, and visibility in ways that transcend spoken discourse. Youth dancers perform not just for entertainment but to reclaim social value, embody group identity, and demonstrate competence. As Maqoma (2023) reflects, the expressive labour of Black youth in performance is both aesthetic and political as it makes them visible within a society that often renders them invisible. These bodily acts disrupt normative understandings of agency by empathising resilience and creativity.

In sum, this literature emphasises that youth in South Africa are not simply recipients of victims of structural violence. They are active producers of meaning and legitimacy, using dance, art, and embodied practices to carve out spaces of belonging and visibility. In contexts where formal recognition is uneven or absent, performance becomes a form of social currency—a way to claim dignity, assert subjectivity, and participate in the reshaping of post-Apartheid futures.

1.2.4 Dancing as Survival

Besides monetising and gaining recognition in the industry, young people have used dancing as a tool for emotional, social, political, and physical refuge in the uncertain life of townships. In emotionally charged environments marked by poverty, unemployment, and systemic inequality, dance has provided an outlet for expression, resilience, and healing, enabling youth to cope with extreme stress and find solidarity within their communities. Socially, dance has offered a space for belonging

and unity, fostering collective identity, as seen in the rise of movements like Kwaito, which blended music and dance to express the hopes and frustrations of township youth (Dube, 2010). Politically, dance has served as a form of resistance, enabling young people to defy Apartheid's efforts to suppress black culture and identity, with township dances often becoming symbols of protest and empowerment (Nuttall, 2004). As Chabal (2009) points out regarding the politics of existence in Africa, people frequently have a tendency to maintain a smiling demeanour despite their suffering. In this context, "smiling" is interpreted as an aspirational quality, reflecting the ability to envision, dream, and address one's challenges while fostering empathy and solidarity. The emphasis on smiling is not intended to romanticise or downplay the daily vulnerabilities faced by disadvantaged individuals, but rather to infuse a sense of vitality into the ongoing struggles they endure (Fuh, 2020, p. 6). Being shut out from opportunities in power, employment, and recreation, young Africans create their own spaces for social interaction and new forms of sociability. These spaces serve to highlight their unique identities, whether they exist on the fringes of society or at its core, positioning themselves both as victims and active participants in a social landscape that extends beyond the limitations imposed by a state that has failed to provide adequate resources for their development into socially mature adults (Diouf, 2003, p. 5)

Written by two nationally and globally renowned choreographers, Gregory Maqoma and Maxwell Xolani Rani's autoethnography demonstrates how they navigated a place ravaged by conflict, greed, intolerance, and corruption by engaging in dancing. Born in the township of Soweto, Johannesburg, which Maqoma calls a "Cultural Cocktail" (2011), he sought his identity by being part of a band. He practiced and taught in a yard, forming a dance group; although people dismissed his activity, and he had to survive humiliation at school and from the police. Dancing internationally at a dance company, his career was challenged due to low income and his parents' unemployment, until his dance partner invited him to the world tour, which led Maqoma back into dancing (Maqoma, 2023). Growing up in the predominantly isiXhosa speaking township Nyanga, Cape Town, Xolani developed his passion as he learned dances such as Zulu and Swati daily from local groups. Although some events, such as gang conflict, forced change, he continued dancing in a group he could reach. Later connections with pioneers of dance companies invited him to create performances, which eventually heightened his passion for teaching dance at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and to be part of the immense transition of dance styles in the country (Rani, 2013). Although they had different life paths, both Maqoma and Xolani survived political, social, and cultural confusion of precarity by sticking to dancing (Maqoma, 2023, p. 44). They gained respect and dignity, proving that they are capable of leading lives without getting involved in mischievous behaviours (Rani, 2013, pp. 2-3). Like the above two figures, many youths relax and get calm by engaging in dancing, forgetting about the crime and poverty that permeates township life (Rani, 2013, p. 44). Insider perspectives of inhabiting communities like Soweto or Nyanga and trajectories in the dancing field are significantly useful in understanding the nuanced experiences of young people in this study.

1.2.5 Research Gap

While much has been written about traditional dance in Africa and South Africa, including its political significance (Castelyn, 2012), linguistic and cultural symbolism (Erlmann, 1996), historical functions (Firenzi, 2015), workplace value (Impey & Nussbaum, 1996), and biographical meaning (Maqoma, 2023), existing studies often centre on the aesthetic, ritual, or socio-historical dimensions of dance. These works offer valuable insight into how traditional dance acts as a cultural form, a political tool, and a historical archive. However, few explicitly examine the intersectional everyday life of young people who engage in traditional dance as a strategy to navigate contemporary urban precarity, especially in the specific conditions of post-apartheid township life.

There is also a methodological gap. While dance ethnographies in Africa (see Grau & Jordhus-Lier, 2020) and anthropological works on youth and precarity (Honwana, 2012; Swartz, 2009) provide rich analytical frames, they tend to treat dance either as symbolic representation or as discrete performance. What is missing is a sensory and participatory ethnographic account of how dance is *lived, improvised, and reworked* as part of young people's everyday survival, social navigation, and self-making.

This study thus contributes to the anthropological literature by examining how young Black South Africans in Nyanga township strategically engage in 'traditional' dance practices—not only as aesthetic expression, but as embodied tools for navigating marginalisation, gaining recognition, and imagining possible futures. By combining sensory ethnography, dance anthropology, and urban youth studies, this research foregrounds the fluid, relational, and affective dimensions of traditional dance, and its role in shaping identity, community, and aspiration in contexts of uncertainty.

1.2.6 Conclusion

In sum, traditional dance in Africa emerges as a multidimensional practice that encompasses ritual, knowledge transmission, aesthetic training, and community formation. Far from being static, it is a dynamic and evolving form of expression that responds to historical shifts, cultural reordering, and social needs. The literature reviewed here underscores dance's significance as both a repository and a generator of meaning, identity, and belonging. These insights provide a critical foundation for understanding how young people today inherit, reinterpret, and mobilise 'traditional' dance within changing urban and sociopolitical landscapes.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This chapter describes the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that guide this study on youth engagement in 'traditional' dance in Nyanga, Cape Town. Building on the preceding discussion of precarity, dance, and recognition, this chapter draws on five key strands of theory: (1) agency as a temporal and situated practice, (2) precarity and recognition as constrained by performative norms, (3) ritual and liminality in embodied transformation, (4) postcolonial feminist notions of relational agency and (5) cultural and social capital as necessities for navigation and formation of social imagination. These interrelated frameworks help to illuminate how young dancers navigate precarity, claim recognition, and construct meaning through embodied practice in their everyday lives.

1.3.1 Agency as Temporal and Situated Practice

This study approaches agency not as individual autonomy or resistance, but as a temporal, relational, and situated practice. In their theorising, Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963) refer to three dimensions named the “chordal triad,” consisting of iterational, projective, and evaluative elements—as “a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).”

The iterational element indicates actors' selective reactivation of past action repeatedly integrated into practical activity, creating order and stability. This element is based on the premise that the present is affected by the past and an individual's ability to recall, select, and apply implicit strategy to act, which is learned and developed through past experiences (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). What makes this element agentic, despite the notion of repetition, is the person's ability to use or not use the strategy that requires the person's “attention, intention and effort” (Berger, 2008). The

projective element refers to activities shaped by the actor's imagination, which reshapes the future through the integration and rearrangement of past experiences (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Extending beyond the repetition, this element involves reflection and the reformulation of strategies that are informed by the actor's imaginative engagement with the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2006). The core of agency lies in the "hypothecation of experience" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), as actors create alternative responses to difficulties (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). The last aspect is the evaluative element, which refers to the actor's ability to respond in the moment with practical judgment to achieve their needs (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This involves agentiveness because the actor exercises "contextualization of social experience," combining past strategy and future prospects (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Using such a framework is helpful in understanding how agency does not arise unexpectedly, but is exercised through past knowledge and future motives.

While it is important to distinguish the concept from its relation to structural determinants, agency is nevertheless shaped by social structures, power relations, and historical processes, making them a "necessary scene" to consider (Butler, 1999, p. 147). There is a need to locate agency within the interplay of constraint and freedom while analytically employing it to illuminate the ways in which South African youth exercise it.

In the context of Nyanga, youth often invoke the legacy of dance traditions (iterational), imagine aspirational futures through dance careers or recognition (projective), and evaluate options in the face of socioeconomic constraints (practical-evaluative). These movements are embedded in a broader "social imaginary" (Taylor, 2004), in which young people imagine their lives in relation to their communities, the nation, and global ideals of success. Appadurai (2004) further elaborates that the capacity to aspire is unevenly distributed: youth from under-resourced communities lack the navigational maps to connect aspirations with viable futures. However, as Weiss (2002) shows, local practices, such as urban youth grooming themselves for global citizenship in Tanzanian barbershops, demonstrate how imagination is actively cultivated. In Nyanga, young dancers imagine themselves not only as performers for local audiences but as cultural ambassadors or professionals on global stages.

1.3.2 Precarity, Recognition, and Performative Constraints

While agency is central in understanding the concerned youth, it is shaped by structural conditions of precarity. Youth in Nyanga navigate a complex terrain marked by unemployment, poverty, and spatial segregation. Butler's (2005) work on precarity and recognition provides a critical lens for examining these dynamics. Butler argues that recognition is not simply affirming, engaging in the epistemological issues surrounding how lives are framed, noting that what counts as "life" is selectively constituted through power dynamics (ibid:2009, p. 1). Young men often go unrecognised by a structurally discriminatory and capitalist state. Their "being" is conceptualised in ways that contribute to the uneven distribution of precariousness, resulting in varying levels of security and constraint among different groups (Butler, 2012, pp. 3-4). Taylor (1994) similarly asserts that recognition is a vital human need, and its denial can inflict harm by impeding individuals' sense of self-worth and social membership. In certain epistemological frameworks, South African youth are perceived in ways similar to how their ancestors were treated during segregation, lacking recognition as individuals who deserve protection and support. In this sense, to be recognised is also to be subjected to dominant norms.

This resonates with how 'traditional' dancers are commodified in the cultural tourism industry. As discussed in Chapter 1, their performances are often reduced to exotic and repetitive displays shaped by market expectations. Fraser's (2003) theory of misrecognition and redistribution helps explain how cultural misrecognition (e.g., being seen only as 'Zulu warriors') is deeply tied to economic injustice. Moreover, youth are not only misrecognised by tourists or institutions, but they are also often viewed by society at large as either "at risk" or "a risk" (Stanford, 2014), which limits their claims to dignity and potential.

However, following Butler, it is also important to examine the ways in which norms of recognisability are negotiated and even subverted. Young dancers do not simply accept imposed labels, but they navigate them tactically, sometimes conforming, other times challenging the expectations projected onto them.

1.3.3 Embodied Transition and Liminality in Ritual Performance

Dance in this study is not just a performative act but it is considered a ritual practice. Turner's (1969) theory of liminality and *communitas*, and René Devisch's (1993) elaboration of ritual as embodied transition, are particularly useful in conceptualising how youth use dance to transform their status, sense of belonging, and community ties.

According to Turner, liminality refers to the in-between phase of a ritual, where individuals are no longer who they were but not yet who they will become. This framework helps explain the transformative power of the dance group, rehearsals, and dance itself for youth in Nyanga. As outlined in Chapter 1, young people such as Gregory Maqoma and Maxwell Xolani Rani have used participation in dance as a way to survive social, political, and economic marginality. These journeys resonate with Turner's idea of rites of passage, and Devisch's emphasis on the body as the site of social reintegration.

By framing participation in dance as a rite of passage, this study explores how dancing provides a structure through which youth express pain, hope, identity, and belonging. It is in the dancing body that emotions, aspirations, and collective memory come together, making space for healing and becoming. This allows us to see dance not merely as symbolic or aesthetic, but as a vehicle for navigating life transitions.

In this paper, I utilized Turner's (1969) theory of liminality and *communitas* alongside Devisch's (1993) concept of ritual as embodied transition to frame dance as a multilayered ritual process. First, joining the dance group resembles an initiation into a moral and social order that shapes identity through discipline, peer accountability, and shared vision (Chapter 6). Second, rehearsals serve as therapeutic, *communitas*-making spaces where collective embodied emotion fosters healing and social bonding (Chapter 5). Third, performance acts as a site of co-creation and agency, with dancers improvising and negotiating meanings in real time (Chapter 4). Together, these layers illustrate how dance offers youth a dynamic, embodied passage through collective and personal liminality.

1.3.4 Postcolonial Feminist Notions of Relational Agency

Another important strand of the theoretical framework draws from postcolonial feminist thought to emphasise relational agency. When discussing individual and collective agency, can we assume that youth have space to act according to their rationale and challenge contradictions if they wish to? Mahmood (2005) critiques Western liberal assumptions that agency must always take the

form of resistance, pointing out the assumption that an individual's identity is fixed (Sehlikoglu, 2018). Without understanding the complex and fluid interplay of structure and freedom, we cannot measure the level of agency the person employs. Resistance and subversion lie in relationships between limits and lived experiences, attributing to agency a “dialectic of freedom and constraint” (McNay, 1999, p. 103). Investigating womanhood in Asia, Hilsdon (2007) argues that women’s agency exists within a contractionary gap between existing societal discourses and symbolic structures. While women may internalise gender constructions in their local communities, they establish spaces for independent thinking and action because of the environment oppression has created (Hilsdon, 2007, p. 135). These “regulated liberties” (Bourdieu, 1991) are evident in ways Japanese coal mining women enjoy freedom in exercising their sexuality and income-making while being oppressed by gendered othering outside work (Sone, 2007). Thus, women inhabit multiple subjectivities (Hilsdon, 2007), and their autonomy exists in hybrid forms.

Not limited to women, definitions of humanness within liberal frameworks are bound to exist in societal discourses that construe the poor, people of colour, the insane, and so on as relatively invisible (Butler, 2004; McNay, 2013). We need to acknowledge that agency is fluid and that it “requires multiple theories of agency and multiple theories of power” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006) and how agency can be exercised through inhabiting norms, finding power within existing structures, or crafting moral selves in contextually appropriate ways (Mahmood, 2005).

In the Nyanga context, this approach allows us to read youth participation in dance not as merely reiterating fixed cultural scripts, but as a medium through which young people assert visibility, value, and voice in a contested social landscape. Rather than being passive bearers of culture, they are co-creators of new meanings, situated between modernity and tradition.

1.3.5 Cultural and Social Capital

To illuminate youth as agentive in their search for recognition, it is necessary to unpack the tools they gain and utilise. Cultural capital and social capital are useful analytical terms to investigate the underlying value of the society people imagine. Cultural capital refers to non-monetary social assets that enable social mobility. Bourdieu (1979, p. 54) argues that cultural preferences such as taste, language, and bodily presentation are linked to social class; these are gained through specific labours such as time, care, attention, and concern rather than through monetary transactions. According to him, there are three forms through which cultural capital is manifested: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1979). Embodied cultural capital indicates knowledge, skills, and habits that individuals internalise by socialising with others. It includes how individuals carry themselves in social situations according to the concerned practices. Objectified cultural capital consists of material objects that individuals have or have access to that symbolise cultural values. Individuals’ interests and affiliations are reflected in these items. Finally, institutionalised cultural capital concerns formal credentials that prove individuals’ competence, including degrees, awards, qualifications, and memberships. The three forms are interconnected in that one often feeds the other; for instance, internalised cultural capital enables the acquisition of institutional cultural capital. The relationship between cultural capital and the formation of social class is ambivalent, as it can simultaneously feed the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu, 1979) and fuel economic upliftment within society (Florida, 2002).

Through their engagement in ‘traditional’ dancing, youth in Nyanga acquire forms of cultural capital necessary to be recognised as contributing members of the group. Embodied knowledge such as how to carry and release energy during movements is a key marker of competence, while learned

dispositions, such as discipline and punctuality for rehearsals and performances, are equally crucial. These forms of capital are crucial for navigating the often demanding space of dance practice, where bodily expression, commitment, and mutual accountability are continuously assessed. Participation in this context not only builds aesthetic skill but also instils social norms and values that structure how youth gain recognition within the group and in the wider cultural economy.

Cultural capital is part of social capital, which is defined as the resources individuals and groups can access through their social networks. It also refers to the benefits gained from being part of specific social groups, associations, or networks. These benefits can include access to mutual support, trust, information, or opportunity, which individuals can leverage to improve their social standing or gain economic advantages (Bourdieu, 1979). Possession of social capital contributes to community upliftment in the context of urban informal business (Simone, 2004), women's land rights (Meinzen-Dick & Quisumbing, 2014), and urban citizenship (Bank, 2011). However, similar to the ambivalent role of cultural capital, certain social networks shape both inclusion and exclusion (Nyamnjoh, 2006). Despite the distinction made, cultural and social capital are interrelated, as it is demonstrated how, for example, social networks enable membership to the veteran club, where young men activate their cultural capital to expand their network (Fuh, 2012). Ethnographic accounts have shown how cultural capital provides the members of the community access to a sense of belonging. Although perceived as immoral in wider society, violating performance (Uchikoshi, 2016, p. 53), having multiple sexual partners (Swartz & Bhana, 2009, p. 72), having money for drugs or alcohol (Swartz, 2009, pp. 75, 119) can be seen as "capital" in the respective society. It is worth investigating the diverse cultural and social capital young dancers embody to navigate the intersection between the township and the dancing community.

Social capital is central to understanding how youth in Iziqhaza Art Combination (IAC) secure gigs, build professional reputations, and maintain a sense of belonging in precarious conditions. The group itself is a social network, built on peer mentorship, emotional unity, and informal systems of accountability. As youth move between dance groups, churches, schools, and community events, they cultivate overlapping networks that often extend opportunity. IAC's openness to fluid membership where dancers can join other groups and return, encourages the expansion of each individual's social network, which in turn strengthens the group as a whole. Following Simone (2004), urban African youth often survive not through stable employment but through what he calls "people as infrastructure"—social networks that serve as platforms for accessing otherwise unavailable goods and opportunities. In the same spirit, IAC operates as a node within a broader ecology of urban cultural work, where youth gain access to possibilities not through formal systems but through interpersonal ties, trust, and reputation. In this thesis, social capital is defined not as a static asset but as a relational and reproductive process—constantly renewed through participation, trust-building, and performance. It is a means by which youth secure survival, craft identity, and pursue aspiration in a terrain marked by economic instability, cultural commodification, and limited formal opportunity.

1.3.6 Conclusion

These five theoretical lenses - temporal agency, recognition under precarity, ritual transformation, relational agency and cultural and social capital - provide a multidimensional understanding of how young dancers in Nyanga engage with 'traditional' dance. These frameworks will be used to analyse ethnographic data in later chapters, showing how dance operates as both a site of constraint and a practice of becoming.

Chapter 2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the ethnographic method for this study and provides a detailed account of the multiple qualitative methods employed. In the field, the elusive concept of ‘traditional’ dance was both a tool and a confinement for me, and my experience of dancing provided access to the members of Izikhaza Art Combination. The socioeconomic context of Nyanga is examined along with the genealogy of dance in the area. The political dimensions of conducting fieldwork in the township will also be unpacked, highlighting the challenges of understanding participants’ experiences through their “definition of the world” (Roberts, 2004, p. 134) and unpacking how my positionality influenced my interactions with the youth concerned.

2.2 Motivation

This research derives from part of my graduation research on township tourism in Langa and the growth of performing arts NGOs in Cape Town. The online interviews with tour guides in Langa highlighted juxtaposing perspectives on showing traditional practices to tourists. On the one hand, it was demonstrated to commodify culture and exploit identity while, on the other, to honour and dignify people whose culture has been oppressed. Limitations in online interviews left space for more examination through sensory information, and the tour guide-centred methodology highlighted the need to centre the participants in the tour process. My encounter with an NGO that offers ‘traditional’ South African dance lessons to youth in precarious conditions made me want to look at traditional dance practices not only for the tourists' sake, but for the dancers' sake. Such organisations, which are growing in numbers, claim to empower disadvantaged children and youth through their traditional dance classes. My research interest is not to judge whether it influences youth negatively or positively, but to ascertain how individuals and collectives attempt to navigate everyday challenges through participation in dancing

2.3 Researching ‘Traditional’ Dancing Youth in South Africa

Research on youth participation in 'traditional' dance in South Africa has largely been approached through the lens of socio-political dynamics, with less focus on the lived experiences and perspectives of the young participants themselves. This gap highlights a need to investigate ‘traditional’ dance as experienced by youth, providing insight into how they interpret and navigate this cultural practice.

Youth are often depicted as passive recipients of socio-political dynamics. Most research on youth dance centres on their function in addressing and adapting to migrant labour issues (Clegg, 1981; Erlmann, 1990) as well as their role as a form of protest and resistance against the Apartheid regime (Vershbow, 2010). Colonial narratives often frame youth participation in ‘traditional’ dance as problematic, reducing it to an “ethnic commodity” (Ota, 1993) intended mainly for international cultural consumption, while overlooking the significance of studying the specific dances performed and the nuanced experiences of the young participants. This framing neglects the agency of the youth involved, focusing instead on broader socio-political interpretations.

As discussed in Chapter 1, youth in South Africa are often seen as either *at risk* or *as risk*. The vulnerable state of youth who face many forms of day-to-day violence (Nggela, 2012) intensifies the narrative of youth *at risk*, while plenty of literature demonstrates youth participation in violent acts (Swartz, 2012), which reproduces the image of youth *as risk*. Beyond this dichotomous framing

of perpetrators and victims, however, current research reveals the sociality of youth in the intricate relation of oppression and liberation. Youth are depicted as navigators of precarity, creating the modes of sociality that embody locally, nationally, and internationally informed imaginations (Weiss, 2002; Gondola, 1999; Newell, 2019).

Ethnographic and autoethnographic studies reveal how young people in South African townships navigate life in precarious conditions, shedding light on their resilience within these challenging environments. These studies offer insight into how youth respond to socioeconomic uncertainties, using local resources and community networks to find stability amid adversity. Meintjes' (2017) account of Ngoma dancers, for example, describes how they cope with a hostile environment, shaped by segregation, by finding safety and meaning in dancing and music. It also shows the complexity of navigating the flirtation-oriented Ngoma dance when they have debilitating diseases like HIV-AIDS. Similarly, Moriguchi's (2018) ethnography on bar girls in Kampala demonstrates how socially marginalised women utilise their "sexual citizenship" to navigate their uncertain urban lives. Embodying both subjectivity and agency as well as using dance to seduce men, the women attempt to achieve economic and social mobilisation. This navigation for survival and pursuit of aspiration is contextualised in South African urban townships in Rani's (2013) and Maqoma's (2011) autoethnography. Although their focus is on the integration and transition of dance styles, their experience reveals double oppression from the racist state, on the one hand, and social judgment within the community on the other. As demonstrated in Chapter 1.8, in their respective communities of Nyanga and Soweto, they danced to survive in the midst of uncertainty and used it as a platform to pursue their aspirations. It is within this intersection of constraint and opportunity that my research is situated.

2.4 Presence and Absence of 'Traditional' Dance

The lengthy search for 'traditional' dancers was shaped by my perception of 'tradition' and the response I gained from the people I contacted. My very first entry point to the field was BABA YAYA (formally called Indoni Dance Academy), where Teach, my former African Dance teacher at UCT, introduced me. BABA YAYA offers full-time dance training to post-matriculant students from various townships, and its dance subjects include Body Conditioning and Fitness Training, Contemporary African Dance, Contemporary Ballet, Improvisation, Yoga, Breaking, Music, and Drama; all these are framed and written on the timetable board at the venue. Contemporary African Dance, which takes place two times a week, facilitated by Teach, employs the Intsika ("a pillar" or "strength" in isiXhosa) technique he developed in 2002 (personal communication, March 9, 2022). This pedagogical technique is an "open-ended Pan African dance technique that seeks to develop the human body in a holistic manner incorporating mind, body and spirit" (Faculty of Humanities, 2008), which is practiced through cautious choices in moves and combinations for the exercises. Although this technique had some symbolic elements that resonated with my image of 'traditional' dance, such as 'Zulu stance' and repetitive moves (Ngema, 2007, p. 31), the framing of the dance motivated me to look more deeply into 'traditional' dance.

In an attempt to understand 'traditional' dance, performing groups were approached at the Waterfront and Central Business District (CBD). I also spoke to the owners of restaurants and cafes for tourists, dance training companies, and acquaintances from the community. Dance training companies such as SboNdaba Dance, Dance For All, and New World Arts Theatre offer African Contemporary Dance classes, and afterschool programmes such as Amoyo Foundation offer 'African' and 'Gumboot' dance. My observation and participation in these classes indicated many links to my understanding of South African 'traditional' dance. Similarly, performers at the touristic sites, who

referred to themselves as a band and mainly performed songs with some instruments, had some symbolic elements that were linked to my image of ‘tradition.’ Tourist-oriented places such as Gold Restaurant and Drum Cafe used the term ‘traditional’ when they named performances. What indicated to me was that ‘traditional’ dance is significantly represented in the entertainment industry for tourists in Cape Town.

Although my attempts to engage with the performers employed by the tourist-oriented restaurants were unsuccessful, I connected with a dancer from Langa who pointed to a large group of ‘Zulu dancers’ based in Nyanga. It shifted my framing of the question from ‘traditional’ dance to ‘Zulu dance’ when approaching people. With the new framing, I was referred to Nyanga township. There, a group called Iziqhaza Art Combination was recognised as one of the strongest Zulu dance groups in the Cape, which overcame my initial reluctance to visit Nyanga township, often portrayed by the media as one of the most dangerous areas in Cape Town (Weekend Argus, 2023).

