

PANTSULA, THROUGH THE EYES OF MICHAEL MOLOI, VIDEO STILL, TV YABANTU

# DANCE CALL-AND-RESPONSE ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

Nuel Nonso (Nigerian-born musician now based in NZ) gives his insights on the flow of dance influences between the cultures of Africa and the US; from shoki to Hip Hop.

BY NUEL NONSO

I remember watching Missy Elliott's WTF (Where They From) for the first time and grinning that I-see-you grin when, about two and a half minutes in, they bust the shoki move. Both shoki and I are from Nigeria.

I'd felt this excitement before. Growing up in South-eastern Nigeria, watching African Americans on *Soul Train* or any black people dancing on western TV, it was not uncommon for someone onscreen to move in a way so familiar that they reminded me of an extended family member, a neighbour, or someone at school. You could chalk that up to the fact that they were black and so was I, but the flaw of that explanation would be its simplicity.

There are many Nigerian ethnicities whose traditional dances do not bear the slightest resemblance to me or my Igbo people. In fact, despite both my parents being Igbo, the traditional dances of their subcultures are so distinct, at least to the insider, one could be English and the other

Chinese. If we're so different even within our own borders, why does my Igbo West African body seem to know just what to do when it hears African American or Caribbean rhythms? Is it mutual simply because of a coincidence of blackness? Or because we have gone on to consciously collaborate in shaping each other's contemporary popular cultures?

The ships that departed those painful-to-recall centuries ago from the Bight of Biafra, the Gold Coast and all other slave trade ports, carried away with them slices of African culture into what would be the grimmest unknown. Those ill-fated, fettered ancestors carried across the ocean mere snippets of who they were before their exile; snippets because one is but a part of a whole - community. It's like John Mbiti said,

"I AM BECAUSE WE ARE, AND SINCE WE ARE, THEREFORE I AM".

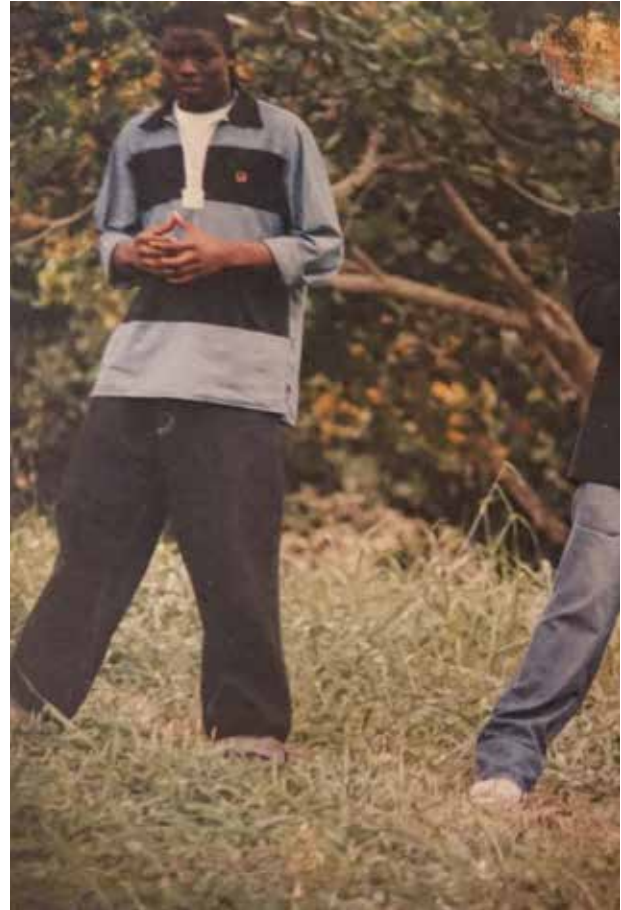
Those stowaway cultures of music and dance, and the trauma of their indefinite exile would continue to be passed on (if the argument for inherited trauma is anything to go by) like a giant electric wave and remembered for generations to come, with innovation filling the gaps where some had fallen, or been too broken to pass it on. Generations after, those snippets had melded and morphed into new art forms in their own right, and with black people able to migrate voluntarily, the cultural call-and-response began.

Music and dance in their evolved state crossed the Atlantic, riding BBC and VoA radio waves, in phonographs and, eventually, on black and white TV screens. Harry Belafonte, Lord Kitchener, Mighty Sparrow and calypso; Chubby Checker and the twist; The Five Du-Tones and the tail feather; James Brown, Michael Jackson - they all came pouring back home to motherland, bringing with them new yet familiar dances. Artists like Fela Kuti responded, taking Afrobeat to the west in the 70s. And it was not a Fela performance without the kalakuta queens there to dance the fire dance.

Hip Hop kicked global popular culture in the crotch and everything changed. Fashion, language, socialisation and, of course, dance - all went through the same phases of reeling and resisting; then yielding and monetising Hip Hop culture. I still have embarrassing photos of me in my baggy jeans like all other 80s babies. Copying African American slang, twang and fashion - the life forces of Hip Hop, remains a daunting chore in many parts of the globe.

Hip Hop dance on the other hand, has been much easier to pull off for many across the Atlantic from the US, largely due to familiar patterns we see in the movement. For example, the Igbo Nkpòkìtì acrobatic dance provided reference for Hip Hop routines involving daredevil flips and complex formations. The Yoruba Bata dance did the same thing for the isolation and popping techniques that are common in Hip Hop.

When The Electric Boogaloos (the crew) shared their art in the 70s, their synchronised popping and locking already had distant relatives in Pantsula, a southern African dance from the 50s which involves energetic, synchronised footwork with lots of dramatic pauses. Kwaito emerged in the 90s from southern Africa as well, drawing heavily from Pantsula and Hip Hop. A decade later, Tofo Tofo, a Mozambican dance group, taught Beyoncé a blend of Pantsula and Kwaito for her *Run The World* music video - talk about cultural influence coming full circle.



NUEL NONSO IN THE 1980'S

**BEFORE THE 'JAMAICAN DUTTY WINE' AND THE 'BUTTERFLY' OF THE 90S, THERE HAD LONG BEEN HIP ROLLS IN MAKOSSA, MAKOLUNGU AND MAPOUKA IN PLACES LIKE CAMEROON AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO.**

Traditional African or Caribbean dances have not stayed quite the same since Hip Hop happened; neither has Hip Hop since exposure to dancehall and Afrobeats. This palimpsest of call-and-response predates the internet platform on which it currently thrives.

A good snapshot of where we are now is the choreography in Childish Gambino's *This Is America*, which captures dance fads from different black communities that have influenced one another over the years. Quite like the concept of that video, our collaborative dance culture has always been there in the background and foreground amidst all the chaos that is history.

Perhaps it's more like a party that might not have been great to begin with, but eventually gets to the part where people form a cheering circle and take turns to dance in the middle, and for a while, nothing else seems to matter. Nothing. Just the rhythm and the dance. ■