Conversations with the individuals and groups I encountered while navigating the dance scene in Cape Town shaped how I framed Iziqhaza Art Combination as a community-led group of the strongest ‘traditional Zulu dancers.’ One of the young men in my study confirmed in a conversation that Nyanga is known for its Zulu dance and Bujwa. This process of letting the word of mouth navigate me to the field site shows a part of my attempt to “grasp *his* point of view, *his* relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world” (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25).

2.5 Situating Nyanga as Field Site

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in Nyanga, one of the oldest townships in Cape Town, which was established in 1946 (News24, 2017). South African cities and towns were shaped by racially discriminatory policies during Apartheid. The central business areas, reserved for the white population, were usually well organised, with adequate infrastructure, while the periphery of cities, populated by people of colour, were purposefully underdeveloped, with lack of basic public facilities. These areas were strategically created to segregate Black, Indian, and Coloured people, forcing them to be dependent on the white communities. This dependency is easily observed today through the overly congested traffic on the N2 highway. This congestion not only disrupts daily routines, but also limits access to economic opportunities, social activities, and essential services, preventing residents from meeting job requirements, attending events, and engaging in social interactions.

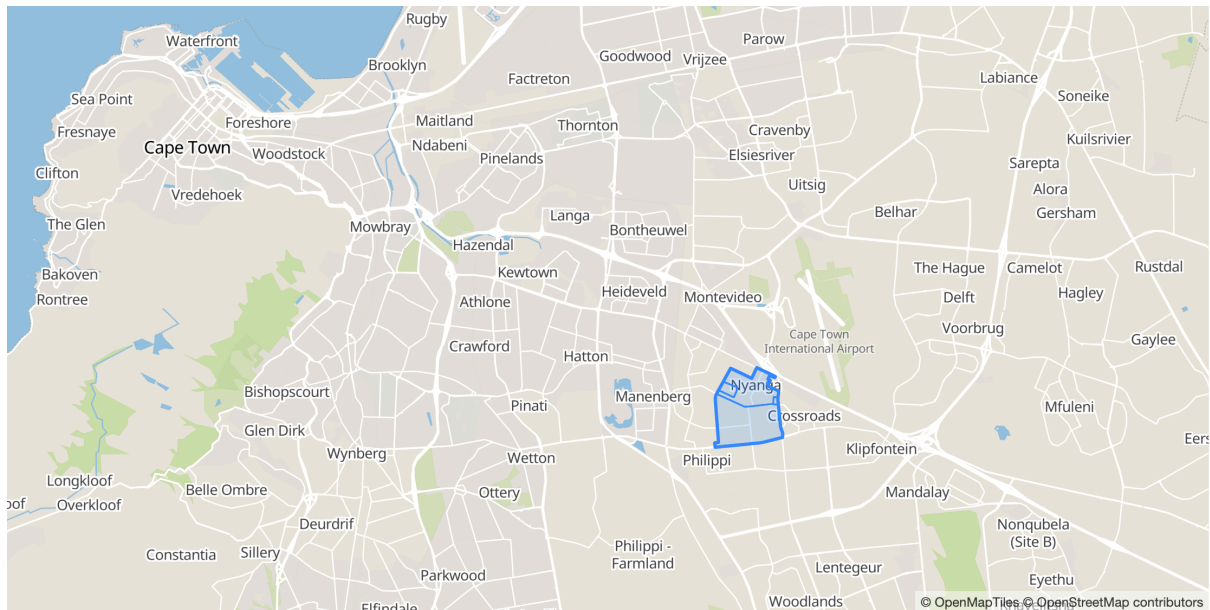


Image 1: Nyanga (Adrian Frith)

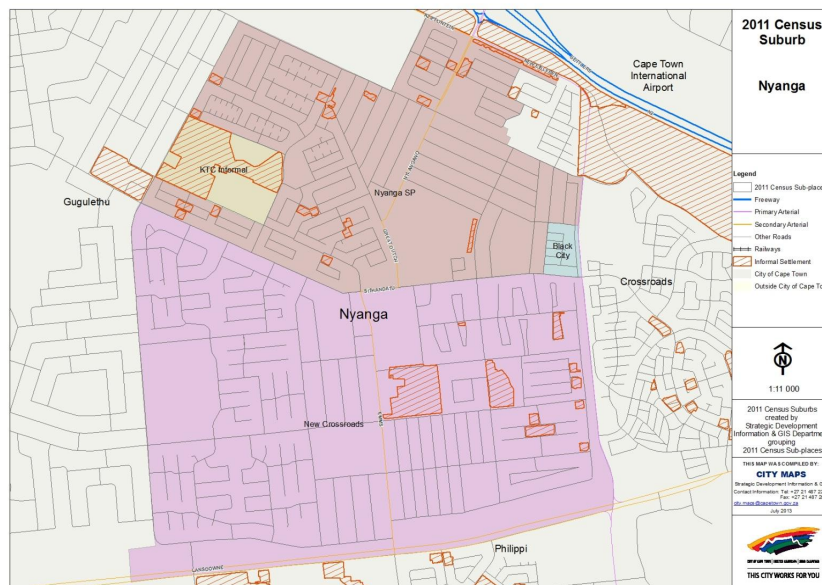


Image 2: According to the 2011 Census, the suburb Nyanga includes the following sub-places: Black City, KTC Informal, New Crossroads, and Nyanga SP. (City of Cape Town – 2011 Census Suburb Nyanga)

Nyanga, whose meaning in isiXhosa is “moon,” is located a 5-10 minutes’ drive from Cape Town International Airport, and it shares its border with Gugulethu and Crossroads. Nyanga was established as a township following the implementation of Apartheid policies such as the Act of 1923 and the Group Areas Act of 1950 after Langa township was too densely populated (Khosha & Zwane, 1995, p. 11). According to the 2011 Census, the population in Nyanga is 57,996 people and 99% are Black Africans (City of Cape Town, 2013). 30 years after the end of Apartheid, people in Nyanga are still marginalised, as neoliberalism increases the already embedded system of inequality. Only 31% of those aged 20 years and older have completed Grade 12 or higher, and 45 % of the labour force (aged

15 to 64) is unemployed. 74% of households have a monthly income of R3,200 or less, which equals 18% of the average household monthly income in South Africa (UNICEF South Africa, 2023). Young people aged between 14 to 34 years old make up more than 20% of the population in Nyanga (City of Cape Town, 2011), and 45.5 % of them are unemployed, which is much higher than average of 32.9% (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The absence of socioeconomic resources in the community leaves many people unemployed, which foments involvement in crime (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010, p. 222-225).

In this context, youth in Nyanga tend to use criminality to survive (Swartz, 2012) and gain dignity that the nation has failed to offer. Thus, Nyanga is characterised by violence, especially gender-based violence (Ngqela, 2012), resulting in Nyanga being referred to as a “crime hotspot” (News 24, 2023). This terminology contributes to the perpetuation of a stigma that negatively represents a place where people live their everyday lives. In this thesis, I attempt to unpack individuals and collectives who navigate the complexities of everyday life through participation in dancing.

Nyanga township is a significant place for artists. The Nyanga Arts Development Centre, Zolani Centre, and School Halls have developed plenty of talent, as Silumko Koyana, Luthando “Toto” Ntsodo, and Maxwell Xolani Rani demonstrate (Rani, 2013). Nyanga East—including areas like Lower Crossroads, Phillipi, and KTC (Khayelitsha Township), where Zolani Centre is located—has faced a certain stereotype tied to crime, often based on the migration of people from rural areas and the mixture of different cultural groups. On the other hand, the area is concentrated with people who engage in arts, evidenced by Koyana’s statement, “Many people knew Nyanga East as a 50%-60% creative part of the arts, and if you are from Nyanga East, people will bow and respect you because of the arts” (Koyana in Rani, 2013). We have to remember that this is how people are “spreading the story of how the forgotten structure could manifest a new kind of beauty” (Aalto & Ernstson, 2016). It is my intention to investigate how youth who are involved in arts in Nyanga navigate day-to-day life, instead of reducing them to victims or perpetrators.

The genealogy of ‘traditional’ dance in Nyanga is complex. Shaped by the intricate history of migration, multiculturalism, and urbanisation, dancers like Ntsodo and Koyana trace its evolution from its roots in indigenous practices to its contemporary forms. In Nyanga East, the dance has evolved through a hybridisation of rural and urban cultural influences, as both those born in the township and migrants from rural areas have shaped the dance’s form (Ntsodo in Rani 2013). Koyana adds that early dance groups in Nyanga, such as Manyanani and Amabutho, played a key role in maintaining a culturally rich tradition. However, with time, these practices have been affected by commercialisation, exploitation, and the pressures of modern life, leading to tensions between maintaining traditional forms and adapting to financial realities. As a result, while ‘traditional’ dance continues to be an important cultural expression, it now faces challenges, as dancers negotiate the balance between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to contemporary expectations and economic pressures. According to Rani (2013), Zulu Ingoma dance was traditionally performed during significant life events such as coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, hunts, and battles, as well as to foster community solidarity. It was popularised in Cape Town by Vusabantu Ngema, who introduced the dance and its cultural significance to the urban setting (Rain, 2013, p. 77).

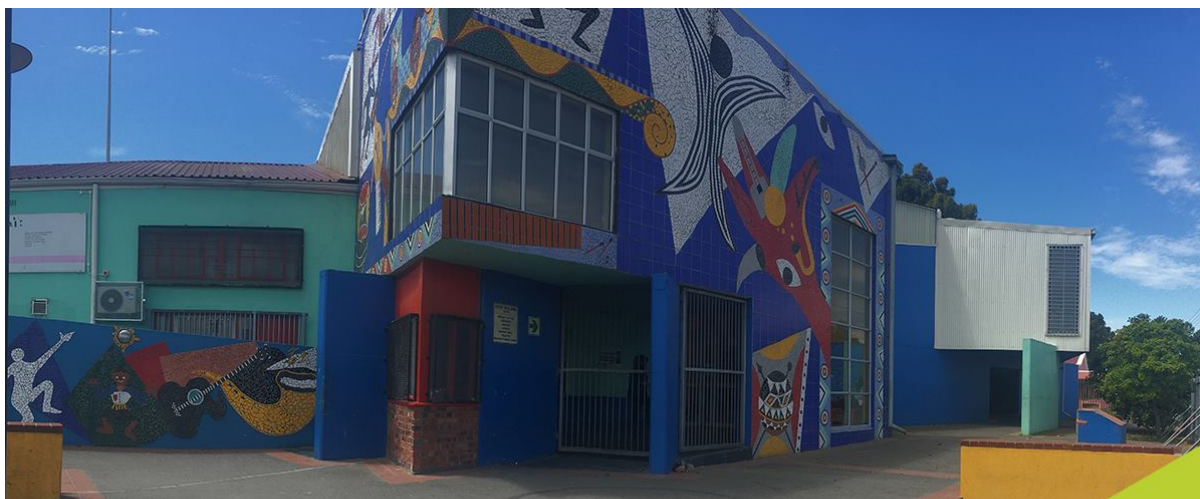


Image 3: Zolani Sport and Recreation Centre, posted on City of Cape Town Facebook page on September 29, 2017.

The post caption says, “In the heart of Nyanga lies Zolani Sport and Recreation Centre, a colourful and vibrant community centre offering residents a variety of creative and fitness classes. The classes range from visual arts to aerobics and dance classes, with all members of the community welcome. The centre has also played host to Educare and after-school programmes focusing on youth at risk.”

It was challenging to navigate the field site and participate in youth's everyday lives while attempting to protect my physical safety from crime. This is an increased quandary in ethnographic studies that are conducted in spaces perceived as unsafe and violent (Kovats-Bernat, 2002, p. 210). I ensured means of transport ready for the return trip before I left my residence. I often asked the leader of IAC to pick me up at the airport and drop me off, or ask my acquaintance from Nyanga to take me to the Zolani Centre. I often had to order Uber, which only succeeded after a few cancellations due to the drivers' hesitancy to drive into a 'dangerous' area. This lengthy preparation process, combined with comments from my friends, aligned to the stigma, making me feel alienated and recall the unsafe image of the area. Once, the driver asked me if I could guarantee his safety, to which I could not respond but to “buy” his safety with R125. Although the driver is not my direct participant, I unknowingly created an asymmetrical power structure (Pels, 2003) to get to the field site.

2.6 Researcher's Positionality

In qualitative research, researchers' ontological and epistemological stance in the world shapes how they conduct the research (Ormston et al., 2014). The positionality of the researcher has long been debated in anthropological literature, especially how they interact with participants. Researchers need to be aware of their own power and employ theories to interpret their social actions accordingly (Madison, 2006).

Researchers' positionality needs to be taken into account, particularly for research in a country like South Africa, where “hierarchies of power, the politics of cultural differences and jaggedly contending ethical claims are inevitably insinuated into the practice of research” (Posel & Ross, 2014). This adds to the hierarchical dimension of ethnographic study, which tends to be structured in such a way that the rich study the poor and white people study black people (Nyamnjoh, 2012). Coming from Japan, which is often defined as economically privileged, and doing research with people from an area defined as precarious, I am situated within this power dynamic. Once, one of IAC members' younger brother asked me to financially assist him and his family, which challenged my position as a researcher. Although I did not financially have the means to support them, the way they

perceive me as a support provider revealed the existing power dynamic. I was often forced to confront the power I held because of my positionality.

My attempt to minimise the exploitative dynamic involved both conscious and unconscious effort to “avail myself to be eaten.” In Nyamnjoh's (2018) concept of “cannibalism as normal way of being,” the phrase “avail yourself to be eaten” urges researchers to immerse themselves fully in the field, allowing their own identities, biases, and perspectives to be shaped by the community they study. It highlights the importance of vulnerability, reciprocity, and self-awareness in the research process, challenging researchers to confront power dynamics at play and engage ethically with marginalised communities. While I benefited from participating in their practice, asking them questions, and being around them, I needed to offer something in a way that would benefit them. In return for their kindness in welcoming me to the space, teaching me to dance patiently, and explaining the situation in English, I helped with their application to UCT, wrote proposals for theatre performances, and contacted potential collaborators.

While giving cautious attention to my preoccupations, I tried to let my subjectivities interact with the participants and build a strong rapport with them. Every researcher has personal subjectivity that is sometimes taken for granted (Rettberg, 2014, p. 32), affecting both the data collected and its analysis. However, understanding the processes of social networks and cultural dynamics requires one to form intimate relationships with research participants (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982, p. 38). This kind of rapport cannot be formed without both the researcher and the participant being present with their subjectivities. Building such rapport—trusting, respectful connection—prevents participants from behaving consciously in the field (Bernard, 2017), although it might be difficult given the limited length of fieldwork. Both the researchers and the researched need to be present with their subjectivities so that a strong rapport is built, which then reveals the everyday experience of the participant.

It is also worth paying attention to the otherness and foreignness I felt in the field, as it reflected my positionality. Although I was extremely welcomed by the members of IAC, and they gave me a sense of belonging, my presence was often met with lots of attention outside the rehearsal venue. I was often stared at or racially harassed with words like “China!” Combined with my gender and my nationality, I was labelled as a person who is ‘expensive’ to marry. Although sexual or racial harassment in the field is prevalent (Hanson and Richards, 2019), I saw this phenomenon as the pure response of the field to differences between them and me. I unpacked it as a valuable source to understand my position and used it as an opportunity to explain more about myself and where I am from.

Despite all the qualities that made me an outsider, I was also an insider, as I connected with them as a dancer and a young person. While this study draws on the meanings and manifestations of “youth” in relation to specific social and cultural processes (Mannheim, 1952; Durham 2004) and not the chronological development stage, researchers acknowledge that there is a limitation on working with children under the age of 18 without clear informed consent from parents or legal guardians, as stated in the South African Children’s Act. This research ensured that any minors under the age of 16 from whom I did not attain informed consent would not be included. The age range of the group population was diverse (from 15 to 35), but there were hardly any circumstances in which age was discussed besides the legal restriction in terms of dancing for getting income. I was conscious that my social status at the age of 26 could become a power imbalance (Cohen, 2011); however, the members, including those of younger age, took care of me, especially when I was in Nyanga. Acknowledging

my visibility in and unfamiliarity with Nyanga, they always ensured I was picked up by the driver before they left the Zolani Centre.

Another element that kept me as an outsider in the field was my inability to speak isiXhosa fluently in a predominantly isiXhosa speaking group. I could only catch simple words used during the dance setting, and I asked for a translation whenever there was an announcement or a discussion. Given that linguistic fluency shapes research, my lack of fluency significantly affected the data collection process, such as writing notes (Tanu and Dales, 2016). The participants usually used English in direct interaction with me, while other conversations were made in isiXhosa. I often asked permission to record after-rehearsal meetings so I could listen to them slowly to learn the language more and send it to the isiXhosa-English translator to make a script in English. Aside from this compensation, I tried to bridge the gap through other shared similarities, such as being a dancer and sharing space for bodily activities. Although my use of English might have imposed power against the participants in their operation (Briggs, 2007), my incompleteness of English as the second language made it feel more of a familiarity than a difference.

2.7 Becoming Part of Iziqhaza Art Combination

Entry into the field was shaped both by the challenges and advantages of my positionality. Mandisi and Nozuko, members of both Iziqhaza Art Combination and BABA YAYA, explained to me that there are rehearsals from Monday to Thursday from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm at the Zolani Centre in Nyanga. After failing several times to ask for rides from my friends, Mandisi agreed to ask Viwe, a member of the group, to give me a lift from the airport. Considering the potential risk of using public transport or ordering a ride, asking someone from the group was the safest way. On 4 August 2022, getting picked up by four members of the group (Mandisi, Nozuko, Viwe and Andile) at the airport drop-off area, I was directed to sit in between Mandisi and Nozuko, as if they were guarding me. I was warmly accommodated by Andile's "Welcome to Nyanga!" as the car drove under the N2 highway into Ntlangano Cross, the main road stretching to the centre of Nyanga. The traffic, Avanza taxis, and many pedestrians crossing the streets represented the daily vibrancy of Nyanga.

We got to Zolani Centre, and the four members led me to the entrance. Passing by the security, having a glance at the beautifully tiled wall, I walked through the glass door. The soundscape changed, as many kids were doing sports in different venues. As Mandisi navigated me to the dance venue, the sound of a drum started to enter my ears and integrated with the existing noise. The venue looked like a theatre, with the stage (Image 4) and the lines of blue seats installed with staircases (Image 5). The person who was playing the drum was sitting on a red plastic chair at a corner of the stage, while a few other people were sitting on the floor. Mandisi introduced the drummer as a leader named Siyabulela. I sat on one of the front seats and observed what was going to happen. Viwe, who came back with changed clothes, came up to the stage and started to lead an exercise. It was when Nozuko, who was still changing at the back seat, said to me, "Why don't you join?" that I was given a space to join. I asked Siyabulela if I could join, and he said yes with a surprised face. There were eight of us on the stage.



Image 4: Rehearsal venue at Zolani Centre (front). Image 5: Rehearsal venue at Zolani Centre (back). Both taken on November 23, 2022.

I managed to catch the basics of most of the steps practiced. Steps are repeated from the corner of the stage to the other corner. Two people started together at each time, and Nozuko came to join me. After some more laps, people spread on the stage and started the choreography without me noticing. As I was trying to imitate the moves at the back, they all were in a half circle, linking shoulders and singing. The song was in isiXhosa, and Mandisi asked Siyabulela to explain what the song said. He said it was about village women mingling or drinking together while their husbands were away. Without me noticing, some started doing solo moves. Nozuko asked me if I could do a front somersault to jump into a solo. Confused and nervous, I tried to follow what she was doing. After that, different kinds of agendas kept happening without me noticing. It seemed to me everything was already programmed, as I could not comprehend the unspoken rules and patterns of their practice. Mandisi asked for attention and introduced me to everyone. “Igama lam ngu Rise. Ndifunda eUCT. Ndihlala eRondebosch. Ndithetha isiXhosa kancici.” (“My name is Rise. I study at UCT. I live in Rondebosch. I speak isiXhosa a little bit.”) After giving a basic introduction, I addressed that I am doing research on ‘traditional’ dance and how it influences young people’s everyday life, expressing my desire to be part of Iziquhaza Art Combination. It was approved by their clapping, followed by Siyabulela’s comment, “I’m glad you showed me you can dance. You keep studying, and you bring Japanese here to learn African dance.”

Since this day, I kept attending rehearsals two or three times a week, whenever Viwe was available to give me a lift. I found out they were preparing for a production planned in September, and the rehearsals were planned around it. My continuous participation in rehearsals automatically placed me to be part of the production and allowed more intimate interaction with the members, as we were working towards one goal. After a few weeks, I was not just a passive member, but actively engaging in leading exercises and playing a leadership role in one of the production scenes. Although the performance date was postponed three times, ultimately taking place two months later, with Viwe unable to attend, this prolonged process allowed me to observe and embody the youth’s complex relationship between reality and aspiration. What this indicates to me is that my ability to follow their moves gave me a credential in their space, their dance, and their everyday realities.

2.8 Paying Respect and Protecting Participants

This study involved not only the participants' dance practice, but also their personal life journey, in which privacy needed to be protected. The conduct of fieldwork exposed me to the connectedness of the circle of people within dance sectors in Cape Town. I use pseudonyms or anonymity to in the data management and in the paper writing. In the recording and the documentation process, all written, audio, and video materials were securely stored in my personal Google Drive with a password known only to me. On the other hand, to avoid misrepresenting the group of participants, I intentionally kept the names of organisations as they are. I adhere to the ethical principle indicated in the *Anthropology Southern Africa* essay, "Ethical guidelines and principles of conduct for anthropologists" (2005), which includes making the paper available to participants in ways that they can understand and engage.

2.9 The Multi-Method Research Process

2.9.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation is the key method for data collection in ethnographic studies (MacClancy, 2002) that allows researchers "to understand people in terms of how they make sense of their daily lives" (Ross, 2009, p. 9) and their own "definition of the world" (Roberts, 2004, p. 134). Although I was in the same space as my participant only when I went to Nyanga two to three times a week, observation was a continued process, as events and encounters outside the field often gave me valuable insights into youth participation in 'traditional' dance. I often ran into some of the participants at dance performances and community programmes, which occasionally informed me of a new aspect of the informants. For example, when I was watching a third-year dance student show at UCT, I saw Saki playing a drum; later, I found out that he was asked to choreograph a Zulu dance piece. I carried a hand-sized notebook on which I could take note of how I could make sense of the data and additional questions I felt the need to ask my participants.

2.9.2 Dance Ethnography

I employed dance ethnography as a significant part of my methodology. Dance ethnography is based on "reflexive body practices" (Thomas, 2003, p. 75) that regard researchers' experiences as dancers as valuable. As I kept participating in the subsequent rehearsals, which mostly involved experiencing "the sequence, rhythms of movement, and also how and *if* the meaning is attributed to those sequences" (Hughes-Freeland, 2008, p. 4), I started to gain "corporeal cultural knowledge" (Sklar, 1994) and was able to pick up some patterns in continued movement routine. Dancing with them equipped me with deeper observations and cultural insights (Ness, 2004) that allowed me to recognise the cue of transition from one exercise to another. Since my experience helped me to learn sequences quickly, members kept praising me as a "good learner," and I could ask more detailed questions. Witnessing my commitment and progress, Viwe asked me if I remembered the choreography he taught me and also suggested that I would be part of the upcoming production. As well as Mandisi and Nozuko, I started to build stronger rapport with members. As this demonstrates, participation in dance provided me "a role, credentials, and the right" to ask inquiries of the teachers, while the conversation contributed to building close friendships with teachers and dancers (Hughes-Freeland, 2008, p. 5). They started to see me as a member rather than a guest, which was indicated when they started not to translate what they said, gave me the rehearsal schedule, and asked me to lead an exercise.

2.9.3 Sensory Ethnography

My journey to gain “corporeal cultural knowledge” (Sklar, 1994) from the members of Iziqhaza Art Combination was not possible without me paying attention to sensory information, especially the sound. I utilised a sensory ethnographic method that allowed me to embrace multisensory experiences, including knowing, practice, memory, and imagination (Pink, 2009, p. 3), in and outside the dancing space. Schneider and Wright (2006, p. 13) have suggested that most sensual experiences involved in fieldwork are normally filtered out from anthropological writing. For example, both informants and researchers are often challenged to articulate the qualities that constitute the aesthetics and concepts of the movements, but the absence of terminology does not mean there is no philosophy behind them (Youngerman, 1975, pp. 121-122). I attempt to articulate the sensory aspect of my experience not simply to *invoke*, but to *convince* (Pink, 2009, p. 32) the reader's empathetic engagement. In this attempt, I took notes in my mother tongue, Japanese, so that it was easier for me to recall the experience.

2.9.4 Interviews

As part of ethnography, I conducted semi-structured interviews, often informally (e.g., in the car, during rehearsals, at dance workshops) and formally at arranged locations. Semi-structured interviews involve a flexible format in which the interviewer has a set of predetermined questions but is open to exploring new topics that arise during the conversation. This approach allows for deeper insight and enables participants to elaborate on their responses, providing rich, qualitative data. For my study, I prepared around ten core questions to guide the discussion, but many of these questions were naturally addressed throughout the conversation without needing to be asked explicitly. I attempted to collect backdated narratives to provide me with participants' histories of day-to-day navigation of precarity through dancing. I also asked about their short and long-term goals as well as the potential challenges in achieving them. This illustrated the complex circumstances in which youth find themselves.

Given their fluency in English, the interview was conducted in English, with some isiXhosa words that could not be translated by them. Interviewing in a non-native language significantly shaped the data (Briggs, 2007), but their detailed accounts, raised by my small responses and questions, overweighed linguistic appropriation through voice recording and translation. Interviews were often accompanied by gestures, especially moves, which they used to explain dances in which they have been engaging. The places were chosen accordingly, such as outside the dance venue in Zolani Centre or a garden at Baxter Theatre. The interviews were recorded as audiotapes, enabling me to keep the data objective and comprehensive to ensure its “rigor and validity” in qualitative research (Silverman, 2008, p. 380). Although the formal interview gave enough space and time to provide me with the bigger picture, casual conversation often gave it context and, therefore, nuances.

2.9.5 Video Taping

In addition to using dance anthropology as a method, whereby I engaged my body as an instrument to experience the youth's dance practices, I also incorporated videotaping as a key research tool. Simultaneous participation in dance practice and observation is challenging, and researchers must see a dance several times to attain movement description for the further stages of research (Youngerman, 1975, p. 119). I mostly took videos of choreography, and I was taught to both analyse and practice. My videotaping became normalised in the field, and the members started videotaping me together with the member who was teaching, which enabled me to practice more efficiently. The videotaping of the dances was not only for documentation and analysis, but also an integral part of my

participant observation. By recording the youth's dance practices, I was able to immerse myself in their learning and memory processes, experiencing first-hand what they go through as dancers. Videotaping also acted as a catalyst for the informant to mention the quality of dance, which is hard to be expressed in words (Youngerman, 1975, p. 123).

It was often the case that members who watched the video found minor differences within steps and discussed the agreement. I also collected videos of their performances that revealed various "strategies" they employ to gain recognition as the "strongest Zulu dancers." As verbalisation is not always a suitable tool to express the concepts and aesthetics of a dance, the videos helped me to ask questions such as the name of the dance, the extent to which they improvised, and judgment on the quality. No identifying information was included in the videos or transcriptions, and efforts were made to anonymise participants, such as using pseudonyms or blurring faces if requested.

Care was taken to avoid recording sensitive content without prior consent, and participants were informed that they could stop the recording at any time. Ethical boundaries were respected by regularly checking in with participants to ensure their emotional and psychological well-being. Any material deemed too personal by participants was excluded or handled in a way that preserved their dignity and privacy.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrated the process of my entry into the field and my multiple qualitative research methods. I have emphasised the role of positionality in shaping experience in the field and data collected, as well as how negotiation of positionality is a continued practice. I have outlined different methods through which I attempted to pay respect and protect participants' privacy to make the study free from exploitation. This chapter illustrated how my understanding of Nyanga and the conceptual framing of 'traditional' dance influenced both my fieldwork experience and the data I collected. It also highlighted my efforts to address how young people strategically utilise 'traditional' dance to achieve recognition as valued social beings and to establish themselves as socially accomplished adults, as perceived from their own perspectives.

Chapter 3 Precarity and Youth ‘Traditional’ Dancers

3.1 Abstract

This chapter examines the precarious lives of young dancers in Cape Town’s townships, focusing on how they navigate daily challenges and seek recognition through dance. Drawing on life history interviews with members of the Iziqhaza Art Combination (IAC), it highlights how their dance-centred lives intersect with socioeconomic inequalities and systemic uncertainties. Despite their creative agency, these youth face significant barriers tied to township life and their roles as ‘traditional’ dancers. The chapter argues that dance serves as both a means of survival and a pursuit of social recognition, contextualising their struggles within the broader realities of resource deprivation and unfulfilled national promises.

3.2 Introduction

Young men and women in this study live in precarious conditions where dance becomes essential for survival, both as a means to endure and to live through challenges. The everyday lives of IAC members in townships are shaped by under-resourced conditions, reflecting New South Africa's unfulfilled promise to nurture and protect lives (Swartz, 2012). These conditions are evident at the intersection of township life and the dance industry. Stories of three IAC members illustrate how their dance-centred lives exist *with* and *within* precarity, shaping how they navigate daily challenges to gain recognition as humans (Taylor, 1992) and as accomplished social adults (Fokwang, 2008). They demonstrate how recognition enables them to transition into social adulthood, while its absence keeps them in the "waiting" phase (Honwana, 2012). Life history interviews, focusing on their engagement with "traditional" dancing, reveal how their pursuit of recognition is challenged. Despite their agency, IAC youth collectively face obstacles as ‘traditional’ or ‘Zulu’ dancers in Cape Town, especially living in townships where intersecting uncertainties hinder their efforts to gain recognition.

3.3 Andile’s Story

3.3.1 Dancing while Precarious

“In 2015, I was in my Grade Twelve, and I was not at school anymore. But I was still a dancer. And gigging, doing whatever. But gigs don’t always come. Or at least when there was a sun, when the season was hot and so on, we were like, “Let’s go and mingle. Let’s go and busk and earn money.” So I brought everyone around, and we kept that.”³

Andile was born in Wynberg and raised in the precarity of Khayelitsha without the presence of his father. Andile fell severely sick at a young age and was advised to stay with his father in Nyanga to heal. After he recovered, he grew up and often roamed around the streets with his friends straight after school. Instead of being caught by the temptations in which other children and adolescents engage to “check out each other’s lives on the street” (Hills et al., 2016), he was more exposed to recreational activities such as Uqapu or Uweit, women playing jump loop, and tin kicking games. Since the women were much older than Andile and his friend, they could only watch them, feeling hesitant to join them. Seeing Andile and his friend staring at the ladies and their activities longingly, a young man of a dance group picked Andile and his friend for his group so that it could be bigger and be more recognised. Meeting at the crossroads of a street, a young leader made them

³ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

transcend the border from “being bored” to “being committed,” offering an interdependent relationship (Nyamnjoh, 2017, p. 266).

The first taught dance, the Gumboots dance, was too difficult to master for Andile and his friend, and it was replaced with the ‘Zulu’ dance, which they managed to pick up. However, the dance practice was marked by intense physicality, including hitting and shouting from the older dancers, which added another layer of precariousness to their experience (Freire, 2018), heightening the emotional and social challenges they faced. On the other hand, the young teacher was ‘raising’ them to become strong dancers and instilling disciplines they had been denied as children, largely due to the lasting structural effects of Apartheid, which had systematically deprived them of proper education, social support, and opportunities for personal development (Spaull, 2013, p. 437). Despite struggling to master the Zulu dance and bearing the harsh teaching methods, Andile actively participated in collective recognition-seeking: wearing a matching costume with the rest of the group members and performing synchronised dance routines in public spaces.

He joined busking whenever he got a chance and got a little money to pay for the lunch his family could not provide. He did not manage to finish school due to multiple structural barriers, such as the school remaining dysfunctional (Spaull, 2013, p. 437) and family being incomplete (Swartz & Bhaha, 2009). Instead, by the age of eight, he was already helping his family to put food on the table with the money he got from busking. Amid precarity, in which he could not be dependent on adults like another child and did not have recourse to complete school (Fleisch, 2008), he used dancing to gain resources to be recognised as a dignified human and as an independent child who could support family finances.

Although busking had helped his and his family’s finances, the act of money-making itself was precarious. Uncontrollable factors such as weather, the number of tourists, and tourist spots that required permits to perform constantly exposed the team’s uncertainty. The second dance group Andile joined did not have a permit to perform at the Waterfront and was often expelled by the security. With IAC, he has more successful “gigs” due to its connection with coordinators, but opportunities for performances are still inconsistent. The performance rewards temporarily help his finances, but the inconsistent opportunities leave him and the group economically vulnerable, and it debilitates the group’s sustenance in the long term (Herrmann & van der Maesen, 2008, p. 12). Particularly in winter, the off-tourism season, performance requests are scarce, and the members, including Andile, barely have money to make it to dance rehearsal, allocating the income from the main job for everyday expenses. He is currently a freelancer who works on a project-by-project basis in the film industry to sustain his life, using dancing as a side hustle. The work is demanding, and it is sporadically managed. Andile frequently cannot make it to rehearsals at IAC; hence, he is unable to play the full role of the group leader.

Part of the precarity of living in Nyanga derives from geographical exclusion, which intersects with racial segregation. This greatly makes Andile’s commitment to his work and IAC activities challenging. Andile often struggles to find a ride to go home after working in town in the evening, as there are no more minibus taxis and Uber drivers are reluctant to accept his ride request. I once ordered Uber for him to go to the city centre so he could take a taxi from there to Nyanga; the driver almost rejected the ride when he saw the passenger was not me but Andile, making him a victim of the stigma put on people of colour as carjackers. He is vulnerable as he is spatially, racially, and economically marginalised (Chattopadhyay, 2018), which deprives his human dignity. For similar reasons, he often needs to reject invitations to shows from his friends in the dance industry. This

blocks his chance to learn from and connect with people and, moreover, to apply that work to IAC so that the group can grow. Thus, it deprives him of the opportunities to practice, explore, and refute (Appadurai, 2001, p. 69) and to gain social capital to actualise the dream. Precarity “inhabits the micro spaces of everyday life” that prevent him from predicting and planning for his time (Ettlinger, 2007, p. 320). These challenges of daily life have compelled Andile to advance within the dance sector, establishing it as his primary arena for gaining recognition, which is frequently being challenged due to multiple layers of exclusion.

3.3.2 Straddling Groups for More Recognition

When Andile started to be part of the dance group, there were also many other groups like his; each drew inspiration from and competed against the other. People often moved between groups, seeking an environment with higher skills and rewards. Andile was part of the competition for recognition regardless of the specific group to which he belonged. The first group Andile joined was still new and often chased away by the more experienced group while they were busking. The presence of a drum in Andile’s group eventually attracted the stronger group, as it complemented their unsynchronised movements, which were guided only by chorus. Two groups merged and became a bigger group, which gave Andile more chances to gain visibility. He met a good dance partner, Yamkela, through this collaboration, and together they joined the Amy Biehl Foundation, an after-school programme based in Nyanga and Gugulethu. There, Andile got to know Viwe and exchanged skills with him as well as another guy named Sive to advance their choreography. Andile, Viwe, Yamkela, and Sive made a great team with extremely powerful dancing, as claimed by Andile. The group became widely known. Consequently, it attracted another group consisting of female dancers who approached them with the aim of making their show bigger in scale. Despite the challenges in putting different gender-oriented dances together, the combination made the new group one of the strongest Zulu dance groups in Nyanga. Naming it Imbambalo (“crazy” in isiXhosa), they danced with extreme passion, including dance battles within the group. As their advanced dancing skills drew such an interest from artists outside the dance sector, Andile and others started to form another group with more musical variety and named it Izisonke (“everyone” in isiXhosa).

However, Yamakela and Sive’s misbehaviour led to their dismissal, and Andile decided to leave the group with them to keep the irreplaceable “crazy” energy the four of them had when dancing. Yamkela and Sive kept making trouble with their attention-seeking and “all talk no action” behaviour, which kept crushing Andile and Viwe’s intention to develop the group for more recognition. Andile also initiated reuniting with some older male dancers with whom he used to dance, but some of them would ask around or even transgress for rands and cents for the temporary pleasure of drinking and smoking. Although physically part of a dance group, some youth engage in drinking and smoking as a way of belonging to the “wounded nation” (Berlant, 2000) and to a historically structured masculinity (Miles et al., 2014), often overlooking the long-term benefits of “using their time well,” as Andile puts it. His social network frequently exposed him to negative behaviours (Dziewanski, 2020), which were shaped by the structural violence of both the nation and the broader world (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016). Despite this, he continued to navigate the shifting dynamics of dance groups, using any opportunity he had to survive. Three dancers from the other side of Nyanga joined Andile and Viwe’s group at that time, bringing some stability to their efforts. In 2011, when Andile was sixteen years old, he and Viwe named the group Iziquhaza Art Combination, with the goal of growing further as a collective. This constant integration and disintegration of groups, driven by a delicate balance of individuals’ skills and moral alignments, mirrors the dynamics of sports clubs in Langa during the increased migration of the 19th century (Wilson & Mafeje, 1963, pp.

113-125), when similar patterns of participation and collaboration were shaped by shifting social and economic forces.

3.4 Viwe's Story

3.4.1 Dancing to Get By

Viwe's story illustrates his navigation through precarity in different phases of becoming and how he negotiated his identity in violent acts, dance groups, and dancing. Viwe was born into the precarity of Nyanga and was raised in a family well connected with music. While being exposed to the music in which his father and his brother engaged, Viwe became part of a local gang group, and he fought against the enemy gang group violently in his early years of school. Living close to violence, being part of a gang group was his way of belonging and gaining recognition (Swartz, 2012). At the age of eight, Viwe realised, "This is not a life for me," and decided to join the Amy Biehl Foundation, an after-school programme. The program was founded by the parents of an American woman who was committed to making a difference in Apartheid South Africa but was tragically murdered in a political mob attack in Gugulethu (Amy Foundation, n.d.). The foundation's mission is to help children and youth develop the skills to make positive life choices and contribute to society. Learning many kinds of different dance styles consistently, soon he was well equipped with skills and started busking with Andile as well as older members of the group. As the group became visible, Viwe, Andile, and other members started to perform 'traditional' dance and Gumboots dance at restaurants directed for tourists such as Mama Africa and Marco restaurant. He also learned some indigenous instruments including Mbila, Mhobe, Uhadi, and Marimba from a guy whom Viwe befriended at one of the performances in which he participated. As Andile and other dancers developed more and more skills, they were told to leave the afterschool programme, as the programme needed more space to accommodate younger students in need. This kickout motivated them to form an independent group and increase more visibility in and out of Nyanga. Since leaving the gang, he has utilised his social capital to navigate uncertainty, channelling his energy to engage in and hone his craft. However, while the connection with people tremendously helped to shape his identity and sense of belonging, he was still inhabiting a world in which scarce resources did not allow him to be recognised as a human worthy of protection and respect:

In this year, I've been through a lot. I've lost my father, you know. And I was in a bad space, and also my family turned their back on me. And because, with my little brother, I'm sharing the father, but [we have] different mothers. And then, the mother, she is doing everything that I would never have never expected [her to do]. I have one best friend. But he wasn't there for me. The time I needed him. But then, dance was there for me; music was there for me... I play some soft music and then do some steps so that the pain can come out. If I keep my pain inside, it will affect my mind for the rest of my life.⁴

Viwe's story highlights the devastating impact of lacking non-material support—such as social trust and emotional connection—on his survival (Kovalainen, 2004, p. 160). In the absence of a dependable companion, he turned to dance and music as his faithful 'friends,' using them to cope with isolation and navigate the uncertainty in his life. For him, dance was not just an art form, but also a vital lifeline—a means of processing pain and preventing it from consuming him.

⁴ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

3.4.2 Multiple Responsibilities: Work, Family, and Dance

Viwe experiences challenges in committing to IAC practices and performances because of his overloaded social and financial responsibilities. Besides being a leader of IAC and a father of a child, he is a full-time worker at the Cape Town International Airport and breadwinner of the extended family, straddling multiple positions, localities, and identities (Nyamnjoh, 2018). Depending on the day and night shifts at the airport, which alternate every two weeks, Viwe cannot make it to the weekly practices at IAC. In the duration of my fieldwork, Viwe experienced two of his family members passing, which he needed to take care of financially and physically. As a full-time worker with consistent income, he was positioned to support his extended family for daily and ceremonial expenses (Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley, 2019, p. 451), which is sometimes taken for granted in the name of Ubuntu, the community support ingrained in African Society (Masenya, 2017, p. 195). Being a youth and a father who already has extra expenses, the social obligation to pay for such “black tax” burdens his finances. Instead of receiving the rights youth are promised by the new democratic nation, he still experiences the marginalisation his ancestors had to face (Barlant, 2000). Each time, he needed to ask for a shift change at the airport, which then left no space for more adjustment to attend IAC practices and performances. For instance, the group’s show, which he scripted and directed after three months of preparation, was performed without him because he couldn’t secure a shift change at the airport after requesting time off for a family funeral. His absence left the rest of the IAC members confused and hindered the final rehearsal and production process. Constantly balancing work, IAC duties, and family responsibilities, Viwe was so overwhelmed that, when I greeted him, he simply replied, “Hi Reece, I’m super busy.”

3.5 Nozuko’s Story

3.5.1 Surviving under an Exploitative Teacher

In her fourth grade of school, Nozuko joined the Amy Biehl Foundation after Viwe and Andile had left the programme and learned different kinds of dance including tin dance, stick dance, and Kwaito dance. As the teacher resigned from the programme, Nozuko moved to a new group called Imbogoto, based in her community Philippi, where she gained a lot of experience but also faced a debilitating environment due to her teacher who exacerbated the level of precarity. Being an empathetic leader who is passionate in dancing, Nozuko’s teacher made an effort to learn Tswana dance to fit the all-female population of the group, complementing the absence of male dancers who usually perform Zulu dance. The teacher made the ladies powerful dancers and brought some opportunities for them to perform at well-known places like Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden, where Nozuko could use her skills and gain visibility at a young age. However, the teacher’s strong preference for particular dancers and the desire to compete with other groups created pressure on dancers, including Nozuko. Being one of the strong dancers and the teacher’s favourite, Nozuko’s will to focus on school during her matric was not welcomed by her, so Nozuko had to leave the group:

As time [went] on, I ended up leaving the group because I think I was still doing Grade Twelve at the time. I was being on and off. She didn’t understand. Especially [as a] teacher, [she should understand] I’m doing Grade Twelve. I want to do this [dance]; at the same time, I had to focus on school. And I must pass because I wanna further understand this [the subject]. That’s when it changed, that’s why I was leaving Imbogoto and joining Iziquhaza. But the teacher was so jealous of Iziquhaza, and she didn’t like [that Iziquhaza] ended up taking us from her. I was one of her best

*dancers. So yeah, she had her own favourite. She had some girls she hated, so they didn't come to the rehearsal.*⁵

Nozuko's statement highlights the teacher's strategy to manipulate dancers by showing her intensive preference, making the teacher-student power balance more asymmetrical (Freire, 2018). Besides the manipulative act, the teacher took advantage of her authority and withheld the rewards she got from the children's performance by not sharing fairly with the performers while they were too young to realise it. Nozuko explains how painful it was to recognise the teacher's unfair act after a few years:

*I learned a lot from her. If she was not toxic, yes, and [not] unfair to others, I should have danced. After I left the group, I heard from the person from Kirstenbosch that they paid like 1500 Rands [for the performance] but I was still...I was still young, you know. So she left 60 Rands for us but she was paid much more. As we were getting information, we just didn't get paid [the share of] 1.5K. After I [came] back [to the group], yoh, I was [feeling] very painful, as I was still young. I was still young.*⁶

Similar to youth, children are susceptible to the violence that permeates the township community (Scheper-Huges, 2004), and acquiring primary education is essential to equip them with the skill and resilience to navigate precarious circumstances. While dance groups like Imbogoto and their initiative to give children space to commit to physical activity is considered valuable, especially in the context of historical oppression, the asymmetrical power dynamics between the learners and the teachers exist. By taking advantage of children's vulnerability by withholding the performance rewards and pressuring them to prioritise dancing over education, the teacher increased the risk of Nozuko's future precarity, becoming a perpetuator of underscored children's oppression (Freire, 2018). Due to this experience, Nozuko eventually made her decision to transfer to IAC, whose members welcomed her after a long period of absence.

3.5.2 Internalising Precariousness: Crime and Violence

Although IAC provided Nozuko with a more stable sense of belonging than her previous group, transferring to IAC also meant commuting from Philippi to Nyanga, a journey complicated by the unsafe nature of the rehearsal venue's location, especially for women (Mofokeng, 2023). The experiences of IAC members, including Nozuko's, highlight their proximity to violence and crime. They internalise these dangers, becoming entangled in the environment around them. Viwe described Nyanga as "the most troublesome area, with crimes and teenage pregnancy," a view echoed by situations I personally witnessed, such as an ambulance that required a police escort to avoid criminal attacks, and IAC members' talk about carrying guns for self-protection. As Butler (2009, p. 12) argues, precarity is not just a condition of economic insecurity but a politically induced condition in which certain populations are rendered more vulnerable to violence and death. In Nyanga, precarity is a constant presence, shaping how individuals "think, feel, act, and interact" every day (Ettlinger, 2007, p. 234).

⁵ Excerpt from an interview with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁶ Excerpt from an interview with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Events such as taxi drivers' protests and thefts not only affect the safety of the community, but also stop the daily operation of IAC. Taxi drivers' protests, such as the one in November 2022, not only compromised community safety, but also disrupted the daily routines of IAC members, forcing the cancellation of an entire week of rehearsals. This setback significantly delayed their preparation for the production, hindering their efforts to gain recognition and pursue their aspirations (Appadurai, 2001). Another event that marked the community's precarity was when the Zolani Centre was broken into by a thief and was blocked by the police for investigation. It was later found out that the attacked building was another community centre; the police mistakenly shut off the wrong building, and the crime report on the actual thief was never updated. The IAC members' response was focused more on the disruptions of the day than their safety, which reveals how their perception around crime has been normalised (McCart et al., 2007). Similarly, Nozuko's story of her partner highlights her proximity to violence in daily life and some level of "immunity" she has to such circumstances. On one of the performance days, she arrived home to find her partner collapsing from a severe eye injury caused during a fight:

Nozuko: I had three missed calls, and I called this person back, but he couldn't pick up, only to find out that my boyfriend was stabbed. You see? He was stabbed in his eyes. And I was coming now to Gugulethu, so I stayed there; my boyfriend came to my house. People went back to the place and fought again. [If he went back], he might be dead by now, because he was very drunk. So we came home, and I cleaned his blood and everything because everything was red. Even things he paid [for] the day before, [like his] clothes. It was very bad. This cannot happen. Like, you lost your eye? Then he said, "No, I don't know. But I cannot feel it." Even now, there's a scar.

Rise: I'm very sorry.

Nozuko: No, it's fine. They were gonna take him to surgery, and he said, "No, I can feel my eye, so they don't have to." So that is why, if you are Xhosa, you need to listen to yourself.

Rise: Did he eventually take it out?

Nozuko: No, he didn't take it out because he refused. He refused.

R: They suggested to take it out, right?

A: Yes. But he said, "No, I can still feel it," which means it's working. So he didn't have to take it. Maybe it might work again.⁷

The incident Nozuko described occurred just a week before I conducted this interview with her. While her calmness in recounting the event is notable, it is particularly striking how much emphasis she placed on the damage to her boyfriend's new clothes rather than the severity of his injury. This response suggests a form of emotional detachment or what might be understood as a cultural "immunity," developed as a coping mechanism in response to the pervasive violence and instability in her environment (Issacs, 2010, pp. 25-26). The constant presence of alcoholism and

⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

violence in townships, driven by the structural inequities of post-Apartheid South Africa (Berlant, 2000), compels young people like Nozuko to adopt coping mechanisms to navigate these harsh realities. This resilience, though a necessary survival strategy, reflects how the "acceptance" of such precarious conditions becomes ingrained over time, shaping how individuals perceive and respond to violence. In this sense, the normalisation of such experiences is both a product of the structural violence embedded in society and a mechanism that reinforces it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 272).

3.6 Youth in Crisis: The Impact of Structural Violence on Andile, Viwe and Nozuko's Search for Recognition

Although the three figures—Andile, Viwe and Nozuko—have been exposed to different kinds of precarity—such as absent fathers, limited education, limited transport, black tax, power abuse, alcoholism, and fighting—these adversities are caused by an uneven distribution of precariousness (Butler, 2012, pp. 3-4) that is facilitated by the structural violence of colonialism, the Apartheid regime, and neoliberalism (Saul, 2001). According to Butler (2009), precarity emerges from the political frameworks that fail to recognise certain populations as fully human, or as worthy of protection. The youth in IAC are positioned within such a framework, where their social and economic vulnerabilities are not just circumstantial, but structurally sustained through this different allocation of recognisability. The youth of IAC are often deprived of their right to live a humane life (Tshivhase, 2021) as well as to fully participate in an activity to attain dignity and recognition as an accomplished social adult. On the other hand, membership to the group acts as platform to gain financial and social resources, which enables youth to navigate adversities, making them active agents who seek recognition as successful people. This will be further explained in Chapter 4.

3.6.1 Exploitation in the Industry

In their efforts to earn income through 'traditional' dancing and be recognised as independent, accomplished adults, youth face multiple layers of unequal treatment that is driven by the power imbalances embedded in the tourism and entertainment industries. Dancers' desperate and urgent need for income creates unbalanced dynamics between dancers, employers, and audiences, fostering financial and cultural exploitation. This constantly exposes the youth who engage in 'traditional' dancing to a debilitating environment.

3.6.2 "Poverty" Exploitation

Through interviews and conversations, it became evident that dancers' vulnerable positions are being exploited and normalised, particularly due to the high demand for performance opportunities. Nozuko's experience demonstrates how performance coordinators take advantage of their power in the group and do not equally share the full reward with dancers. Wandile's episode also demonstrates how little the performance reward is set and how unfairly it is distributed by the coordinator:

He [a coordinator] used to organise gigs for us. There were 50 drummers at the rugby game during COVID. We surrounded the ground and played the drum for three minutes, and it was R5000. There was a girl who did traditional dance, read poems, and performed before [or after the drumming]. It is a lot of reward for a three minute gig, but since we were 50 of us, we spread it, and we also needed to get drinks and other stuff. So it was not much at the end, but Max [the coordinator] was getting money

*from Springbok. I knew how it was distributed. Sometimes people don't distribute, but take as much as they want, right?*⁸

Wandile's experience highlights the two layers of exploitation that dancers face, both from the client and the coordinator. The payment for the performance does not account for the number of performers or the other costs involved. Additionally, the coordinator unfairly distributed the reward he received, failing to share it equally among the IAC dancers. Siyabulela's account of another performance further illustrates the exploitation dancers endure, particularly due to the mismatch between the actual performance time and the total hours invested in preparation:

Rise: How was your day?

Siyabulela: Yoh, it was so long. I had a rehearsal at the Convention Centre.

Rise: Oh, was there a ceremony or something?

Siyabulela: Yeah, kind of. We were there from one to four [o'clock].

Rise: So, the performance is quite long?

*Siyabulela: No, it was like 30 minutes. We had to be there at one, and there was a song, so we had to adjust to it. The lady was leading us. Otherwise, I have to work.*⁹

For the 30-minute performance at four pm, Siyabulela had to be at the performance venue from midday, sacrificing the work he was contracted to do for a few months. Despite this exploitative nature of performances, youth still need to take the opportunities they can get, as they are convinced that the little rewards are an important source of income in their inconsistent employment situation. Furthermore, they acknowledge that the connection and visibility they make through the performance will give more and bigger performance opportunities in the future. The aspiration for financial gain and upward mobility blind young performers from the actual cost of participating in the gig, reproducing the asymmetrical power structure in the performance industry.

3.6.3 Political Manipulation and Exploitation

In addition to being victims of financial and cultural exploitation, the reality of youth 'poverty' is often objectified for political gain. Viwe's story illustrates how dancers' identities as 'township youth' are co-opted by political parties as part of an empowerment narrative aimed at attracting voters during elections, while their promises of support remain empty and temporary:

Viwe: Sometimes they ask us to perform in their ceremonies, events, or anything. They do know that we don't have any sponsors. They only ask us if they need us. And then after that, they just forget about us. They promise us things, all they [would] do for us, and then after that, they forget about us.

⁸ Excerpt from a conversation with Wandile on September 20, 2022, in Wynberg, Cape Town.

⁹ Excerpt from a conversation with Siyabulela on November 22, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Rise: They don't have enough budget?

Viwe: I believe that they have the budget for sports, arts, and culture, they do get that, but they never get anything [for us]. If they are part of ANC, this is what they do. They like dancers; they ask us to stand for ANC. Like, they would change our costume to wear ANC stuff. And then they will just tell us, "We are gonna fund you, we are gonna change your life." Every time I go to their functions, they will do that. And then they like to promote [community projects] like us dancers. We perform at the conference, and then they say, "This is what we do."

R: As part of their empowerment projects?

Viwe: They say, "We keep kids busy," and what what what. And then they promise us things. Promise us life, promise us everything. And then they just forget about that.¹⁰

Political leaders often make promises of sponsorship to dancers, using them for performances to gain visibility, but these promises are not always fulfilled once the leaders return to positions of power, leaving the group outside the system, where an unregistered group such as IAC cannot apply for funding. This pattern of exploitation reflects broader political and economic marginalisation, which, as Meintjes (2017, pp. 212-213) notes, has been perpetuated by uneven resource distribution under the ANC. For vulnerable young dancers in groups like IAC, these unkept promises reinforce the challenges of achieving stability and dignity in the face of the government's continued failure to address the aspirations of those it aimed to uplift in the post-Apartheid era (Swartz et al., 2012, p. 27).

3.6.4 Commodification and Misrepresentation

In the context of performances for international guests, IAC dancers are misrepresented by essentialised and exoticised African traditions created by the West (Echtner and Prasad, 2003, p. 66). Youth's vulnerability in financial status creates a hierarchy that forces them to accept the request (Ota, 1993, p. 385) and therefore contributes to the reproduction of the imagined 'Africa.' In a Facebook post, I have observed a photo of Andile and Viwe partaking an event. They are standing by the entrance of the event venue, playing Jembe. They are only wearing animal skin skirts. The rest of their exposed bodies are painted white. Together with other artists dressed in their respective themes, they are welcoming an international audience as they walk into the venue. The below conversation with Andile shows how their economic vulnerability allows their bodies to be used to present an exoticised picture of 'Africanness':

Rise: Why were you wearing the white painting the other day at Cabo Beach Club?

Andile: It's the client. They requested it. They wanted us to be like the Khoisan people.

Rise: But they [Khoi Khoi and San people] are not white.

¹⁰ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Andile: Yeah, but it's their image. It's embarrassing sometimes. There are so many people in the industry that doesn't know what they are doing.

Rise: And you guys are not Khoikhoi nor San people.

Andile: Yeah. Maybe they couldn't find people, so they used us.

Rise: [Have] there been any requests from the client that were weird or extreme? What kind of requests do you usually get?

Andile: Like "half naked" or "the animal skin for a skirt" or something like that. We need to do whatever they say because we agreed to that.

Rise: So you can refuse if you don't like the request?

Andile: You don't have time to refuse. We need to be flexible, like using other people's costumes.¹¹

The dancers' socioeconomic marginality prevents them from having control over the market value, despite their awareness of what is being commodified (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009, p. 71). Like the above scenario, clients request not only what kind of dance piece to perform, but also costume and face paint to meet the expectation of the global guests (Naidu, 2011 p. 34). Impulsive acceptance of this kind of performance sometimes leaves dancers unaware of the setting of the events, hence how and to whom they are represented.

IAC dancers are particularly susceptible to this structural violence because of their representation as 'Zulu dancers' in the national and global market. Most of the performance requests are aligned with an image of Zulu people that has been shaped by layers of historical injustice. These include the Bantustan system (Amato, 1996), where artificial territories were created by the Apartheid government to segregate Black South Africans, depriving them of resources and rights, as well as the mining industry (Clegg, 1981; Erlmann, 1990; Larlham, 1985), for which Zulu and other African communities were exploited under colonial and Apartheid rule, resulting in severe social and economic inequality. Additionally, post-Apartheid ethnic authority boosting (Oomen, 2005, p. 15) further shaped Zulu identity by granting ethnic groups official recognition and political power, which reinforced ethnic divisions rather than fostering national unity. Finally, tourism development narratives (Naidu, 2011, p. 34) have also played a role, reducing Zulu culture to a set of stereotypical, romanticised images for the benefit of tourism, which often overlooks the complexity and richness of Zulu history and experience.

These historical forces continue to shape public perceptions of Zulu culture and influence the performance requests tied to it. This politically structured image is embodied and reproduced by IAC dancers, as they keep accepting the requests from clients. When I accompanied their performances, it was often the case that dancers did not know the details of the event. This was evidenced in Nozuko's response, "I don't know, love," in a calm but admonishing tone when I asked her about the audience, scale, and the programme of the event a few minutes before the performance. "Gigs" opportunities often come through the connection of Viwe, Andile, and Siyabulela; they get shared in the IAC WhatsApp group with minimum information such as numbers of dancers needed, date, and the

¹¹ Excerpt from a conversation with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

amount of reward, as “not everyone has to know the detail,” as stated by Andile. Regular dancers are automatically included to be part of the performance unless they are busy. IAC dancers’ economic vulnerability and their strong aspiration for visibility shapes their decision-making process, which contributes to the reproduction of stereotypical images of ‘Zulu dancers.’

The urgency that youth feel to secure performance opportunities stems not only from their desire for visibility within the industry, but also from their need to be recognised as economically capable individuals. While IAC includes both male and female dancers, the male presence in both the dance performances and decision-making processes is more prominent, which reflects a collective pursuit of manhood. In their marginalised socioeconomic context, masculinity has been reshaped from being defined solely by traditional rituals, such as *ulwaluko* (initiation) and heterosexual homemaking, to being measured by the ability to accumulate money and wealth as a means of survival (Mfecane, 2020; Qambela, 2021).

Socioeconomic marginality also makes the hierarchy more competitive (Fuh, 2012), so IAC men constantly look for financial opportunity to climb up the social ladder within the dance industry. As Meintjes (2017, p. 235) describes Umzansi Zulu Dancers’ attempt to make the best of the studio practice as “hardworking principled masculinity,” IAC men take on opportunities with the hope that it might bring something, even if it does not render results, such as connections, opportunities, money, and fame. While their pursuit of opportunities reflects their agency in a limited economic context, the urgency they feel to secure performance opportunities is a consequence of the neoliberal restructuring of the postcolonial state (Meintjes, 2017, p. 234). This, in turn, places them in a vulnerable position, subject to both economic and cultural exploitation.

3.7 “The Quiet Violence of Dreams”: High Aspiration Coupled with Scarce Resources

Due to the precarious environment that makes youths’ lives challenging to navigate, their dreams and aspirations are hardly met with accessible recourses. When I asked Wandile about his short-term dream, said he wanted to make the IAC production a success, but this slowly faded away as the production collapsed.

On my second visit to Zolani Centre on 17 August, Viwe told me that there would be an IAC show on 18 September. It was an hour-long production named *Uhambo Lwam* (*My Journey in isiXhosa*) consisting of five scenes of dancing, singing, and acting, scripted and directed by Viwe. IAC invited a youth drama group called Imvelaphi Arts Movement (IAM), based in Nyanga, to collaborate and take on most of the acting part. Together with IAC, IAM, and other musicians, the show consisted of around 30 performers and some instrument players, proudly described by Viwe. However, the production was conducted in a way significantly different from how it was initially imagined with extreme delays and improvisations. The fall of the production was caused by a lack of management due to the leaders’ inconsistent presence and direction, intensified by the other dancers’ low commitment. These challenges were largely a result of the unstable social and economic conditions in which the dancers live, which hindered their ability to carry out their original vision for the production (Appadurai, 2001, p. 96).

Although Viwe had rehearsal plans such as “working on Sophia Town Dance on Wednesday and Thursday next week,” it was only set for half of the week when Viwe could make it to rehearsal. Because the dancers’ attendance was inconsistent due to school and work commitments, rehearsals often focused on the material the present dancers needed to catch up on or adjustments to the dance formations with only those present. As a result, the structure of each scene in the show changed

constantly. The logistics of the show were only paid attention to when one of the old IAC members mentioned issues such as “posters should be out two weeks before the show, so people are aware of the show,” and it was often too late to make it. Nine days before the re-fixed performance day of 30 September, the venue for the show was not secured, the poster was not created, and the participation fee of R50 was not collected from any of the IAC members but Andile. These crises were often responded to with, “We’ll make a plan,” without coming up with tangible solutions. As a result, the youth were under constant pressure to manage immediate challenges without seeing any real improvement in the broader situation (Standing, 2011, p. 16).

This delay in preparations and logistics led to another two reschedules of the show date, which caused clashes with members’ other commitments, such as work and rehearsal at other dance companies. Viwe was occupied with his work at the airport, Andile was caught up with his film-related work, and Nozuko was busy with her demanding call centre work. They needed to prioritise their jobs to survive everyday economic precarity and did not have space to find the energy to keep going (Lazzarato, 2004; Chabal, 2009, p. 158) for an independent performance that would not bring them resources to maintain their material lives.

The extension of the production timeline, combined with each member’s individual time constraints, led to a decline in dancers’ focus and commitment to the project. Communication within the group decreased, and fewer members informed the team about their absences. This lack of engagement from IAC members stood in stark contrast to the consistent commitment demonstrated by IAM members, despite their own time constraints. Siyabulela, the group’s main drummer, was the only IAC member who consistently attended rehearsals. However, without clear direction from Viwe and the senior dancers, he was uncertain about how to proceed, leaving both the IAM actors and the junior IAC dancers without guidance or tasks to work on. When the third postponement of the show was decided due to unpreparedness, Siyabulela made a comment out of frustration after one of many quiet rehearsals:

Guys, let us all be serious here. We should all know what we are here to do without wasting each other’s time. The others wake up early every morning. They [IAM actors] have call-backs every time, but you are now wasting their time, they are going home at 16h00 at 15h50, rest for two hours only, and come back here at Zolani Centre at 18h00. They are not getting enough rest, but they come back. They have now wasted their time here; two hours have been wasted here without any rehearsals. That is time they should have spent on their stuff, but they came here. Some have chores in their homes, but they choose to come here. We are all still living with our parents. We are still young and have chores at home. Please let us do our best now to get the best out of this production. We should not waste Imvelaphi’s time. And to the seniors, you have a performance this weekend. I know people won’t pitch for the rehearsals on Friday. Friday to me is a day I should be spending with my family or relaxing, but I will come here to find people not pitching up for the rehearsals. Let us stop wasting each other’s time, please.¹² [Translated from isiXhosa]

¹² Excerpt from a conversation after a rehearsal on October 5, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Siyabulela's speech demonstrated a moment of collective frustration, but also of heightened emotional unity among the group. Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* helps to frame the rehearsal space as more than just logistical preparation. In moments like these, rehearsals function as *rites of intensification*, temporarily suspending external pressures such as economic insecurity, familial duties, and social expectations. However, this *communitas* is fading. While it provides a shared emotional release and sense of purpose, it exists within a broader context of structural precarity that continually interrupts and destabilises such unity.

Siyabulela's comment indicates that the young people's search for recognition through performing at dance production was often in conflict with other recognition they needed to pursue at home and at work. Despite the higher commitment Siyabulela showed than other IAC members through his consistent attendance and lead-taking, he also showed inconsistency in his commitment. On a rehearsal five days before the show, he had agreed to work on brushing up a song and doing the run-through, but the song practice took longer. Siyabulela showed hesitance to my suggestion of working on another scene to make use of the remaining ten minutes until a returning senior dancer initiated a dance piece. He started to pack up as soon as the last dance ended, saying "Ay ay, it's 20h00 already,"¹³ prioritising finishing in time over production. Similarly, the plan often articulated as "we do it tomorrow" was often not acted on, and less effort was made to make it happen.

This gap between manifestation and practice could be attributed to their scarce opportunities to practice trial and error, cultivating a sense of how to realistically strategise to achieve their goals (Appadurai 2001, p. 69). Two weeks before the show, there was no complete scene, and one week before the performance, none of the senior dancers—Viwe, Andile, Wandile, Nozuko, Aya, or Sam—were present at rehearsals. It was only when Siyabulela invited the leader of IAM, who is well experienced in acting, to give feedback on the production that we were finally pushed to perform from the beginning till the end, filling the unrehearsed part of the production with improvisation. On 4 November, on the day of the performance, the show started an hour later than the announced time, without Viwe's presence. IAC and IMA members managed to perform through the show and to close the show. Many unforeseen happenings occurred—such as skipping a scene and the finale as well as twisting and extending an acting scene, leaving both the backstage and stage in chaos. Besides the fact that the show did not go according to plan, lack of marketing meant that only one-third of the seats were occupied. Half of the audience consisted of people I personally invited from outside Nyanga, with very few from the Nyanga community itself.

Despite crises during preparation and performance, the show received a big applause and tremendous praise. It was recognised as a successful performance by the audience's positive response as well as photos and videos from the event. Responding to the momentary recognition the production received, Siyabulela grew high aspirations of bringing the production to "big stages" such as Artscape Theatre and Baxter Theatre. He articulated his will to collaborate with UCT students and other competitive dance groups. His high aspiration is unmatched, especially in light of IAC's failure to pay respect to the IAM actors' time and work. Although Siyabulela acknowledges the members' other commitments, he still holds the hope with "optimist bias" (Chapin, de las Alas & Coleman 2005, p. 749) that has "survival value" (Davies, 2005). He said, "For next year, we manage to overcome the challenge because most of our performances are at weekends,"¹⁴ dismissing the fact that this production also took place on the weekend and still experienced lots of challenges. Siyabulela regards

¹³ Excerpt from a conversation with Siyabulela on October 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

¹⁴ Excerpt from a conversation with Siyabulela on November 15, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Viwe's absence at the show as an unlucky inconvenience, as he says, "He [Viwe] was just in the different shift,"¹⁵ not realising the commitment Viwe has outside dancing. The ability to dream of such aspirations grants him both empowerment and agency. As Appadurai (2004) argues, the "capacity to aspire" is a critical mechanism through which individuals assert their dignity and actively shape their futures, even within the confines of social constraints. Siyabulela's aspiration for recognition goes beyond the performance on a bigger stage in Cape Town; he dreams of bringing the production overseas:

Siyabulela: Let's say "We got a client from Tokyo," and we need to go there for two months. Yebo, you have to sort that out. Sort out that we must leave Viwe, Wandile, and Nozuko.

Rise: Yeah, and also Andile is working. Sam is part of Sbondaba [dance company].

Siyabulela: Yeah, and then Wandile BABA YAYA [dance company].

Rise: Okuhle as well.

Siyabulela: So, yeah... but when we overcome that challenge, it's our mentality now. We don't have challenges for rehearsing, dancing, dancers, or gigs, the challenge is that people are working. And they are students.¹⁶

Siyabulela overlooks the fact that IAC dancers have to prioritise work that will bring them resources to put food on the table, rather than coming to production rehearsal, which does not give them immediate money. Others need to attend classes at the dance company that is more established and well known. These challenges are not overcome just by "mentality," but require financial resources and navigational capacity (Appadurai, 2001, p. 69). This capacity is nurtured through more practices, which require time and money, of which most of IAC youth do not have control. This kind of high aspiration, coupled with slim chances of success, is often experienced by IAC members in and outside the dance space. The mismatch between aspiration and material possibility highlights what Butler (2009) refers to as the ethical dimension of precarity. It is the way individuals must negotiate hope and survival under conditions that continually deny them institutional support. Nevertheless, the dream continues to be articulated, as it is their means to survive (Davies, 2005) and to be part of the hope-filled "New South Africa" (Swartz, 2012, p. 32).

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter explored the precarity of IAC members, who find themselves at the intersection of township, youth, and 'traditional' dancing. Through the personal and collective stories of IAC members, I argued that dance is a vital means for them to navigate uncertainty and seek recognition—a recognition that is often denied due to challenging socioeconomic conditions. The chapter also examined the reality of pursuing dance as a livelihood and how the daily precarity they face complicates their efforts to achieve success through creative activities. Judith Butler's (2009) theorisation of precarity, as a condition differentially distributed through systems of power, helps frame these struggles not only as economic but as existential, revealing how these young dancers are systematically excluded from the forms of institutional recognition and protection that would

¹⁵ Excerpt from a conversation with Siyabulela on November 15, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

¹⁶ Excerpt from a conversation with Siyabulela on November 15, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

otherwise support their aspirations. It showed how their high aspirations are often thwarted by the structural inequalities created by the nation's unequal distribution of resources. Despite the individual and collective agency these young people exercise in navigating their lives, the chapter underscores the circumstances into which they are born, providing context for understanding their actions and perspectives in the following chapters.

Chapter 4 Creative Strategies for Survival

4.1 Abstract

Chapter 4 explores the ways in which youth from Iziqhaza Art Combination (IAC) navigate daily uncertainties by engaging in dance. It examines the strategies they employ to overcome challenges and gain recognition both in their township and in the competitive entertainment industry. These young dancers convert their artistic and embodied skills into economic resources while using their community as a platform to build cultural and social capital that fosters upward mobility. As collectives with Xhosa identity, they strategically represent themselves as Zulu dancers to align with the demands of the cultural entertainment industry. This chapter moves beyond dominant narratives of ‘endangered or dangerous’ youth or commodified ‘traditional’ dancers to highlight how these individuals autonomously plan, negotiate, and act to survive and thrive amidst intersecting precarities in the field of dance.

4.2. Introduction

Operating within the structural dynamics of the tourism industry—shaped by the “host” and “guest” relationship (Ota, 1993, p. 385) and its historical roots in colonialism and Apartheid (Rani, 2013)—they leverage their agency to develop dance forms that meet market demands. They utilise the perceived value of cultural expression as a means to survive in South Africa’s precarious socioeconomic environment (Meintjes, 2017, pp. 240-265). These strategies include representing themselves as Zulu dancers, tailoring performances to align with market expectations, and negotiating their identity through diverse dance integrations.

Fluidity within the IAC not only expands the group’s social capital, but also enhances its unique dance repertoire through a process of continual evolution and stylistic fusion. While rooted in the vibrant and energetic Zulu dance tradition, often incorporating Xhosa steps as part of their identity, the group consistently integrates diverse dance forms, reflecting the varied influences its members bring IAC. This blending of styles, described by Andile as a “combination,” allows the group to remain dynamic and creative, distinguishing their performances in the traditional dance industry. Members like Viwe, who merges Zulu and Xhosa dances with contemporary techniques, and Sam, who incorporates his training at SboNdaba Dance Academy into warm-ups and choreography, demonstrate the innovative potential of this fusion. Other members, such as Nozuko and Aya, contribute their unique stylistic inputs, enriching the collective artistry of the group. This approach not only captivates international audiences, but also positions IAC to respond effectively to evolving market demands. Despite occasional challenges in maintaining cohesion, this fluidity provides members with opportunities for self-monetisation which, in turn, augments the group’s cultural and social capital. By functioning as a platform for both individual and collective advancement, IAC enables its members to pursue financial gain, artistic recognition, and personal growth, all while fostering a supportive and innovative environment.

4.3 ‘Zulu’ Dancers for an Entertainment Profession

4.3.1 Becoming ‘Zulu Dancers’

IAC youth navigate the entertainment market to pursue economic opportunities using various strategies. This idea is grounded in Scott’s (2009, p. 176) concept that marginalised groups often adopt strategies to adapt to market demands for survival. Within the structural force between “host” and “guest” in the tourism industry (Ota, 1993, p. 385) and its lineage from the colonial and Apartheid era (Rani, 2013), they exercise their agency to create dance that makes use of the idea of culture in order to make do in a precarious South Africa (Meintjes, 2017, pp. 240-265). These strategies include

representation of Zulu dancers, performance alignment to the market demand, and the negotiation of identity through various dance integrations.

Zulu representation has shaped the dance community in Nyanga since the era of Vusabantu Ngema, one of the Zulu dance pioneers in Cape Town, who first brought Zulu dance to Nyanga East in the early 1990s (Rani, 2013, p. 91). As IAC has consistently passed down the ‘Zulu tradition’ since its founding, it is widely perceived as a Zulu dance group, despite its participation in various other dance styles. This representation is evident in multiple instances, for example at private functions in Cape Town and live TV (Image 6). When I went to watch their performance at an international business conference at the Cabo Beach Club, an exclusive event venue at the Waterfront, the receptionist could only associate the group with the concept of ‘Zulu dancers,’ not ‘traditional dancers,’ Iziqhaza Art Combination or a group from Nyanga. Another instance was at the Espresso Live Show, when the MC said, “They are going to perform ‘Zulu Traditional Dance,’ and it’s the one that you guys want to see!” (Image 7) despite their prior introduction, which highlighted their participation in different kind of dances, including Pantsula and Gumboots.

The interaction I had with the receptionist at Cabo Beach highlights the class and spatial divide between the Waterfront and Nyanga, illustrating how such gaps are navigated by IAC youth. While the class difference and the perceived value or superiority of these spaces are apparent, some dancers view venues like the Waterfront as "fancy" places where they take photos of themselves, engaging with the environment on their own terms. Rather than being overly sensitive about the divide or excessively optimistic about bridging it, they strategically navigate these exclusive settings. Together with the MC’s comment on IAC dancers during the Espresso show, it is evident that IAC’s representation as ‘Zulu dancers’ has already been firmly established.

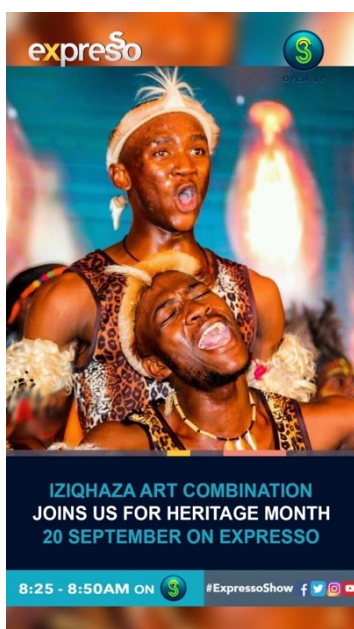


Image 6: An advert for Espresso Live Show. Image shared by an IAC member.

Image 7: An image of IAC’s live performance on Espresso in 2024. Screenshot by Rise Tanino.

From an early age, IAC youth grew up to embody their identity as ‘Zulu dancers,’ strategically using it for economic opportunities. Zulu dance as a tool for successful economic activity

is revealed in how Viwe gained the skill. In his first dance community, Amy Biehl Foundation, Viwe learned various kinds of dance, including the basics of Zulu dance, such as squat and some steps. Later, in the other group where a female teacher choreographed for all dancers, he learned the “strict” Zulu dance from YouTube videos with other male dancers to satisfy their desire to dance like Zulu warriors, an image shaped by Zulu nationalism in the 1980s and early 1990s (Meintjes, 2004, p. 191). Although their motivation was purely to learn the dance so that they could express masculinity, the notion of “proper” Zulu dance and the videos circulated on the internet were shaped by the stereotypical picture of Zulu culture formed in the entertainment and tourism industries, which are informed by colonialism (Pwiti and Ndor, 1999), Apartheid (Frenzi, 2012), and neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009, p. 71). Thus, they can be regarded as victims of historical and economic injustice. Therefore, Viwe and other male dancers’ initial motivation was not necessarily market-oriented, but it did equip them with the skill that led to the acquisition of visibility in the market while making use of their black male bodies as part of the ethnic dance package (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009, pp. 37, 49).

In explaining his early dance career, Andile states, “We only knew about the Zulu dance and, remember, we are Xhosas. We learned the other culture and used it as entertainment.”¹⁷ Despite the execution of Zulu dance moves—such as body bending forward, pounding, and quick shuffling, which respectively symbolise connection to the mother earth of the dancer and the evasion of ancestral spirit (Ngema, 2007, p. 23)—he rather makes sense of his participation in “the other culture” as part of his economic activity, differentiating it from his participation in his own Xhosa culture. Similarly, Nozuko describes Zulu dance as her “side career,” indicating that it has less to do with her cultural identity (Meintjes, 2017, p. 25). Acknowledging the market demand, they are selectively engaging in the kind of dance they practice, strategically straddling the identities (Maruyama, 2017, p. 61) of Zulu dancers and Xhosa youth.

To keep the status of “the strongest Zulu dancers” in Cape Town, IAC youth strategise to effectively respond to the historically established image of Zulu dancers such as “dynamic,” “energetic,” and “mesmerising” (Scarlett Entertainment, 2024). Andile showed me a Xhosa step of tapping with toe and heel with ankle movement, which he and IAC members considered repetitive and boring (Rani, 2013, p. 2). The market-oriented mindset is clearly demonstrated by his comment, “If we do this kind of move, people will leave, saying, ‘Ah, it’s a waste of time. We have to do something at home when we go home.’ You need to keep entertaining so that people want to see you.”¹⁸ In the cultural entertainment industry, where the market favours specific dance and performance styles, IAC youth carefully choose how and what to perform to be visible and gain some income. Although the established visibility of Zulu dance in the industry is shaped by power (Bulter, 2004, p. 31), it is youth’s intentional choice to keep using the format. Besides choice of dance, youth strategies include giving “energy,” following trends, negotiating rewards through dance customisation, protecting the spiritual boundary, and negotiating identity through the integration of Xhosa dance.

4.3.2 Energy as Cultural Capital

“Energy” in dancing enhances IAC youth’s cultural capital, through which they attain visibility in the industry for successful monetisation. In this context, “energy” refers to the liveliness, vibrancy, and vigour of the youth. The importance of “energy” is emphasised in the practice sessions

¹⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

¹⁸ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

and transmitted from senior dancers to junior dancers as a skill. When junior dancers and I were practicing a piece called *Uzwezwe*, Andile, who was observing us in a resting position on the stairs, stood up and said, “Look how she does. Look how she has energy.”¹⁹ He was pointing to Aya, one of the experienced dancers. Aya demonstrated one of the first moves by twisting her back and lifting bent knees. Junior dancers were impressed with the extent of the twist, the width of the leg, and hand movements—the whole dynamic—compared to how they had been executing the same step. Aya started to teach me and the juniors how to make the moves bigger, advising us to step bigger in the spear sticking move and to lift the knee higher to the height of the pelvis. Seeing the juniors lacking some strength in applying Aya’s advice, Andile frustratingly stood up again and said, “It starts here [rehearsal]. If you don’t do it here, I don’t know when you go out there and perform.”²⁰ Dancing big, having stamina, and putting soul into each move are all aggregated in the word “energy” (Meintjes, 2017, p. 258) in the context of Zulu dancing, especially for the fast and dynamic war dance. Andile always emphasises giving the most energy one can give, even if it is for practice. This mindset is embodied by most of the senior dancers. This was proven by a comment Okuhle made to me:

*Oh, you are sweating! Nice, that means you worked hard. That’s the real practice. If you are just doing this [showing me steps with small movements], then that’s just playing around. When you are actually putting [in] your energy, you are sweating all over.*²¹

Andile’s comment and Okuhle’s reaction to my sweat highlight the importance of giving energy during performance and, thereby, successfully responding to clients’ expectations, which are aligned to the picture of “high-energy Zulu dancers who embody the spirit of victorious warrior” (Dance and Grahamstown cited in Meintjes, 2017, p. 6). To maintain this cultural capital, senior dancers give the most at both performances and rehearsals, transmitting the skill and mindset to junior dancers for the continuous success of their strategy.



Image 8: Rehearsal captured by one of the IAC members, 17 December 2022.

¹⁹ Excerpt from a conversation during rehearsal on November 16, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

²⁰ Excerpt from a conversation during rehearsal on November 16, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

²¹ Excerpt from a conversation with Okuhle on November 30, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

The presence of “energy” is particularly important, as performance often requires much more stamina than practice (Twitchett et al., 2009). This is to accommodate unpredictable performance settings, such as venue size and different floor materials. Most of the performance details are not stipulated until the day of the performance, or are not stipulated at all, so endurance and adaptability are necessary to navigate the situation. Nozuko’s statement highlights how the performance environment is not always dance-friendly and, thus, they need to adjust their dancing on the spot to avoid lowering the performance quality:

Most of the time, they don’t have a stage for us because we have to surprise the audience. And only the person that hired us knows how we are going to dance. So we just come out of nowhere. Oftentimes, we dance on a tile. Compared to the stage, it’s very different. You need to push yourself. But the tile is not more difficult than the Cabo Beach sand... We were lifting something very heavy. We could lift our legs but not so high. You need to put your full energy there. And make sure that the audience doesn’t notice. You need to show them, “Ooh, they are full of energy.” And the fluffy mat at hotels is, yoh, also very challenging. You can’t hear the sound. Sometimes they ask me to do spirit. And the mat can also be very strong for you when you spin, and you might hurt yourself. If the space is small, sometimes it’s very hard for you to spin. Some floors are slippery, and you must balance tight.²²

This remark shows the unpredictability of the performance setting and the need for much “energy” to be able to represent as authentic Zulu dancers. “Energy” is not only expressed through the dynamic output of the dance, but it also involves the strength to withstand unfavourable situations to keep the dynamism that will surprise and impress the audience. Proof of full energy output is often shown during the performance when dancers’ costumes fall off and, still, they have the focus to continue dancing, regardless of the exposure of the body. During her solo moves at the end of the Uhamboo Lwam production, Nozuko’s top cloth fell off, and her entire breast was exposed. Nevertheless, she continued the stamping of her feet. Her justification was the limitation of the costume to accommodate big moves facilitated by the full “energy”:

Rise: Your clothes went off, right? But you didn’t care. Are you not scared of showing the upper body?

Nozuko: What I’ve learned is that... You must make sure that your costume is tight enough that you don’t feel funny. It distracts you, and it distracts the audience and ends up looking like, “What are you doing?” You’re gonna have to wait to fix it while others are still dancing. That is why I had the paint on my breast because I knew that, when you give out your full energy, something might happen.

²² Excerpt from a conversation with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Rise: Oh, okay. Mine was actually also about to fall, so I went to the back of the stage to tighten it.

Nozuko: So, you are not allowed to do that. Sometimes we used to perform without skirts. Only with tights and beads. You don't have to give up dancing. Finish up with your dance. So, afterwards, you can pick it up. There is this other day. I was performing at CTICC. I was wearing a long wig. I was doing the solo. Yoh, it was very intense. Like, the energy was there. But when I did the last step, fu! [Gesturing that the wig fell off.] Everyone, even the cameraman, laughed. But luckily, it was clear under the wig. There was a time when even amaKhahlaza [shakers attached around ankles] fell.²³

Her embarrassed but proud tone validates accidents that happen as a result of giving full energy, and it is prioritised over keeping the proper appearance. When I gave full energy in my solo moves in the Uhamboo Lwam production, I could feel the top cloth covering my breast becoming loose. I immediately went behind the other dancers and fixed it, as I felt extremely uncomfortable, but it cut the momentum of my energy, and it took time to find myself giving full energy again. Another member, Aya, used to scold me for fixing the headdress while executing a dance piece even in the rehearsal. Unlike one of the elements of performance professionalism—keeping the costume look organised—IAC youth believe that cutting the flow of energy is the last thing a dancer should do. Given that it is not only dancers who give energy to dance, but the dance itself that fuels dancers to keep pushing (Foster, 2016, p. 13), keeping the flow of full energy makes the dance successful. Nozuko says, “If I don't give my full energy, I am not warm enough, and I cannot split.”²⁴ Thus, constant full energy output is necessary to keep the energy flow of dancing that enables the continuous execution of a strong Zulu dance performance.

Besides the physical skill needed to adjust to the performing setting, mental preparedness is key for the dancers to bring the best energy, as the performance environment heavily influences their psychological status (Turner and Schechner, 1988, p. 2). IAC dancers need to have a capacity to be present and focused regardless of the given environment. During my conversation with Andile while waiting at the costume fitting in the back office of the Cape Town Carnival garage, he revealed how he embodied the skill to feel present at any place and to allow himself to give the most in performing:

This thing of dancing on the stage, wherever you are, if you are there, then you can dance. For example, if you ask me to dance here, I can dance because “I'm here.” I can respond to you because “I'm here.” If I'm not here [looking different direction to show his attention was distracted], then I can't answer to you.²⁵

This mentality of always “being present” was revealed on many occasions by most dancers. Often, I was corrected to dance “properly” when I was practicing little moves just to go over the choreography. Always “giving the most” and feeling present in any environment are skills and strategies that IAC youth use to meet clients' expectations. Their success in doing so ensures more

²³ Excerpt from a conversation with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

²⁴ Excerpt from a conversation with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

²⁵ Excerpt from a conversation with Andile on November 26, 2022, in Maitland, Cape Town.

performance opportunities, which can lead to reward and recognition. The circumstances in which IAC youth needed to develop this strategy are shaped by the exploitative entertainment industry and the historically commodified image of Zulu dancers, combined with the youth's socioeconomic situation, which deprives them of control over the market. However, they have embodied a way to navigate this challenging environment and strategically activate their skill to sustain their economic activities.

4.3.3 Following the Trend

Responding to market demands does not mean copying existing Zulu dance pieces; rather, it entails identifying the trend and integrating it into the group's unique performance. Andile explains how a shift in the cultural dance industry was adapted to IAC dances:

We have a beat called Umzansi—the straight one. [Hitting the desk to describe the beat.] And then, in that beat, you can do anything, even in Um Sezem's choreography. The Zulu tribe used to use it for Zulu warriors or Zulu dancers. As entertainers, we tripled or doubled the speed because we now use Jembes. They are not from South Africa, but from places like Ghana and so on. So we adopted those things, and we use them to get a different sound. But that sound with that bass drum, isiBdla, was only going like dukudukudukudukuku [double the speed of the initial tempo]. What I can say is I observed in the industry, and I saw that Umsanzi beat has long been there. And then, as time went on, things changed. It's where people learn that, "Okay, now we must adjust when someone kicks." So you must do ta ta ta [hitting the desk with his hand] to interact with the dancer in a way that's effective. So, as the time goes, it changed and improved. About Uzwezwe, that dance was created, and then the beat was created. So the drummer is playing wherever the dancer goes. He is playing where the dancer is going.²⁶

Andile's remarks attest that IAC members have carefully observed the trend in the cultural entertainment industry in Cape Town and have been applying it to their work to meet the demand of what people today think of as "surprising, mesmerising and dynamic.". According to Meintjes (2004, p. 178), Umzansi is one of three substyles of Ngoma dance, although Ngoma is historically a fluid category and carries a range of meanings within South Eastern Africa (Erlmann, 1991, p. 95). Although IAC dancers carried on with Zulu dancing brought to and spread from Nyanga East, they actively observe the bigger entertainment industry to keep up with market demand. Replacement of isiBdla with Jembe and speeding up the Umzansi beats reflect some of IAC youth's crucial strategies to maximise their success and relevance within their socioeconomic environment (Harris, 2001).

4.3.4 Keeping the Appropriate Level of Surprise

Given that IAC dancers are usually requested to perform as a "surprise" at many functions — such as conferences, weddings, and sports events—they strategise to create a spontaneous atmosphere while trying not to leave the audience behind. Andile's description of how to start Um Sezem ("Help him/her" in isiXhosa) highlights the dancers' sophisticated strategy to catch the audience's heart with a proper level of surprise. In Um Sezem, there is always one dancer who initiates the dance, along with the consecutive drum hits, by thrashing around, representing a struggle in the middle of the floor.

²⁶ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

Other dancers start to gather around, as if they are called by some cry. The surrounding dancers then start to sing, “Um Sezem sezem, Um Sezem sezem,” with one hand placed in front of their forehead, representing that they are looking for the person to help. The dance represents a war in which one warrior is defeated by the enemy, and the other warriors follow the person to fight together. After some shouting, the drum hits a certain rhythm with which dancers start off the collective two-minute choreography, joining the initial dancer. The abrupt stamping and flailing surprises the audience, but they nevertheless follow the line of the story. The dancers’ actions must guide the audience accordingly and “must not let them hang, not understanding what the dancers are doing at all.”²⁷ The best is for the audience to have questions such as, “Why is she moving this way?” along the storyline, instead of just being overwhelmed with consecutive dynamic moves.

Instead of simply surprising the audience with impactful entries and dynamic moves, IAC dancers convey the narrative of the dance. In the case of Um Sezem, one person is struggling and seeking help in a war, and others come to join the person to fight against the enemy troops (Image 9). The detailed story might not be conveyed entirely to the audience, but the facial expressions, raised voices, and moves in half-sitting postures show the warriors’ careful, nervous, and determined mind-set; the overall tension informs the audience that something is about to happen. The narrative structure of the dance piece and the dancers’ ability to fully be in character combine to create a performance that the audience enjoys not only for its artistic and dynamic aspects, but also its narrative (Geertz, 1973). This enhances the audience’s sense of involvement and, thereby, the level of satisfaction, which will lead to more performance opportunities in the future. IAC youth’s strategy does not end with skill and knowledge, but extends to create a piece that speaks to the audience.



Image 9: Singing Um Sezem before exploding into the main part. Captured by one of the IAC members at a performance.

²⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

4.3.5 Negotiating Reward through Dancing

Strategy to monetise successfully in the competitive dance industry involves youth's negotiation with reward. To accommodate spontaneous requests from clients, IAC youth arrange a performance, effectively utilising available resources. They have around 20 senior dancers, including the ones who do not come to rehearsal regularly, and have more than 20 dance pieces, each of which has a length between a minute to two minutes. Variation lies in the tempo and the dynamism of the dance, the dancers' gender composition, and the theme. IAC youth come up with a combination of dance pieces that fit the capacity of available dancers, venue conditions, performance duration, and other elements, making the effort aligned with the monetary rewards offered by the client. Nozuko's explanation provides an example of this strategy:

If they [clients] say they want five minutes, then we are gonna have to plan. We say let's do Um Sezem. And Uzwezwe. So you can perform with this other lady who was once an Izikhaza member. Very strong. She's not dancing at all now. So I don't have a choice but to dance something that she knows. Even if it's the old dance from Izikhaza.²⁸

The above comment indicates how IAC members ask some dancers who no longer come to rehearsals to dance for the performance to complement the absent regular members and to enhance the performance quality. Regular dancers select dance pieces that non-regular dancers know by heart, as there is scarce time to teach them a new dance from scratch. Customising the line-up of dance pieces according to the participating dancers' capacity, time, and theme, IAC dancers offer performances that meet the client's requests. Similarly, IAC youth strategically adjust the amount of work they put into the gig as a way of negotiating compensation. Andile's comment reveals how IAC dancers negotiate reward for the performance not necessarily by asking for a higher rate, but by reducing the work put into the gig:

Let's say someone needs entertainment for a function. And he or she comes to us because we are the only group that is doing an isiZulu traditional dance in Nyanga. And there are many dances, they know that we can entertain them. When they come to us, they ask us how much we want, but they say, "I'm gonna give you this amount." So it's up to us if we bring five dancers and six dancers. We need to negotiate for more money if they want more dancers. They usually select five girls and two boys. Getting gigs is still a hustle because people do not offer the same amount of rewards as others. Some pay 1000 rands, 500 rands per dancer or less depending on their stance, but our prices are 500 rands for each dancer. So we negotiate with the number of dancers we offer.²⁹

Besides the number of dancers, another key factor that determines the success of the performance is the quick customisation of different pieces to accommodate the requested time and dancers' energy. Because IAC dancers are often forced to accept a client's request (Comaroff and

²⁸ Excerpt from an interview with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

²⁹ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Comaroff, 2009, p. 71), they activate agency to craft performances in a way that is convenient for them while meeting the client's expectations. They draft the structure of the performance by selecting dance pieces, deciding their order, and finalising on the day of the gig when all the performing dancers gather at the venue. For a gig at the opening of netball games in Cape Town, Viwe sent a voice note in the WhatsApp group that said, "Starting with Yatha Imizi, then Yasebenza, Africa, Bayede, umTomato, War Cry, and Uzwezwe,"³⁰ with some mumbled singing, followed by another voice note to correct some of what he said and to add that he is not entirely sure. Andile then sent a text to the group that suggested, "We can even discuss tomorrow when we meet, then just summarise everything and, yeah. I'll engage on stage."³¹ Similarly, when planning for a performance on the Espresso show featuring Heritage Day, performing dancers drafted the structure at rehearsal the day before, leaving some space for change to accommodate some factors they did not know by the day of the performance. The following excerpt from field notes illustrates how they created the overall structure of the moves with dancers who happened to be at the rehearsal.

Viwe, Andile, Aya, and Thembi are deciding which pieces to perform for tomorrow's live show. They start singing with Yasebenzi then, within the same rhythm, transitioning to Africa. With Andile's shout, "Pukabo! Asezenza!"³² the drum starts again, and the guys' dance starts with the girls joining at the end as part of the choreography. Immediately after, the girls start dancing to the piece Uzwezwe, and end with hopping their bums on the floor as the guys join the bum hop. All of them look tired and done. Viwe asks the other members who were watching them dance if there's time left shouting, "Ixesha! Ixesha! Ixesha!" ("Time! Time! Time!")³³ to indicate that there is more time to fill to reach the requested length of the performance. Thembi shouts back, "Hayi! Hayi! Hayi!" ("No! No! No!")³⁴ and shows objection to how they try to push the already tired dancers. Siyabulela keeps hitting the drum, and Andile starts to step slowly, starting the transition to another piece, and Viwe follows. Aya lies down completely on the floor from a sitting position, showing that she has no intention to move. I turn off the video. Viwe comes to me and asks me how long the whole dance was. I say, "Four minutes." Viwe says, "Ah, okay."³⁵ He goes back to the stage and joins Andile without hesitation to start another routine, as he was convinced to dance more to fill the remaining time.

4.3.6 Embodied Knowledge in Performance Navigation

It is worth noting that IAC youth's strategy to navigate spontaneous performance is executed with the use of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979). It is evidenced in how they navigated the live performance on Espresso. Despite the performance structure that was fixed by four dancers and a drummer at the rehearsal the day before the performance, what was actually performed was very different. It was eventually executed by five dancers, as Viwe became unavailable, two dancers were added, and some dance pieces were replaced with others. Nevertheless, the performance flew smoothly as if it was well-rehearsed. Given that two dancers were not at the rehearsal, they might have had to go through the order and overall formation in the little time they had while waiting to perform. The rest of the arrangement was mostly improvised during the performance with their embodied cultural and cognitive knowledge. This improvisational swiftness aligns with Devisch's (1993) emphasis on the body as a site of creative and reflexive knowledge. The dancers' ability to reconfigure formations and adapt choreography in real time exemplifies how performance becomes a

³⁰ Excerpt from a voice note sent in WhatsApp group on February 19, 2023, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

³¹ Excerpt from a voice note sent in WhatsApp group on February 19, 2023, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

³² Excerpt from a conversation during a rehearsal on September 19, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

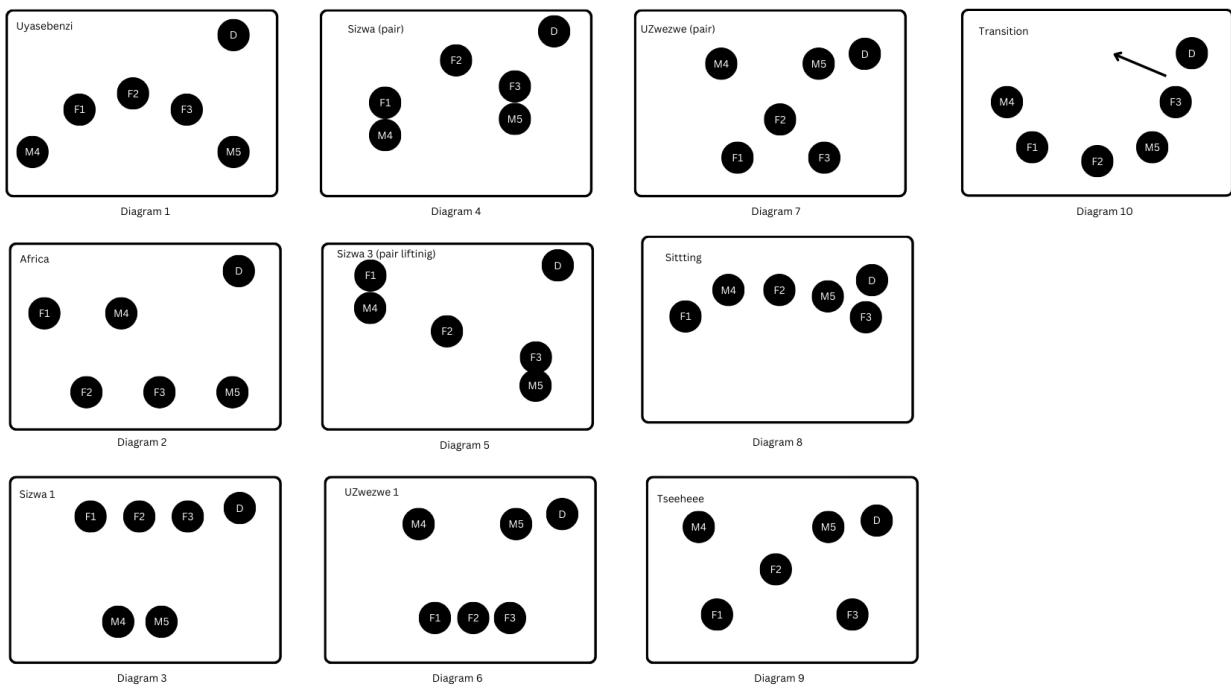
³³ Excerpt from a conversation during a rehearsal on September 19, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

³⁴ Excerpt from a conversation during a rehearsal on September 19, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

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living process—an act of ‘co-authorship’ rather than mere repetition of rehearsal. Their movement is not just execution but negotiation, informed by a history of shared practice and collective intuition.

Besides songs and dance pieces, there are fluid factors such as pair-making, formation, and transition within the dance piece. The drummer, Siyabulela, stands in the right back corner of the space, while five dancers constantly move around in the given small space to avoid collision. With Andile’s (M5) singing *Uyasebenzi*, the other dancers and the drummer follow, and they position in almost one line (Diagram 1). Judging the timing of the transition from song and dance, Thembi (F1) and Luya (M4) smoothly move into position at the back without looking around, as if they are just moving around for expression. This positioning accommodates a choreography whereby Thambi (F1), Luya (M4), Okuhle (F3), and Andile (M5) pair at different sides of the space while leaving room in the front for Aya who arranges a pair move into a solo move with minimum changes. Ending *Africa*, female dancers walk to the back as Andile and Luya come to the front to start *Sizwa*. At the end of the piece, Okuhle (F3) joins Andile (M5) and Thembi (F1) joins Luya (M4) to complete the pair part, automatically leaving Aya in the middle to keep the formation balanced, as shown in Diagram 4. Luya (M4) dances at the back of Thembi (F1) for another period of unison dance to avoid collision with others. Then Thembi (F1) steps and jumps into Luya’s arm for the last pose without looking (Diagram 5). Immediately after, all female dancers step into the front, dodging males, to start *Uzwezwwe*. For a pair move, Aya (F2) steps back to let Thembi (F1) and Okuhle (F3) do it in front of her, as shown in Diagram 7. Two males join the final pose, and all dancers are seated, with faces showing some exhaustion and thinking about what formation comes next (Diagram 8). Soon after, Siyabulela starts to hit *Jembe*; he gives the dancers a few seconds of rest before getting everyone back to the stage with the intro rhythm for the final piece, *Tseeheee* (Diagram 9), without anyone wondering where to stand. As the final part of the piece moves in a line (Diagram 10), Okuhle (F3) turns around to begin, and Andile (M5) joins right behind her from the right corner while Aya (F2) slows down to make sure Andile (M5) joins the line first.



Through these transitions of ten different formations, five dancers move in sync, assessing the possible positions for pair making depending on floor size and timing without any cues visible to the audience. This silent coordination reflects what Turner (1969) describes as the *communitas* and liminality of ritual performance, an unstructured, yet highly cohesive moment where individuals transcend fixed roles to create collective flow. The IAC dancers momentarily suspend formal choreography to inhabit a liminal space, using the sensory cues and rhythm to construct meaning together in motion. With the sensory information they receive, they predict other dancers' moves, using their knowledge of movement patterns and spatial awareness embedded in their bodies (Grafton, 2009). The knowledge of how to move around the space is cultivated throughout the daily rehearsal process. There is a set of unwritten rules on how to move the body in space for specific situations. For instance, there is a unison dance piece that has three different formations spreading out. The dance starts with Siyabulela's drumming after a warm-up session, and dancers are expected to navigate the space according to the number of dancers present on the day. When I was reviewing Uzwezwe with three other dancers, I was shocked to see Zintle sliding in front of me under my lifted leg to complete a pair move with me. While I contemplated the pair only when the part arrived, Zintle promptly discerned the dancer count, delineated potential pair formations among four individuals by assessing their spatial proximity, and proceeded toward me, employing the preparatory step. Zintle also shared after the sequence that she moved an extra distance, as she knew I was not doing the calculation. In Devisch's (1993) terms, this moment illustrates how performance is not a fixed script but a constantly re-written narrative. Zintle's embodied reflex anticipates gaps and fills them, demonstrating the body's role as an intelligent, improvising agent. Rather than following set steps, the dancers co-create the choreography in real time, which translates to an act of *ritual improvisation* where value, cohesion, and competence are demonstrated. Even after four months of participation in their dancing, IAC members' embodied knowledge to judge multiple elements simultaneously and move around the space was difficult for me to acquire.

Embodied knowledge includes the dancers' movement prediction by listening to the drumbeat. When there is an accident in executing the dance smoothly, the drummer's correct beating gets them back on the right track. Most of the seniors know the choreography of dance pieces by heart, but sometimes one forgets a step or makes a minor mistake that potentially distracts the audience. Siyabulela knows all the choreography, and he hits the drum accordingly. The lost dancer can, thus, catch up with the moves without fully going blank. In this context, performance becomes what Turner (1982) might call a *social drama in miniature*, where minor disconnection are repaired in real time through shared ritual codes, in this case, rhythm. The drum acts as a structuring agent, enabling dancers to return to alignment and maintain consistency for the audience. The combination of drumbeat and embodied responsiveness transforms the stage into a performers' collaborative space of sense-making. In the Espresso performance, Luya was unsure about some steps of the male piece, Sizuwe, and kept looking at Andile, but he never executed a wrong step, as the rhythm of the drum constantly informed him what the next step was. As proof, with a step of four stamping with the right leg, while turning around, Luya was navigated by the regular beating of the drum, although he could not check Andile's move. Similarly, when dancers were not sure which dance piece came after Uzwezwe, Siyabulela hit a prelude rhythm of Tseeheee, and everyone automatically knew where to go and with what moves to start. Siyabulela's rhythmic knowledge combined with the dancers' embodied knowledge to react to the certain pattern of the beat maintained the quality of the performance.

The IAC youth draw on embodied routines built through past collaboration (iteration), improvise during performance based on real-time spatial and social cues (practical evaluation), and do so with a

clear orientation toward future opportunity and recognition (projectivity) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). This temporally layered agency is deeply embodied and relational, shaped by both individual skill and collective memory. It aligns with what Devisch (1993) identifies as the dancer's capacity for embodied reflexivity which is a means of navigating uncertainty and improvising coherence in contexts marked by precarity. Their performance becomes a vital mode of agency-in-motion, in which rough scripts are not merely followed, but continually reinterpreted through bodily creativity, allowing them to adapt, impress, and survive.

Amid precarity, whereby IAC youth do not have the luxury of enough time for perfect preparation, they have been equipped with the skill to navigate a few minutes of performance by observing, identifying the irregular points, and executing movement accordingly (Warburton, 2011, p. 73). In a situation marked by structural socio-economic challenges such as unstable income, overbooked schedules, and limited access to rehearsal spaces, youth do not improvise by choice but by necessity. Through this process of expressing relational agency, they convert constraint into opportunity, improvising in the present to secure collective and individual futures.

4.3.7 Keeping the Spiritual Boundary

The use of Zulu dance for performance is not solely for meeting the market demand. The intentional selection of Zulu dance allows them to stay professional while also protects their sacred practice from being exploited and commodified by the public. As Nozuko says, Zulu dance “is not spiritually gifted” for her and other dancers. In other words, youth are aware of the need to differentiate performances and rituals, keeping the latter for their own spiritual sake to avoid reducing it to a commodity with superficial meaning (Hillman, 2003, p. 182). Siyabulela's comment on the difference between Xhosa dance and Zulu dance highlights these boundaries:

It's different, wena. Let's say we talk about Xhosa. Xhosa has different moves. There are types of styles that we are not allowed to do because it is part of the ceremony and it is spiritual. And then there's that one I showed you. It's not allowed to be done for performing. It's only for ritual. Only. Zulu dance, you can see it on TV or Google, YouTube too. Zulu dance is a celebration thing.³⁶

Besides protecting the spirituality of Xhosa dance, staying away from performing particular dances is their strategy to maintain order on the stage and serve the audience accordingly. Given some moves and drumming in amagqirha (isiXhosa term for a traditional healer) ceremonies make them connect with their ancestors (Izu and De Villiers, 2022). IAC members who are amagqirha tend to fall into a trance or get possessed by ancestors if the performance involves any of these dances (Ngema, 2007, p. 24). Viwe's story highlights how some of the Xhosa dances trigger dancers on the stage and disturb the performance:

If you are doing Xhosa, there are songs that make this inside part want to come out while you are dancing, and you feel like, “Let me just limit myself.” Because with this specific song, you must feel the rhythm and also connect to the ancestors while you dance. When you are doing Zulu dance

³⁶ Excerpt from an interview with Siyabulela on November 17, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

strictly, there are no sangoma steps [isiZulu term for traditional healer], as they are very different. Xhosa dance has the same steps as appears in the amagqirha ceremony, so it's easy for you to connect with your ancestors while on stage.

So, that is why, most of the time, some of our dancers run away from it, such as the step called Ukutyityimba. It happened while we were on the stage. When we were doing Xhosa, one of our members went crazy and screamed and rolled all over the stage. And then we started to say, "No, let's rather not do this. Because people are gonna lose their minds." It's okay if it's in the ceremony, but now we go to the stage, and it becomes so uncontrollable. If someone starts to be crazy, then there is another one getting triggered. If you are an igqirha, you have your own spiritual person in your ancestors. That one person takes full control of you and even changes your voice and stuff. And most of the Izikhaza members are igqirha, so that's the reason why we can't do Xhosa because they just go crazy when they dance on stage.³⁷

As Viwe describes, Ukutyityimba dance is a significant aspect of the Xhosa people's practice that has been passed down from generation to generation (Izu and De Villiers, 2022), containing sociocultural values as well as indigenous knowledge to execute rituals (Onwuekwe, 2006). It involves movements whereby the "entire body quivers and the knees are pushed forward and backward" (Levine, 2005), which stimulates the dancers' spiritual realm. Thus, execution of Xhosa dance needs to be limited to rituals and ceremonies for spiritual protection and performance professionalism. Here, Devisch (1993) offers a valuable lens, framing the body not as a passive vessel of tradition but as an active site of ritual authorship. By choosing not to enact trance-inducing movements in certain contexts, IAC youth act as co-authors of ritual meaning. They are drawing from deep embodied knowledge of their communities, their ancestors, and their social environment to determine what is appropriate to perform, and when. Learning from the past experience of disrupting a performance due to an evocative Xhosa song and dance, IAC youth shifted their focus to Zulu dance, although it does not necessarily represent their identity.

This negotiation reflects not a dilution of tradition but a rearticulation of its terms. It shows how young dancers actively rewrite the script of 'traditional' dance, acknowledging spiritual authority while still participating in the commodified cultural economy. In Devisch (1993)'s terms, this is a moment of reflexive reordering, where ritual knowledge is strategically re-embedded into a performance logic that aligns with both respect and professional aims. The practice and performance of Zulu dancing was collectively decided through activating iterational agency, reflecting on the past and imagining the future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) to successfully perform according to the client's request and to receive monetary rewards. As Turner (1969) and Devisch (1993) suggest, this is where cultural performance becomes a space of both preservation and transformation where youth keep the line between sacred and secular fluid, but purposeful.

³⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

4.3.8 Cultural Cocktail Reflected in Choreography

I have demonstrated the IAC strategy to meet the demand for Zulu dance performance in the tourism and entertainment industries; however, is the historically created boundary of Zulu dance and Xhosa dance always paid attention to by the IAC youth? Does “strict” Zulu dance, as described by Siyabulela, have any criteria to differentiate it from Xhosa dance? While IAC dancers are known as Zulu dancers, they effectively integrate Xhosa dance that represents their identity, resisting the contested notion of ethnicity. They differentiate the themes of dance—such as war dance, wedding dance, celebration dance, and spiritual dance—and strategically perform them to adjust to the needs of respective occasions. Following Viwe, IAC youth maintain the exquisite balance between two different but overlapping indigenous dances and their sociocultural meaning for successful money-making. While acknowledging the need to avoid dancing the Xhosa dance practiced by igqirha, Viwe proudly emphasises that the presence of Xhosa dance comes out from the members and in the choreography they make:

We do Xhosa dance because we are from the Xhosa language... Xhosa land. We are the Xhosas. We don't do deep, deep, deep Xhosa, but when you choreograph, some of the moves are from Xhosa. Because your body has lots of Xhosa dancing. So we basically mix Xhosa and Zulu dance, ne. People think our dance is Zulu, but most of the time, we combine Xhosa dance and Zulu dance and then create one dance. Maybe in one choreo, we have a few Zulu steps and then Xhosa steps.³⁸

This comment highlights Viwe's strong sense of identity and that each dance piece integrates Xhosa steps into the routine. In a country where culture is connected to land that has been deprived due to historical processes, the performance of traditional dance is a crucial part of coping with challenges, as it strengthens and internalises ethnic identity (Smith, 2018). The strategic integration of Xhosa steps helps IAC dancers to gain cultural knowledge, survive challenges, heal, resist, and give support to others (Scolieri, 2012, p. 12). The strategy of wearing the mask of Zulu dancers is executed not only by selecting the dance piece or choreographing, but also by embodying different styles of dancing, including Zulu and Xhosa. Viwe, the main choreographer, explains how his upbringing in the dance field is programmed in him, and it naturally comes out in the choreographing process:

There is this big group in South Africa called Africa Moja. And there is this other one called... Umm, I forgot their name now, but it's also a big group. I've watched African Moja at Baxter Theatre cause they came all the way from KZN [KwaZulu-Natal] to Cape Town. Then I decided to create some steps, watch YouTube videos. I also dreamed about a few steps when I was asleep, and then I just did that when I woke up. If someone can play drums, then I would just stand and just dance. I just feel the beat if it's a war dance or a family dance.³⁹

Viwe has embodied many different kinds of dance since his childhood when he learned to dance from different groups, ceremonies, and rituals with his family and neighbours as well as Africa

³⁸ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

³⁹ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Moja and YouTube videos. Besides the cultural dance, Viwe also integrates elements relevant to youth living in the township and in modern society:

Viwe: We use Zulu dance, but play cans in the choreo. So if you are gonna kick, you gonna kick and then clap clap [pretending to hit different parts of the body with cans], and then you go back to Zulu and then go back to the can. So it's like a mixture of Zulu dance and the tin dance.

Rise: Where does this tin dance come from ?

Viwe: I'm not sure where the can dance is from, but it was like a story from iKasi. The lady was playing. It's like games that you play. So we took [those] games and then made it dance.⁴⁰

Similarly, Viwe uses elements he encounters in his everyday life as resource or inspiration to make choreography, as the following quote describes:

If you see a picture of someone posing, so that's also a step. You can create something by looking on the picture at a magazine. So I was taught like that. To create steps for Zulu, you can look at the pictures, or you can just see someone eating or sitting. That's also a step. So everything. Everything, like we do in life, it's like a step. You can create something and do some choreo.⁴¹

This idea of making everything inspiration for choreography is further explained by Andile. His choreography is updated with contextualisation to make the performance attractive to audience:

We've learnt that, somehow, doing one thing is boring. But we don't forget to teach what we learnt before to others. And then, whatever that is happening in the country, we listen. If we heard the song, and if we loved the song, and if the song is meaningful, we take it. We know that, okay, this song, it can fit on this dance. And as we were creating the dances that we do, we tried to, by all means, to file the dance in the songs so that we can say, "This must belong here, and it must belong here. This song is a war song, it must be there. This dance is a war dance, it goes with [this], it matches with this one." And so on and so on.⁴²

Andile's comments demonstrate that the group reworks social scripts in response to present emotional, economic, and symbolic needs, marking performance as a transformative ritual space. As in Devisch (1993)'s view, their bodies operate as creative instruments of adaptation and resistance, turning choreography into a story of transformation rather than a reproduction of tradition. Youth attempt to include different ethnic dances and everyday elements to rewrite the historically and racially constructed recognisability of 'traditional South African dance' and make recognisability open (Butler, 2005, p. 31). The mixture of social and cultural elements in choreography echoes the

⁴⁰ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁴¹ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁴² Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

sentiments articulated by Gregory Maqoma (2001, p. 76), who was raised in the “Cultural Cocktail” of Soweto, in his process of crafting 'traditional dance':

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... Other cultural forms and traditions have in fact affected my outlook as much as that I consistently explore the aesthetic forms and ethical values in a personal and stylistic manner or approach. I also still refer to certain aesthetic traditions, community norms, and societal issues. These complex explorations continue to develop my tradition just like everybody else.

Like Maqoma, Viwe grew up and learned dance in the diverse cultural milieu of a township, and he keeps creating dance pieces that transcend dance genres or ethnic borders. He maintains the members' “cultural cocktail” identity while making sure to meet the client request by selecting specific dance pieces. IAC youth do not allow themselves to be fully restricted to following their imagination of “strict” Zulu dance, but integrate what is relevant to their identities and backgrounds. Compromising their adherence to their cultural identity, they gain some creative control over their own representation (Meintjes, 2017, p. 234). It is their agentic strategy to wear the mask of Zulu performers for economic activity while including Xhosa dance to feel a sense of ownership and pride in what they do.

This section has demonstrated how IAC youth use various strategies in their performance to succeed in economic activities for life sustenance. These strategies exemplify what Devisch (1993) calls the co-authorship of ritual meaning where each movement is a negotiation of the self in context. Similarly, Turner's ritual theory helps us understand these performances as ongoing social dramas where youth improvise identity and validity within a field of economic and cultural constraint. They are not just reacting to market forces but reconfiguring the very meaning of ‘tradition’ to ensure both recognition and survival. The Zulu dance package, shaped by the cultural entertainment industry in South Africa, is creatively pursued by dancers with the use of energy, narration, and surprise as the main sources of cultural capital. In their process of strategic adaptation to the sociocultural and environmental context of the industry and township, youth activate their agency in many ways, such as step execution, routine customisation, dance selection, and choreography. This leads to recognition and success in monetisation through which they survive daily challenges.

4.4 Making the Platform for Individual and Collective Achievement

4.4.1 Intentional Movement across Groups

As much as IAC youth work collectively, the group is also supportive of individuals who seek economic stability and recognition outside the group. Despite the fact other ‘traditional’ dance groups are competitors in the tourism and entertainment industries, it does not stop IAC from letting members be part of other groups. In fact, they encourage the members' mobility among different groups, which eventually expands IAC's networks and skills, inviting more performance opportunities with which youth can better monetise themselves and gain recognition.

Among the 20 regular dancers who are in the IAC WhatsApp group, at least 12 members are part of other dance groups or companies. For instance, Andile and Viwe are part of different male Zulu and Gumboots dance groups, Nozuko is part of a female ‘traditional’ dance group, and Siyabulela plays drum for other ‘traditional’ dance groups as a freelancer. All of them are similarly positioned in the cultural dance industry, whose audience are mostly international. Okuhle, Wandile, Sam, Aya, and Thembi are part of dance companies where they get trained by renowned dancers in different genres and get to perform in the group's independent or collaborative shows several times

annually. These companies give them the skills to learn techniques, to create pieces, to collaborate with others, to facilitate classes, and to connect with other performers, equipping them with cultural and social capital to climb the ladder in the dance industry. Unlike Nozuko's former group, whose leader wanted to confine skilled dancers for the group's success, or dance companies that do not tolerate absence, IAC allows members to be committed to other groups for their individual monetisation and recognition. Viwe shares how he gives dancers space to take on performance opportunities separate from IAC:

Seniors have a lot of gigs. We let dancers be freelancers and have their separate gigs on the other side. So we don't like saying, "No, you can't do other gigs cause you dance in Iziqhaza." We give everyone a platform to have their own gigs on the side. If you are available, go for it. So it's like that.⁴³

Andile also explains how IAC serves as a platform for dancers to learn and then go on to the next steps in their career:

We are supposed to be a movement, not a group because we are not just in one place as a group. We teach someone dance, he goes up with it to somewhere else, becomes professional, and then someone else comes, learns the dance, takes it to somewhere else, he becomes a professional. So the group is a movement. Because people come. They go. But we are still there. Some they go, they come back. Because they miss the dance. some, they go, some they become professional and so on.⁴⁴

While Viwe, Andile, and Siyabulela have performances to attend outside IAC, they are the leaders who receive gigs from their connections, take the lead in the performances and rehearsals, and teach dances to others. With the group's stance as a platform, members are encouraged to learn in any environment through which they can gain more aspirational nods (Appadurai, 2001) while being able to feel a sense of belonging when they come back to IAC. For example, Thembi had been part of IAC for more than three years when she started to dance at BABA YAYA two years ago. A year later, she moved to another dance company called SboNdaba Dance Academy, then moved to one of the most renowned companies in Cape Town, called Jazzart Theatre, a year after. She attends IAC performances when dancers are short in numbers, and she comes to rehearsal to assist with teaching routines to new IAC members. For instance, based on the knowledge she gained during the training at the companies, she gave advice on how to market the IAC *Uhambo Lwam* production, stage setting, and acting. The cultural capital Thembi acquired through being part of multiple companies was passed down to IAC members, which helped them to be prepared for the production.

While people come and go at IAC, members often watch other members' shows and performances, supporting and encouraging further development. Whenever there is a show in which a member performs in a group other than IAC, the performer sends an advertisement poster with information to the IAC WhatsApp group, and other members go to watch the show. Oftentimes, the

⁴³ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁴⁴ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

non-IAC performance date clashes with IAC rehearsals; however, individuals make decisions between watching the show or attending the rehearsal. When I asked Andile if he was going to watch the SboNdaba company's show that Sam was part of, despite it being on IAC rehearsal day, he said "I just want to support. I'm gonna have to miss the rehearsal."⁴⁵ This shows the value he places on showing up at other IAC members' shows and acknowledging their work they do. Whenever I watch shows of IAC members performing for their non-IAC group, I find other IAC members at the venue. By pursuing individual sustenance and recognition, they accumulate cultural, creative, and social capital for IAC.

4.4.2 Fluidity in the Group Accumulates Social Capital

Allowing the fluidity in the group contributes to the accumulation of social capital. Over time, this expands IAC youth's cultural capital, and the group performs with higher quality to gain more recognition in the industry. As the majority of the senior dancers are part of a group other than IAC, they find themselves in a network of social relationships formed by reciprocity and trust, which they nurture in their everyday rehearsals and performances. The network of their respective group extends to IAC, which opens more performance opportunities and, thus, enhancement of the cultural capital of the group overall. For example, Viwe brought a gig invitation to IAC, as his other group of older male Zulu dancers needed more dance groups to complete a show at a private function. Through the function, he got acquainted with one of the operators of the Cape Town Carnival, which brought them chances to perform at several functions, including the main carnival performance. In one of the functions, where IAC dancers performed for the China-South Africa cultural exchange summit, Viwe got to know one of the organisers in the Chinese group and exchanged contacts for future collaboration. Through Viwe's encounter with the performance organiser alone, IAC youth were given many chances to highlight their talent that not only granted financial rewards, but also expanded their social capital. This opportunity, for more economic activity and recognition acquisition, multiplies by the number of connections each member establishes in their respective group.

4.4.3 Social Capital Transforms into Cultural Capital

Social connections within the dance industry can also enhance the group members' cultural capital through which youth can get closer to their goal of "being big." For example, people from different groups came to watch the run-through of the *Uhambo Lwam* production and gave feedback to IAC to enhance its quality. Siyabulela's remark demonstrates how he takes the initiative to make full use of social capital and transform it into cultural capital through feedback sessions:

On Thursday, we have visitors that will come and watch our production, people that are in the performing arts industry. I have not found anyone who will assist in music, but I managed to find someone for dance, Bongsi and Wendy. I haven't found someone for drama either; I was thinking of Siya. Awee, you know Siya right? There is a guy called Siyasanga. I think you would know him; he owns a Backyard Theatre. The last time I heard, he was staying in Philippi. Who else can we get? But we will take Timna; I think he went to a drama school. We still haven't found someone who will help with the music, and I am not sure, but I need someone with a musical background who can sing, and someone who can give tangible feedback

⁴⁵ Excerpt from a conversation with Andile on September 20, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

*because I know that dance and drama will get that. I want them to come and watch us on Thursday.*⁴⁶

The excerpt indicates Siyabulela's endeavours to utilise a diverse array of talents encompassing music, drama, and dance. Timna, the leader of the IAM, provided insightful critiques on the run-through of the production. Particularly during the shebeen scene, which depicts inebriation, Timna advocated for a more exaggerated portrayal of staggering movements and seamless transitions to the vibrant steps into the Sophiatown dance, emphasising the tumultuous ambiance essential for contextualising the protagonist's subsequent accident. Members of the IAC earnestly attempted to integrate Timna's advice, often invoking his guidance during rehearsals such as, "Like Timna said, we need to act properly,"⁴⁷ thereby underscoring its significance.

Moreover, Timna pointed out the imperative to infuse distinctiveness into customary 'traditional' dance routines, arguing to let go of the conventional celebratory depictions to imbue them with a nuanced tone. Timna's emphasis on the art of exaggeration in theatrical performance, coupled with a preference for innovative narrative within the traditional dance scene, profoundly enriched the collective knowledge of the IAC youth. This enabled them to craft performances that resonated within the cultural dance industry. Despite occasional setbacks attributable to insufficient rehearsal time, the *Uhambo Lwam* production caught favourable attention, notably drawing the interest of an audience member who is an artistic director of a community project in Langa. Having become mesmerised by his acting and dancing, she extended an invitation to Wandile to conduct a workshop for her group. This set of events underlines the transformative potential of the group's open ethos to convert social capital into cultural capital (Fuh, 2012). IAC youth collectively exercise their agency to expand their network through participation and collaboration with other groups.

4.4.4 Combination Makes the Dance Unique

Fluidity in the group not only expands their social capital, but also increases the chance of combination in their dancing, cultivating their uniqueness. While following the energetic Zulu dance demand with some integration of Xhosa steps as part of their identity, IAC youth include diverse dance forms throughout the creative and learning process. This sustained fusion of dance styles contributes significantly to the uniqueness of their performances in the 'traditional dance' industry (Toto as quoted in Rani, 2013, p. 128). Andile elucidates that the defining characteristic of IAC resides in its "combination" of individuals and their respective contributions:

*Izikhaza is something different. Bringing all other kinds of dance. Abahanbile [another traditional dance group], they stick to that one routine that we are used to doing. We learned the dance a long time ago, and we are still doing it. Izikhaza, this group, is a creative group... Yeah, some people come and go. Come and go, sharing some moves and creating new things. So it keeps moving. That's why we call it combination. Yes, we can have a traditional style, and we don't change it, but then some years after, what Izikhaza does needs to keep evolving.*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Excerpt from a meeting led by Siyabulela on September 27, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁴⁷ Excerpt from a conversation after rehearsal on October 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁴⁸ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

Andile's emphasis on the combination of different styles and skills is often seen in the rehearsal space. Viwe, who makes choreography amalgamating elements of Zulu and Xhosa dance, actually incorporates movements imbued with contemporary dance techniques. This reflects what Devisch (1993) conceptualizes as the dancer's body functioning as both an *archive* and *innovator*—a site where embodied knowledge is not merely preserved but actively reworked. Choreography, in this view, is not a fixed cultural script but a reflexive process in which youth reinterpret, remix, and extend cultural repertoires to meet contemporary demands and express new social meanings. Sam, who is being trained in many styles at SboNdaba Dance Academy, combines contemporary dance moves in the warm-up he leads. Other members also have different styles to offer, such as Nozuko integrating some Tswana moves, and Aya including contemporary moves into the first scene of the *Uhambo Lwam* production. Thus, the dance compositions emerge as products of intersecting networks and a spectrum of stylistic influences, encouraging an ongoing evolution of their dance repertoire. This synthesis of diverse styles, drawing from both historical and contemporary contexts, locally and globally, represents an innovative approach that captivates international audiences (Abdillah et al., 2022, p. 12). Thus, the IAC youth's fusion of dance styles not only distinguishes them within the marketplace, but also responds dynamically to evolving market demands.

While the fluidity of members and dance styles within the IAC may present challenges to the cohesive execution of performances, it concurrently offers members avenues for self-monetisation, thereby augmenting their social capital. This, in turn, creates a cycle in which individuals are encouraged to re-engage with the group, seeking further opportunities for both financial gain and recognition. Rather than maintaining a rigid structure, the IAC functions as a platform whereby youth can pursue both individual and collective objectives, nurtured by a sense of safety, security, and mutual support among its members, irrespective of their level of commitment to the group.

This interplay between individual and collective attainment aligns with John Mbiti's (1990) assertion that African societies are inherently communal, built on principles of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. While the IAC youth leverage their individual talent and agency to build their careers and gain recognition, these efforts remain deeply embedded within the broader context of their group's collective goals and shared achievements. The group dynamic functions as a platform where personal growth contributes to the collective identity, reinforcing Mbiti's view.

At the same time, Achille Mbembe's (2001) perspective on how African communal practices have been shaped by colonial histories provides insight into the IAC youth's balancing act. Despite the pressures of modernity and the individualism promoted by Western ideologies, the youth's intentional integration of individual aspirations into a collective framework reflects the enduring relevance of communal values. By maintaining this duality, they illustrate the resilience of African identity in adapting to contemporary demands while retaining its foundational principles.

4.5 Conclusion

I have elucidated how IAC youth navigate the challenges inherent in both township life and the entertainment industry by constantly strategising to gain income, acknowledgment, and recognition as humans and as social adults. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of social drama and René Devisch's theory of the body as a reflexive and co-authoring site of knowledge, I frame the IAC youth's performances not as mechanical repetitions of tradition, but as ritualised enactments through which social recognition, belonging, and adult status are continually negotiated. In this frame, choreography becomes a living script—improvised, revised, and re-performed—reflecting and

reshaping the uncertainties of township life. In pursuit of effective monetisation strategies, these individuals meticulously curate their performances within the domain of Zulu dance, drawing upon market insights and honing their execution skills, while delicately negotiating their Xhosa cultural identities. The deliberate fluidity of the group expands the cultural and social capital of individual members and, eventually, serves the collective aim of accumulating recognition and financial gain. By devising codes of conduct tailored to their circumstances, the IAC youth adeptly navigate the demands of their daily lives, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity.

Chapter 5 Dancing to Smile and be Human

5.1 Abstract

This chapter examines how youth in Nyanga navigate emotional and social challenges through dancing and group participation. Faced with instability, violence, and marginalisation, these young individuals use dance as a mechanism to process their emotions, build community, and assert their humanity. The chapter discusses their engagement in Zulu dance and the role of rehearsals in creating a sense of belonging, safety, and autonomy. By integrating cultural practices with emotional expression, these youth construct spaces of psychological refuge and avenues for personal and collective transformation, illustrating how dance facilitates their pursuit of social adulthood and stability amidst precarity.

5.2 Introduction

Youth in Nyanga face numerous challenges such as unstable employment, violence, and marginalisation, often leading to dehumanisation and a sense of displacement. Amid these hardships, young men seek to assert their identities as social adults and attain manhood (Meintjes, 2004), which is often marked by achieving recognition and dignity in society. This chapter explores how youth in Iziqhaza Art Combination (IAC) turn to dance as a tool for emotional expression and as a strategy for coping with the precarity of their daily lives.

Dance provides a space where they can release emotional burdens and engage in a process of becoming (Fuh, 2012). Collective participation in rehearsals is not only an opportunity for physical expression, but also for emotional and psychological refuge, where they foster a sense of belonging, safety, and autonomy. This is explained by Devisch (1993)'s argument where ritual spaces offer therapeutic potential through sensorial engagement. Rehearsals are not only the preparation for performance but also sites where embodied emotion, rhythm, sweat, and voice work together to release frustration and manage their emotional experiences. By engaging in rehearsals and creating a supportive group dynamic, they construct an environment where they can connect with their identities, enhance their self-worth, and assert their presence as both social adults and human beings. The chapter illustrates how dance, particularly the pursuit of "isigqi" in solo performances, becomes a means of attaining manhood while also facilitating emotional healing (Rani, 2013, p. 44).

5.3 Rehearsal as a Means to Cope

The dance space that IAC youth create at the rehearsal venue serves as a community where they can feel safety, connection, and belonging. This complements the absence of a sense of belonging in the larger community of the nation (Swartz, 2012), which makes it difficult to live a dignified life as a human being, a social adult, a man, or a woman. Daily one-and-a-half-hour rehearsal at the Zolani Centre does not only offer a space to physically escape from reality, but also helps youth equip themselves with means to cope with everyday challenges. Nozuko's story illustrates the benefit of participating in rehearsals:

When I come to rehearsals. I forget what I fought [about] with my classmates and with my mom. I don't usually fight. But I don't wanna stay with them and end up being aggressive. That's why I choose to leave. You know, mos. I'm very calm. I come to rehearsal, I do my own thing. I speak to her [my mom] as if nothing happened. That is why it's a nice place to be. When you feel you are going home with that, you can't hear every damn thing they tell you. If I want to, I apologise because I was wrong. So it's up

to you to say, “Okay, if you don’t make up with me, even if I try to speak to you, then I leave.” It’s just that. It’s not worth spending energy.⁴⁹

For Nozuko, joining rehearsals enables her to temporarily forget about the dispute she had outside the rehearsal, allowing her to address it with emotional control. Despite her uneasy situation—she lives outside Nyanga and works in a stressful environment—she is one of the members who attends Monday to Thursday rehearsals consistently. She acknowledges the positive influence it has on her in coping with the emotional stress she has from events such as disputes, violence, and unfair treatment.

Similarly, Viwe demonstrates how rehearsals provide him with a necessary release from the pressures of his life. Despite his busy schedule and recent family losses, he embraces the rehearsal as a moment of freedom and joy.

In the warm-up led by Sibú in one of the weekly rehearsals, we were stretching our lower body by spreading our legs. Sam let us lift our bums and let the hands walk forward to intensify the stretch. Everyone was screaming out of pain. Suddenly I heard the voice of Viwe saying, “Yes! Yes! That’s it! I love you!”⁵⁰ It’s typical of him to congratulate a situation where dancers are challenged for improvement, but he never looked more frolicky before. Sibú moved on to let us lie down on the floor, lift both legs, and place our feet all the way over the head. Viwe was constantly shouting playfully in a tone that was both teasing and encouraging. Doing his own exercise, he looked relaxed—not having to lead the exercise as he usually does—and liberated to be able to playfully interact with dancers. Throughout the rehearsal, he looked extra pleasant and energetic, as if he was trying to make the most out of 90 minutes of freedom. In our conversation later, he shared the burdens he carries as he navigates family obligations and grief.

During the conversation I had with Viwe on the way to the airport where I was going to be dropped off, he explained how he is occupied with running errands and preparing for ceremonies for both his father and his brother whom he lost recently. He had to cancel his birthday party he booked at a park weeks ago to attend his brother’s burial and to save money to buy items needed for the series of his father’s rituals:

I need to clean his clothes, his everything. I also need to cleanse myself. I need to go to the ocean and do this [gesturing to put something on his forehead] and buy things Igqirha [traditional healer] tells me. And kill chicken.⁵¹

This was expressed with disappointment and resignation, a completely opposite tone from the bright shouting at rehearsal. Besides being a full time worker at the airport, being a father, and being a payer of the so-called black tax, he has an enormous mental and economic burden to take care of the passing of immediate family members. There were many other occasions where Viwe attended rehearsals in an extremely bright mood, even though his personal life burdened him a lot. Rehearsals certainly act as his escape from reality and provide psychological fuel to cope with stress.

⁴⁹ Excerpt from an interview with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁵⁰ Excerpt from a rehearsal on September 7, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁵¹ Excerpt from a conversation with Viwe on September 7, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Both Nozuko and Viwe, along with other IAC members, confront daily challenges rooted in pervasive structural violence. However, they come to rehearsals with the hope of smiling, relaxing, and regaining a sense of calm (Chabal, 2009; Rani, 2013, p. 44). This practice allows them to feel dignified as they acknowledge and manage their emotions, reaffirming their humanity amidst adversity. Following Devisch (1993)'s work, the rehearsal operates as a co-authored, reflexive script in which participants bring their emotional burdens and rework them through dance, gesture, and sound. This dynamic contributes to the regulation of emotions and the formation of embodied knowledge of how to endure and adapt. By intentionally engaging in dance, they create a space where they can navigate their realities and cultivate resilience, using it as a pathway to social recognition.

5.4 Rehearsal as Safe Space

Besides their intentional participation in the rehearsals, youth collectively make an effort to make the space secure so that young individuals can partake in creative and prosocial affection alongside their members. This affection is both safe and conducive to positive interactions, fostering a sense of camaraderie and belonging. This is facilitated through the cultivation of a norm such as embracement, vocal cheering, respect among genders, and adherence to positivity. The adherence to such code of conduct ensures the emotional and physical safety of all participants, thereby fostering an atmosphere where individuals feel sufficiently accepted to express their authentic selves.

Embracing one another serves as a simple yet profound way to cultivate community within the IAC. Despite the fluctuating attendance for rehearsals due to various commitments—such as employment, education, familial obligations, and participation in other dance companies—those who are present at the rehearsal barely fail to embrace all of members who are in the space. Upon every arrival at the Zolani Centre, individuals hug each other, regardless of their role, age, or level of commitment. This practice extends to individuals who may have newly joined the group or who have not joined rehearsal for a long time as well as those dedicated to drama groups or those who maintain personal connections with existing members. Such an act serves to affirm the presence and belonging of all participants within the space, fostering an inclusive atmosphere. During the initial phase of my participation in the rehearsals, new encounters with members of the IAC who no longer come to rehearsal occurred frequently and, each instance, I received an embrace notwithstanding their unfamiliarity with my appearance as a new individual in addition to my physical features as a person of East Asian descent. This act of hugging each other contributed to my feeling of being acknowledged and accepted in the space, which allowed me to participate in dancing comfortably. This feeling of belonging is the premise of the IAC youth's experience at rehearsals as fun, peaceful and refreshing.

Besides the embracement, the vocal expressions of support emitted while dancing serve to imbue the dancers with a sense of encouragement, rather than fostering an atmosphere of competition. Irrespective of whether the dancing is for presentation or for practice, members who are seated in the audience area often express words of encouragement, such as “Hamba Wena!” or “Shue!” Dancers' names or ululations are added to the mix, thereby fuelling the ongoing momentum of executed movements. This practice of vocal encouragement is one of the important factors within ‘traditional’ dance practices (Nicholls, 1996, p. 44) and reflects the deliberate choice to infuse the rehearsal space. During my initial attempts to grasp the complexity of the Zulu dance sequence, the continued encouragement bolstered my confidence and enabled me to keep engaging with the dance, alleviating feelings of nervousness and enhancing my sense of self-expression.

Including cultural norms of acknowledgment and discipline, consistent structural frameworks and delineated boundaries are imperative for cultivating an environment conducive to the safety and encouragement of dancers (Chielotam, 2015; Fensham & Gardner, 2005). Central to the ethos of the group is a code of conduct that is underscored by principles of mutual respect, thereby fostering an atmosphere akin to an emotional shelter. Particularly noteworthy is the manifestation of respect, notably evident in interactions between male and female members who became to be “brothers and sisters,” as articulated by Nozuko:

We've got our brothers. We brothers and sisters in Iziqhaza. So, you don't need to hide it [the body] from anyone because, like, we know we used to talk and chat about it. If you don't like something, you don't do such thing. If you feeling like hugging you [can] or kissing you can, but I'll tell them if there's [a] certain thing that I cannot do. That is how it works. So, I don't have to worry about Viwe, I don't have to worry about Andile. They are, like, they are my brothers.⁵²

In a community dance group like IAC, where certain choreographic sequences involve intimate pair dancing, the cultivation of a sense of mutual trust and respect is paramount in fostering an environment wherein dancers can engage in physical interactions without sexualising one another. An instance of this dynamic was observed in a particular segment of a dance piece I was learning, wherein a female dancer is lifted by a male counterpart, as if a baby held by a mom. As the choreography progressed, Viwe, my partner dancer, supported my ankles as I descended to the floor, subsequently positioning himself alongside me in a coordinated manner. Despite my discomfort, discussions amongst the dancers usually revolve around refining technical aspects, such as ensuring seamless transitions between movements while maintaining rhythmic synchronisation. Notably, within the context of such pair choreography, where interactions between youth of differing genders are commonplace, members consistently ask each other's consent before touching the body for corrections or adjustments.

This adherence to principles of respect extends beyond mere choreographic collaboration, encompassing acknowledgment of one another's identities as dancers, individuals of particular genders, and fellow human beings. It is through the cultivation of such a culture of trust and respect that dancers within IAC are afforded a sense of safety and authenticity in their artistic expression. In a regulated socioeconomic space like Nyanga, where women are often sexualised or objectified as tools for men to attain manhood (Qambela, 2021), IAC youth contest the asymmetrical gender dynamic by shaping siblings-like relationships with mutual trust and respect.

The cultivation of these codes of conduct among members holds considerable significance within the social milieu of a dance community. Such practices contribute to promoting a sense of connectivity, belonging, and perceived value among individuals (Ryan & Deci, 2002) that allows members to engage in dancing freely. Within this framework, youth participants collectively make their participation meaningful, utilising the dance venue as a space to alleviate the stresses and challenges encountered outside its confines.

⁵² Excerpt from an interview with Nozuko on November 29, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

5.5 Becoming ‘Man’ Through Zulu Dance

The code of conduct established in rehearsals not only creates a space for psychological, social, and physical escape, but also allows male dancers to explore their manhood, a crucial aspect of being recognised as social adults. For many IAC males, the “cry” stems from their struggles to achieve traditional markers of manhood, such as stable financial income. Engaging in Zulu dancing provides them with a vital space to cultivate a sense of power necessary for their identities as men (Mfecane, 2020, p. 8).

Drawing on research from a community ngoma dance team in Msinga municipality, KwaZulu-Natal, Meintjes (2017) situates “the body” of Zulu ngoma singers and dancers politically and theorises it phenomenologically while retaining the presence of individualised expression and stylised body movement. She argues that participation in Zulu dancing provides young men with a pathway to assert their identities and navigate the challenges of attaining manhood, especially when traditional markers, like stable income, are difficult to achieve. As the ngoma dancers grapple with the disparity between the idealised notions of Zulu masculinity and their realities, Zulu singing and dancing emerges as a vital source of authority. This performance practice allows them to enhance both their individual status and their collective rights within the community. Through singing and dancing, some can accumulate “institutional power, make material gains, gather military responsibility, and generate seductive power,” all by effectively embodying “isigqi,” the magical moment of coherence when all resources created by dancers, drummers, singers, and clappers are momentarily consolidated (Meintjes, 2017, pp. 175-193).

Although the context for IAC youth engaging in Zulu dance differs significantly—the members being based in Cape Town and identifying primarily as Xhosa—their experiences resonate with those of ngoma dancers. The male dancers exhibit contentment through their bodily gestures, particularly during solo performances in which the alignment of drum sounds, movement, singing, chanting, and clapping creates an imminent moment of fulfilment. A rough yet unbothered demeanour displayed when they land on their buttocks after an intensive sequence reflects their sense of power. In a landscape where traditional avenues to manhood are restricted by race and class (Morrell, 1998), Zulu dance serves as a format for expressing their desire to attain masculinity. However, masculine identities are multifaceted, shaped by various codes of conduct that are influenced by religious belief, style, taste, fashion, education, sexuality, and class (Mfecane, 2020, p. 8). Thus, while the dance offers a sense of “power” and recognition, it also provides a means for emotional control, allowing dancers to release the “cry” accumulated in the complexities of daily life.

5.6 Dance to Let Go of the Cry

As much as rehearsal is a space for emotional escape, and Zulu dancing is a format through which male dancers attain manhood, the act of dancing itself serves as a “spiritual” experience through which youth can process and express their pain, allowing them to be recognised as human beings who have feeling. Viwe’s account highlights how dance and music enable him to keep going when the absence of economic and social support threatens his survival (Kovalainen, 2004, p. 160):

In this year, I’ve been through a lot. I’ve lost my father, you know. And I was in a bad space, and also my family turned their back on me. And because, with my little brother, I’m sharing the father with, but [we have] different mothers. And now, the mother, she’s doing everything that I would never have expected [her to do]. So I have one best friend. But he wasn’t there for me. The time I needed him... And then, dance was there for me,

music was there for me. I play some soft music and then do some steps so that the pain can come out. If I keep my pain inside, it will, like, affect my mind for the rest of my life. So yeah, dance is one [thing] that keeps me going. It can be every dance, every music. Most of the time, if I'm feeling low, I'll do African contemporary with some soft music, and just do everything that comes to me. If I feel like doing kicks, if I feel like doing stamping, if I feel like running or jumping or moving around, I'll just do it.⁵³

Viwe's narrative underscores the transformative potential of dance as a mechanism for the release of inner emotion. In the African context, where men are expected to uphold normativity even when they feel vulnerable (Meintjes, 2017, p. 200), men are forced to repress the emotion, which is not only inhumane, but also risks affecting their approach to subsequent events. Viwe's ability to dance provides him with a tool to be vulnerable and let go of the emotional struggle. Dance also serves as an unwavering companion for Viwe, providing an unconditional presence in contrast to the potential transience of human relationships. Similarly, Andile's sentiments elucidate the therapeutic function of dance, portraying it as a form of counselling that facilitates the processing and expulsion of "cry," thereby enabling personal growth and advancement:

I don't know if I'm still going to be Igqirtha or not. But this dance thing is helping me. Because if I was never a dancer, maybe something could have happened, and I could have gone crazy. You know, when there is a cry, but you can't cry, something happens to you because you hold that cry. And then your inside becomes damaged. So now, we cry there on stage. That's where we heal, that's where everything becomes so wild. I hope you are understanding. So that means the dance is in us, it's here [pointing around his heart]. We don't just dance. But we love what we are doing. That [calling to become Igqirtha] must happen at the right time. Because of this kind of thing, we don't follow it, it must follow you. Someday, it will come out. It's like abusing a child who needs counselling growing up. Whatever that is in mind that you grew up with, in our soul, we are counselling ourselves when we are on stage. And that helped us a lot. Because growing up, we could have met so many things that are bad and negative, but because of this activity, like, dancing kept us thinking positively. Maybe I could have been a gangster or whatever, but because I stuck to it, or dance stuck to me, I became a better person. And I learned things. More things came to me, and I accepted. I was very safe. I conquered many things because of it. Bad things do not get stuffed here. When I get on stage [and] I rehearse with them, I'm thinking fresh.⁵⁴

Unlike Viwe, Andile suggests that he expresses his vulnerability through Zulu dance, transforming his emotional pain into the "cry" of the dance itself. Similar to Viwe, Andile acknowledges dance as an emotional outlet, helping him survive the negative temptations in his life by sticking to dancing (Maqoma, 2023, p. 44). While both men participate in "strict" Zulu dance, which cultivates masculinity through vocalisation and body movement (Meintjes, 2017, p. 42) and

⁵³ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁵⁴ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

embodies masculine qualities like "anger" (Meintjes, 2017, p. 65), they also use dance as a way to release their vulnerability and find a sense of power. While traditional masculinity in other contexts may involve behaviours like having multiple partners (Silberschmidt, 2001), IAC men channel their frustrations into dance, achieving both personal and social respectability. Andile's journey demonstrates how young dancers like him can lead fulfilling lives without resorting to negative behaviours (Rani, 2013, pp. 2-3).

Like Nozuko can cope with disputes in a healthy way, and Viwe charges his energy to tackle familial responsibility after dancing in the rehearsal, Andile benefits from dancing for his emotional and social stability. He articulates that "the 'spirituality' I feel is not like the connection with ancestors, but it releases everything. Any bad feeling, I just release by moving and dancing. Then after dancing, I know I'm fresh. The audience also enjoys it."⁵⁵ The "spirituality" of dance is explained by Warburton (2011, p. 68), who argues that the logic of dancing makes the dancers feel present and functions beyond religion:

The quintessential experience of dancing brings with it a sense of beingness in the here-and-now—a sensation through which one can perceive connectedness in movement, can locate the body in three-dimensional space, can feel togetherness in time, and can know oneness with a larger entity that humans often identify as transcendent religious experience.

This claim corresponds with Devish (1993)'s point of ritual not merely symbolic but deeply sensorial. Andile's and Viwe's accounts shows that the feelings of presence and oneness are healing. When the "wound" of the nation exposes young people to many determinants and threatens their attempt to survive, the moment of being present through dancing is a great escape. The continuation of this temporal escape through micro-rituals of therapeutic intensity provides resilience in navigating uncertainty throughout their life.

The participation in dancing as a means of healing gives youth space for exploration and letting go of their daily struggles. Andile shares how he applied the idea of releasing stress through dancing to other activities:

*I found a way, if there's something coming to me and I'm stressed, I go to the sea or the mountain, just sit there, then whatever. Feel the nature. That is mind therapy. As I learned so many things from this experience, now I think, "Okay, I can use this and this to feel this way. If I'm not on stage, doing other things can help me. Even if I'm not performing, dance taught me that I can do this [other activities]."*⁵⁶

Many IAC members engage in various activities outside of dance, such as working out or doing yoga, reflecting their holistic approach to achieving a dignified and humane life. This participation in various activities underscores that dance serves not only as a moment of refreshment, but also as a vital catalyst for further emotional release. By participating in dance, these youth create spaces that allow them to process the burdens of everyday life and assert their autonomy in navigating the challenges they face, such as unstable employment and violence. This multifaceted participation in

⁵⁵ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

⁵⁶ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

dance and other activities facilitates their journey toward manhood (Meintjes, 2004) and their desire to be “human” by fostering opportunities for joy (Chabal, 2009). Ultimately, these practices become tools with which youth can reclaim their dignity and establish a sense of safety and belonging within their communities.

5.7 Drum Releases the Body Tension

Drumming plays an essential role in transforming dancers’ experiences, allowing them to enter a state of unity in time, space, and body (Warburton, 2011). Given the physically demanding nature of Zulu dance, initiating movement often requires time, warmth, and motivation. It is common to see dancers sitting or lying on the floor during rehearsals. However, the sound of a drum can invigorate their bodies, compelling them to move as if the rhythm takes control. Andile describes how the drum loosens his otherwise tight body, providing the space to play through dance:

I’m quiet, and I don’t just move. There must be something that moves me. I can say for Viwe, he’s different inside, so if music is playing and he wants to jive, he immediately moves. But for me, it takes time to move. Because it starts from here [pointing to his chest]. If I can feel that my knees are still strong, I can’t move. But once you hit the drum, everything just releases. It just releases like there is something that is communicating with me. Because you know, as a dancer, we play. But play by movement. We get the chance to play. Some of us can’t play when we are around the location or whatever. I don’t know whether it happens naturally, but I can’t play. But once I’m in the field of dancing, it releases everything. I can play there. But when I come out of it, I’m a different person.⁵⁷

As Andile expresses, dancing is like play, which is different from ordinary life. It arises from the pure desire to have fun, while it can also be intense and serious. When dancing, one is completely absorbed while, at the same time, being aware of one’s participation (Huizinga, 1949). Andile gets less conscious while he is on the stage, dancing. Thus, dance serves as a playground for which most IAC youth do not have neither the time nor the emotional room in their everyday lives.

As articulated by Andile, dance assumes a distinct role, diverging from the conventions of everyday existence. Rooted in an intrinsic desire for enjoyment, dance concurrently embodies elements of intensity and seriousness. Engaging in dance entails a state of complete absorption, characterised by a heightened awareness of one’s involvement, as argued by Huizinga (1949). Andile’s personal experience corroborates this assertion, as he attests to a diminished sense of self-consciousness while on stage, fully immersed in the act of dancing. Consequently, dance functions as a metaphorical playground—a realm of uninhibited expression and pleasure—particularly salient for members of IAC youth who contend with constraints on both temporal and emotional resources within their daily lives.

5.8 Drum Beats Shape the Therapeutic Experience of Dancing

The presence of a drumbeat is one of the most significant factors that makes the youth’s dancing experience therapeutic. For a choreographed dance, the drummer’s beat gives guidance, dictates the dancer’s body, and helps complete the dancing experience. There were many occasions in

⁵⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

which dancers got lost in executing steps without the presence of the correct drumbeats, and their attempt to feel the sense of beingness was distracted.

For example, Nozuko, Aya, and I were practicing Ndlambe dance, newly choreographed by Viwe. Under Viwe's guidance, we carefully dissected each step, focusing closely on a sequence that demanded consecutive kicks in a prescribed order: *right, left-right, left-left-left-left-left*. Despite our perceived mastery of the sequence after vigorous efforts in repeated practice, our execution faltered when we attempted to synchronise our movements with Viwe's drumming during a full run-through of the routine. I found myself unable to initiate the kick sequence from the preparatory stance of lifting the knee and facing forward, as if my body was controlled by something. Experiencing the same difficulty, Aya blamed Viwe's perceived irregularities in drumming. The absence of correct drumbeats disabled our bodies from making steps, despite our familiarity with them. The centrality of the drum in dance execution was proved on many occasions, especially when dancers abruptly put an end to the rehearsal in the midst of intense practice when the drum owner needed to leave.

For solo dances (a certain period of individual improvisation), the drummer and the dancer reciprocally influence each other and achieve the release of "something in mind," exhausting themselves to feel refreshed. Improvisation sessions usually take place within Zulu dance pieces where dancers make a circle to let an individual deliver sets of moves in the middle. It entails a combination of the activation of movements and rhythms and the interaction with the musician, other dancers, and the context in which improvisation takes place (Aterianus-Owanga, 2021, p. 48).

My experience of conducting solo moves shows how the drumbeat takes control of the body, letting it dance and exhaust it. My solo session spontaneously started at the end of the *Uhambo Lwam* production. I was encouraged by Aya to do a solo, I was pushed into the front of the crowd, and they started to form a circle again. Guided by Siyabulela's fastened Umsanzi drumbeats, I nervously started making steps that naturally came to my body. It fuelled me, and I found myself executing some other steps in the same four beats per measure tempo without realising. When I did a step sequence whose rhythm unit consisted of four times of four beats per measure, it was perfectly accommodated by Siyabulela's drumbeats, with some accents on the fourth hitting, matching the releasing dance move. I was the one executing the dance, but simultaneously I felt like I was guided by the drumbeat and moved "like paper in a river" (Meintjes, 2017, p. 212). Facing the audience, I could not see Siyabulela, but he and I were of reciprocal influence. The energy carried through the collective making of my solo, I found myself doing moves much bigger than I usually can do. With four big jumps and splits perfectly synchronised with Siyabulela's beats and accents, my solo was completed. Not fully, but I could embody part of what solo improvisation entails as described by the leader in Umzansi Zulu dancers (Siyazi in Meintjes, 2017, p. 42):

As an individual dancer, you have to be so focused, so in the experience of your body moving in sync with the sound, that you aren't thinking, you are simply and wholly doing. You and the sound are one.



Image 10: The researcher's solo in the *Uhambo Lwam* production captured by a friend in the audience seat, 29 October 2022.

I was extremely out of breath, exceeding my usual stamina, and my head was clearer than before starting the solo, as if I just meditated. This experience informed me of the necessity of the drumbeat in keeping the momentum of the movement and exceeding the limit of what my full energy can offer (Warburton, 2011). This has been observed when other dancers do moves that are more dynamic during their solo with Siybulela's drumbeat. The improvisational circle and solo dances exemplify Turner's *communitas*—a state of shared vulnerability and mutual witnessing where individual pain is recognized and collectively held. Devisch (1993) reaffirms this by stating that ritual is not fixed but co-created. The meaning of each beat, each movement, is shaped by the interplay of dancers' intentions, emotions, and social ties in the moment.

The guidance of choreographed sequences and the authentic execution of individual movements, compounded by the rhythmic resonance of drumbeats, engenders a profound sense of beingness and bodily expansion. This experience assumes a pivotal role in rendering the dance experience therapeutic. Whether engaged in choreography or solo improvisation, the act of dancing as a therapeutic endeavour aids youth residing in townships to effectively manage the challenges of daily life, bolstering their emotional resilience to navigate adversity.

5.9 Conclusion

As demonstrated, participation in dance and rehearsals offers IAC youth a vital means to cope with daily challenges while asserting their identities as social adults and human beings. Beyond individual efforts to attend rehearsals, their collective participation—through embrace, verbal encouragement, respect among genders, and the exclusion of negativity—creates a safe, supportive environment where youth can experience a sense of being and belonging. The execution of Zulu dance, particularly the capacity to reach “isigqi” during solo performances, provides male dancers with a pathway to attain manhood.

Moreover, collaboration with the drummer enhances a sense of presence, facilitating the release of the “cry” often trapped in their minds. Through this process, youth acquire embodied knowledge that allows them to move in resonance with the music, enabling them to process and express their emotions while embracing vulnerability. The formation of and adherence to the rules governing the dance space enables youth to fully utilise rehearsals and the act of dancing, affirming their dignity as human beings and social adults. This participation becomes fundamental for young people who face multiple expectations to be recognised as accomplished social adults, fostering a sense of purpose and connection in their lives.

Chapter 6 Being Change Makers in the Community

6.1 Abstract

This chapter explores how young people seek recognition through strategic participation in moral and civic practices within a dance group. Motivated by aspirations for upward mobility, including financial gains, youth in Iziqhaza Art Combination (IAC) also aim to be recognised as change-makers in their community. They actively engage with local notions of morality that includes speaking up against negativity, preserving the dance ecosystem, recruiting younger participants, and conveying moral messages through performances. The chapter highlights how these youth strive to transform Nyanga, a community often perceived as troubled, and establish themselves as key actors in the social fabric of the city.

6.2 Introduction

Young people at IAC use dance not only as a means of personal growth, but also to gain recognition within their community. In the context of Nyanga, often seen as troubled, they challenge negative stereotypes associated with township youth by engaging in cultural dance, which they view as a form of respect (Crehan, 2011). Their participation in the arts allows them to reshape their community's image, promoting creativity and positive change.

The group's moral framework adheres to local values, resisting behaviours such as substance abuse and attention-seeking actions that could undermine their cohesion. IAC youth serve as moral leaders within the community, prioritising collaboration and respect over personal gain. Their approach to recognition demonstrates that artistic expression can coexist with moral integrity (Swartz, 2006).

Beyond personal development, IAC youth aim to educate and inspire the broader community, especially the younger generation, through their performances. By sharing their skills in dance and performing arts, they contribute to their community's cultural and social development. Through performances like *Uhambo Lwam*, they communicate moral lessons on family, responsibility, and self-reflection, reinforcing their role as responsible, respected community members (Crehan, 2011). In this way, they align with Swartz's (2006) view of youth as transformative figures in moral development and social change.

6.3 Not Conforming to the Dangerous Image

Youth at IAC gain recognition from their committed participation in art instead of conforming to the negative narrative of youth being *at risk* or *as risk* (Stanford, 2014). Gaining recognition through cultural dancing contests the idea that township youth engage in socially unacceptable actions to gain dignity (Swartz et al., 2012). That is, instead of conforming to the usual criteria to be recognised—such as wearing brand items (Howell and Vincent, 2014) and getting multiple partners (Qambela, 2021, p. 3)—IAC youth engage artistic and cultural practices that add value both to individual life and to society.

When he was in primary school, Viwe, the leader of IAC, used to be part of a gang to gain the sense of belonging that he could not obtain from the larger society, but he chose a different platform that involves music and dancing to belong and to gain recognition. While often being pointed out for its highest crime rate in Cape Town, Nyanga is also recognised as a hotspot for 'traditional' dancers. When I was looking for potential participants for this study, quite a few people in the dance and music industry told me that the strongest 'traditional' dancers are in Nyanga, and I need to go there if I want

to know more about ‘traditional’ dancers. This recognition as strong dancers is acknowledged and internalised by IAC youth. Thando, one of the members of Imvelaphi Arts Movement, proudly told me “Nyanga is famous for two things. It’s for Zulu and Pantsula dance.”⁵⁸ Including IAC, ‘traditional’ dancers in Nyanga collectively challenge the negative image of youth in townships, often referred to as “moral deviants,” by being compelling in dancing. This transition into the dance group can be understood through Turner’s (1969) tripartite model of ritual: separation, liminality, and aggregation. Youth separate from socially devalued peer cultures such as gangs and substance use, enter a liminal phase marked by intense rehearsals, moral readjustment, and emotional release, and eventually emerge as morally respected figures in the community. Joining IAC, thus functions as an informal initiation into a moral and social order where one’s worth is earned through discipline, cooperation, and aesthetic performance.

6.4 Speaking Up Against Negativity

Besides participation in artistic activity, IAC youth inhabit a “moral ecology” (Swartz, 2010) whereby they need to act according to local notions of morality. While morality is contextual according to space and time, the moral ecology in which IAC youth find themselves overlaps with what is demonstrated in Fokwang (2008)’s ethnography of youth in associational life in Bamenda. He argues that the youth prefer to avoid the disgrace of gossip and reckless behaviour (Fokwang, 2008, p. 106). Similarly, IAC avoid negativity, especially if it will impact the group. An example that elucidates this point is when Andile confronted his older dance partners for their negative behaviours. He initiated reuniting with his past dance partners when he found them asking around or even transgressing for rands and cents for the temporary pleasures of drinking and smoking. He made an effort to shift the focus to something productive:

They [his old dance partners] would say, “Can I have whatever? Can you please give me 50 cents or 2 Rands or whatever to buy cigarettes?” Cause you know, around where we stay, there are people who are smoking cigarette[s], but they don’t have money to buy cigarette[s]. So then they have to ask [for] that money. There are people who are drinking, but they don’t have money to drink. So now they have to ask [for] that money [from] people. So now, I said, like, “No guys, we have skill. Let’s do this, in this way. Let’s reunite again.”⁵⁹

By acknowledging that financial dependence for immediate pleasure is morally wrong, and that there are resources that can be used to generate income, Andile was able to encourage the group to be moral members of the community. Moreover, he kept himself and IAC members from being influenced by these immoral attitudes. Another example is when Andile and Viwe made a collective decision to dismiss two strong dancers from IAC to protect the group from potential disruptions resulting from their negligent and attention-seeking attitudes:

Andile: Now, Yamkela and Sive are not in Izikhaza anymore because of the[ir] behaviour. So they had to leave. It was becoming chaos.

Rise: Did you kick them out?

⁵⁸ Excerpt from a conversation with Thando on September 21, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁵⁹ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

Andile: No, they left. We couldn't handle that anymore... When they meet us, they say, "Why are you so quiet? You don't talk each other? You must do whatever [something more expressive]..." We [Viwe and Andile] only take actions, [rather] than speaking. But they are the literal talker[s]: "I can do this this this and this," and when they are supposed to do that, [clicking his fingers], they don't show up. So, it often happened when we are at the place, or [we were] about to do something, we [were] crushed because [of] our behaviours. Now, it comes to the extent [that] they were ruining whatever that was happening. We will just mess it up because of these people who always want to be there and, like, to be... like, you know when you are young, that you want to be older than me.

Rise: They wanted attention?

Andile: Yeah, attention. He want to be older than me, so they wanted all the attention. But it automatically come[s] to those who are just quiet. But they are very good also in dancing. It is okay that all of us were different. The behaviours became a problem [though]. But they always come and claim, "This is our group too!"

Rise: Even now?

Andile: Yeah. And I have to tell them, "Yeah, we know it's your group. [Then] come with us! Come. Behave with us." Don't ruin everything and spoil everything for everyone.

Rise: Are they still danc[ing] with Abahambeli?

Andile: Yamkela is in [the] Eastern Cape, but Sive dance[s] with Abahambeli. He's there. He's causing problem[s] there. They are growing up, but they are not realising, ey, their behaviours are taking lot of things away from themselves. Not only good things, but it brings bad influence. But they are still there. They are very good.⁶⁰

The above conversation shows how Andile and Viwe prioritised the sustenance of the group over the visibility they could have acquired with the dancers' skills. As much as recognition through quality dancing was important to them, they realised the effect the behaviour would have on the group in the long term. Andile and Viwe followed 'what is right' to become a respectable young collective. The 'wanting to prove I'm older' tendencies shown by Yamkela and Sive come from their desire to dominate the group rather than to collaborate.

Even after the two dancers left, IAC members continued to navigate challenges to maintain their moral ecology. For instance, Siyabulela, the drummer and the oldest member of IAC, made a comment to the younger senior dancers after one of the rehearsals, saying, "You guys are my children,"⁶¹ as he tried to discipline them. While this came from a place of care, it also reflected his attempt to assert authority. The members, including those who are usually expressive and playful, responded with silence and puzzled expressions, contesting Siyabulela's attempt to position himself as

⁶⁰ Excerpt from an interview with Andile on November 20, 2022, in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

⁶¹ Excerpt from a conversation after rehearsal on September 5, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

an authority figure. Instead of reacting as they normally would, the IAC members responded in a way that emphasised their preference for collaboration over hierarchy.

Andile also highlighted the group's discomfort with the phrase, “You know, mos,” which Siyabulela often uses when expressing his thoughts or giving instructions. Andile felt that the phrase implied Siyabulela was positioning himself as a teacher, which was not reflective of their dynamic. Within IAC, the youth consistently recognise actions that fall outside their moral boundaries and respond autonomously to challenge them, regardless of the scale of the issue.

Moral judgments are often complex, and youth sometimes face situations in which their actions conflict with their values. One key moral issue involved commitment and communication. Commitment to rehearsals for the IAC production was sometimes compromised in favour of joining more established dance companies. According to their moral code, it was important to communicate absences or delays, even if these were due to opportunities that offered greater recognition and could potentially enhance the group's social capital. As attendance began to decline, Siyabulela reminded the members to stay humble and focus on the smaller, everyday tasks, saying, “We should remember where we come from,” instead of only chasing individual upward mobility.

IAC youth also value a positive atmosphere. In a moment of production turmoil, Siyabulela made an aggressive remark, implicitly fostering exclusion within the group. When rehearsal attendance got inconsistent and the performance neared, he said frustratedly, “Those who want to be part of this production can just come, and those who don't can leave.”⁶² Viwe intervened promptly, affirming, “We don't want negative energy here,” redirecting the discourse towards problem-solving endeavours. As much as the commitment to a production they sign up for is an important part of their moral ecology, talking negatively about members was seen as wrong. Although Viwe was in a difficult position insofar as being the director of the production contradicted with his low attendance, he was committed to preserve the atmosphere of positivity and collaboration within the group.

I have demonstrated how IAC youth autonomously contest various levels of immorality they encounter in and outside of rehearsals and how that translates to fighting against social ills. Their aim to gain income and recognition through dance can sometimes be in conflict with their notion of morality, and it is within their actions that they prove themselves as moral vanguards. They also experience situations where multiple moral criteria conflict with one another, but they make active decisions as to what is most ‘right’ in a specific space and time. Turner's (1969) analysis of the Khita initiation rituals among the Ndembu where boys undergo seclusion, moral teaching, and symbolic transformation, offers a helpful analogy. IAC's space operates in a similar way as a gendered and moral zone of transformation, where young men, in particular, are expected to shed “negative energies” such as peer pressure, emotional frustration, or desires for instant gratification. Through discipline, embodied practice, and peer monitoring, they reshape themselves as focused, future-oriented actors with long-term civic goals (pp. 265-266). Within their attempt to gain recognition through artistic practices, they also try to be recognised as respectable, accomplished social adults.

6.5 Conveying Moral Messages

Besides maintaining morality within the group, IAC youth also convey moral messages through performances that are relevant and educational to the community. This is shown in IAC's independent production *Uhambo Lwam*. It is an hour performance narrated through dance, drama, and

⁶² Excerpt from a conversation after a rehearsal on October 5, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town

music. The story is set during the time of labour migration and narrated around a young man's journey. Viwe scripted the following story:

A young Xhosa man called Sizwe who stays with his Zulu wife in Kwilali, a village in the Eastern Cape, faces financial struggle and decides to work in a mine in Johannesburg to sustain life and to raise his unborn child. Surviving a harsh city life and intensive labour, Sizwe starts to go to taverns to let go of the tiredness by drinking and dancing. Absorbed in the city life, Sizwe starts to forget about his wife and the unborn child, leaving them to suffer from scarce resources and neighbour's rumours. One day, after months of repeated labour and nightlife, Sizwe's friend visits him and reminds him of the initial purpose of his journey, making him realise the important thing in his life. Sizwe makes his way home and apologizes to his wife for what he had done, asking for her and her family's forgiveness. After long interfamilial discussions, the wife and her family forgive Sizwe, and two families are reunited to celebrate the official wedding and the arrival of their child.⁶³

Sizwe's story parallels the experience of many South African black men who experienced migrant labour. Although the context is historical, the economic struggle, the temptation of nightlife, and the challenge of familial relationships are shared in young men's modern life. Gaining the audience's sympathies, Viwe attempted to convey some moral lessons such as to prioritise family responsibilities, to be loyal to God and ancestors, to reflect on actions, and to reconcile. All of these ideas speak to and from youth, shaping their notions of morality

It is not only through the performance as a final product, but also through the collective creation process that IAC members actively shape and reshape morality. Although the script was written by Viwe and the production directed by Viwe and Sibuy, the creation process was highly collaborative. Actors were given the freedom to interpret situations and explore expressions through their characters. For instance, Sibuy encouraged Zkhona, who played Sizwe's wife, Nomazwe, by saying, "What I am trying to say now is that it's your time to play around with it."⁶⁴ This was particularly evident in the scene in which Sizwe returns home to apologise to Nomazwe in the presence of their family. Sibuy guided Zkhona and the other actors playing family members by posing questions that helped them consider Nomazwe's emotions after experiencing her husband's betrayal:

So, when we get there, [it] is then that the production [is] getting to the climax, the drama that is going to unfold between Sizwe, Nomazwe and the family when you go through those questions: where have you been the whole time? You promised to write letters and [send] money. What about the baby? The people who are gossiping about me? And he on the side is trying to explain himself on some, "No, babe this and that happened." Now, how is the Zulu family responding to this? Their daughter has been treated like a dog by those Xhosa people, they are making her their slave. The content of the production is basically there.⁶⁵

⁶³ Summary of Viwe's script explained by him and demonstrated by Iziqhaza members in rehearsals, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town

⁶⁴ Excerpt from conversation during a rehearsal with Sibuy on October 28, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁶⁵ Excerpt from conversation during a rehearsal with Sibuy on October 28, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

Through considering how to deliver movements, words, and sounds to the story, IAC youth explore moral issues in a structured and engaging way, processing and internalising moral lessons (Bruner, 1991).

6.6 Educating Community through Performing Arts

IAC youth do not only dance for their own economic, social, and psychological benefit, but they also recruit other youth, creating a larger impact. They use their skill to provide the same opportunities for younger generations, equipping them with skills through which they can actualise their aspirations. About one third of senior members are involved in teaching dance classes in organisations or institutions with which they are affiliated outside IAC. For example, Wandile and Okuhle teach dance two times a week at a public school in Nyanga after their training at BABA YAYA. Sam gets a chance to teach dance class through SboNdaba Dance Academy as part of their outreach programme. Siyabulela has volunteered to teach dance and music as well as to facilitate awareness sessions since he finished Matric. The following conversation with Siyabulela indicates how his intention to teach younger people has driven him to continue volunteering even there is no monetary reward:

Siyabulela: There was a community service where I stay, where you can go and volunteer. And you go and help kids with homework, dance, or play at the [play]ground.

Rise: When was it?

Siyabulela: After Matric.

Rise: Matric. Oh, so in Matric, you weren't really involved in dance?

Siyabulela: ...I was not doing only dance. I was doing drama, music, dance, and so and so. So I was doing Performing Arts at the time. I was in the group of youth where they create different stories, and then we go and perform shows. So we were not just doing one thing. we were doing drama, music, dance, and so and so. So I was exposed to that background. So that group died.

Rise: Was it like a afterschool programme?

Siyabulela: Yeah, it was an afterschool [programme] where we meet after school at half past three until six o'clock.

Rise: Okay, so like Iziquhaza?

Siyabulela: Like this, yeah. So it was a nice [thing] then. So then, I met the lady called Abana. She told me she want to open an organisation. It's like a youth development [programme]. I said, "You know what? Yes, open this this, let's start [to] go to different schools and tell them that we want [to] open this youth development [programme]." So, we went to different schools in Gugulethu and Nyanga.

Rise: So you were, like.. teaching [on the side]?

Siyabulela: Yeah. So, it was like a[n] afterschool programme. Yebo. Which, say, it's a one year programme, they will teach you, dance, music. Yeah, we've got different group[s]. Then we've got awareness, where we talk about different topics that affect us as youth. It's Monday [and] Tuesday performing arts and then Friday is awareness day.⁶⁶

Similarly, Sibulo and Thando, who have more experience in drama, teach drama and music at schools in Nyanga on a contract basis. Regardless of the type of teaching—whether it is paid position or not—youth genuinely have the desire to pass on their knowledge to younger generation so they can make do in the community in the future. By actively choosing to educate students in dance, music, or drama, Nyanga youth attempt to be renowned for their contribution to society. Group membership in IAC is not only about performance but about scripting a new identity. Drawing on Turner's (1967) ritual theory, we can see this identity as both scripted through routines, discipline, and peer accountability, and evolving. These processes collectively affirm youth as “social adults,” respected not only for their talent but also for their responsibility, mentorship, and vision.

6.7 Creating a Dancing Ecosystem: Keeping the Society Busy

The way youth gain dignity is not solely by engaging in artistic and cultural practices, but also by creating an environment where youth can commit. Viwe expresses the motivation to start and continue the group despite his busy schedule:

What I know is [that] I'm trying all my best to change the society. Like, some of the people are experiencing things in life. Like, they drop out of school. Like, some of the people got raped. When I grew up, I was in a gang group, and I was fighting with [the] other gang. So now, I decided, “No, man, this is not a life. This is not a life.” And then, I decided to make myself busy out of the street, [through] dance. And then, while I am doing dance, I decided, now let me share my story [with] other people. Then I decided that, “Let's go [make] something that's gonna keep the society busy.” Cause here in Nyanga, it [has] one of the highest criminal rate[s] in Africa. So now, I decided to form a group, doing dance and music and what what.⁶⁷

Viwe's remark indicates that the environment to engage in arts and culture can get young people away from mischievous actions. Andile's episode also involves picking up kids from the street and teaching them dance to equip them with skills to get by and to give them a sense of belonging. Including Viwe and Andile, many of IAC members were picked up by youth who were part of a group engaging in dance, music, or theatre as their entrance to alternative ways to earn respect and dignity. A few years ago, Viwe formed a junior group of IAC, which has separate sessions, organised by Siyabulela, with children under fifteen years old. By inviting kids to the practice of dancing, they maintain the dancing ecosystem in townships and keep young people busy. By engaging in significant civic activities like this and adopting mature practices, these young people establish themselves as key

⁶⁶ Excerpt from an interview with Siyabulela on November 17, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

⁶⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Viwe on November 24, 2022, in Nyanga, Cape Town.

figures who address community issues. This involvement helps them to be considered as credible political actors and respected members of society (Fokwang, 2023).

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter explored young people's search for recognition through engaging in morality through various activities of dancing. Participation in dancing itself forms a sense of morality that does not conform to the dominant idea of Nyanga youth as morally deviant. In dancing at IAC, youth attempt to avoid negative acts or potentially negative impacts, shaping and sustaining moral rules through both practice and production. By opening the junior class at IAC and inviting young kids on the street to join, IAC youth do not only provide social and emotional refuge, but also update the ecosystem of dancing for more generations to benefit. Through this participation in the community, IAC youth are trying to establish themselves as accomplished social adults (Fokwang, 2023).

Framed as a ritual process (Turner, 1969), the journey through IAC begins with separation from harmful environments, passes through a liminal space of shared hardship, emotional discipline, and aesthetic labor, and results in their being absorbed into a morally upright and civically engaged youth collective. This reflects Turner's account of initiation and transformation—where bodily practices and social relationships work together to forge new moral beings. In this way, IAC functions not just as a dance group but as an informal institution of moral education, spiritual refreshment, and community care.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This ethnographic study examined the experiences of young black South Africans seeking recognition through participation in ‘traditional’ dance. Based on six months of research with a group of young dancers in Nyanga, Cape Town, the study investigated how these youth strategically participate in ‘traditional’ dance to become social adults (Fokwang, 2023) and gain acknowledgment from their families, friends, community, and elders. I approached the youth in Nyanga not as passive recipients of a precarious environment, but as autonomous agents actively navigating multiple identities and reshaping social norms. By situating ‘tradition’ as fluid and contested, I explored how ‘traditional’ dance is understood and utilised by my participants.

Participating in their daily evening rehearsals at the community centre allowed me to immerse myself in their ways of being, thinking, and doing (Roberts, 2004, p. 134). Dancing alongside them not only granted me the credibility to ask questions and build rapport (Hughes-Freeland, 2008, p. 5), but also enabled me to acquire “corporeal cultural knowledge” (Sklar, 1994) to comprehend the language expressed through movement. Although the study predominantly took place within the dance space, every observation, interaction, conversation, and extended dialogue revealed the context in which they dance, smile, and sometimes “cry.”

In the first chapter, I unpacked the experiences of youth in Nyanga, illustrating how their dance-centered lives coexist with uncertainty. This analysis emphasised the critical importance of recognition in facilitating their transition from marginalisation to acknowledged social adulthood. Through their narratives, it became evident that recognition is not just an aspiration, but is also an essential resource for their development. By introducing the concept of uneven distribution of precarity (Butler, 2012, pp. 3-4)—shaped by colonialism, Apartheid, and neoliberalism—I demonstrated how issues like absent fathers, school dropouts, unemployment, familial debt, power abuse, alcoholism, and violence influence their lives. These youth leverage dance not merely as an art form, but as a vital strategy for survival and social mobility. Their participation in dance deeply intertwines with their quest for dignity and recognition, allowing them to claim visibility and affirm their humanity in a context marked by economic and social instability.

In the second chapter, I explored how youth strategically engage in ‘traditional’ dance to secure financial resources, enabling them to gain recognition as capable social adults. I examined the artistic, economic, spiritual, cultural, and organisational strategies employed by Xhosa youth at Iziquhaza Art Combination, focusing on their intentional identity formation and representation as ‘Zulu dancers.’ In navigating the competitive entertainment and tourism sectors, they continuously adjust their performances based on market demands while embodying “energy” as a form of cultural capital to meet the constructed expectations of “dynamic,” “energetic,” and “mesmerising” Zulu dancers (Scarlett Entertainment, 2024). In this exploitative industry, they negotiate performance rewards by adjusting non-monetary elements, such as the number of dancers or the length of performances. In order to accommodate limited preparation time and resources for “gigs,” they draw on embodied knowledge to navigate challenges while maintaining professional standards. Their participation in Zulu dance is deliberate, allowing them to protect their Xhosa spirituality. While they avoid rigid adherence to a strict interpretation of Zulu dance, they create space to integrate elements relevant to their identity, thus gaining creative control over their representation (Meintjes, 2017, p. 234). This strategy enables them to present themselves as Zulu performers while incorporating Xhosa dance elements, fostering a sense of ownership and pride.

Additionally, to enhance their cultural and social capital, they intentionally maintain mobility across various dance groups. This mobility enables IAC to accumulate social and cultural resources, leading to more opportunities for performances and access to diverse techniques that enhance their artistry. By strategically identifying when and how to implement these tactics, IAC youth actively navigate the challenges of everyday life in townships and the competitive entertainment industry.

In the third chapter, I demonstrated the use of dance as a vital means of coping with daily challenges while asserting their identities as social adults (Chabal, 2009). Beyond individual efforts to attend rehearsals, their collective participation—marked by embrace, verbal encouragement, respect among genders, and the exclusion of negativity—creates a safe, supportive environment where youth can experience a sense of being and belonging. The execution of Zulu dance, particularly the ability to reach “isigqi” during solo performances (Meintjes, 2004), provides male dancers with a pathway to manhood. Collaboration with the drummer enhances their presence, facilitating the release of emotions that are often trapped in their minds. Through this process, youth acquire embodied knowledge that allows them to resonate with the music, enabling emotional expression while embracing vulnerability. The establishment of rules that govern the dance space empowers youth to fully engage in rehearsals, affirming their dignity as human beings. This participation becomes fundamental for young people who face multiple expectations to be regarded as accomplished social adults.

In the last chapter, I revealed how young people seek recognition through strategic participation in moral engagement as a member of a dance group. While their primary motivations for dancing include mental health, upward mobility, and financial gain, they also aspire to be accepted as change-makers in their community. They combat social ills by adhering to local notions of morality and actively maintaining them (Hokwang, 2023). This chapter described their moral environment as a “moral ecology” (Swartz, 2010), encompassing actions like speaking out against negativity, sustaining the dance ecosystem, recruiting younger participants, and conveying moral messages through performances. Through these efforts, youth aim to transform their community of Nyanga, often labelled as “troubled.” This chapter provided evidence of how Nyanga youth strive to be recognised as significant actors in improving their community (Fuh, 2012), asserting their space and stake in society.

By synthesising these findings and exploring the precarity faced by Nyanga youth, it was demonstrated that the youth at Iziquhaza Art Combination actively participate in ‘traditional’ dance. Their agency allows them to be identified as successful. This creative avenue empowers them to assert their identities, navigate societal expectations, and foster a sense of belonging within their community. This study intricately weaves together the interconnected fields of youth, ‘traditional’ dance, recognition, and precarity, contributing a vital perspective to the literature on youth as agents of social mobilisation.

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