

Beyond the Dance: a Look at *Mbende (Jerusarema)*  
Traditional Dance in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional dance occupies a pivotal place in the economic, political and socio-cultural system in African traditional society. This role survives to the present day manifested in several performances that have stood the test of time and alien influences. Despite the onslaught of colonialism, Christianity and westernization, traditional dances have survived to this day, albeit with modifications. *Mbende / Jerusarema* in Zimbabwe is one dance that has withstood the test of time and western influence. It is an important cultural expression which in 2005 was listed on the UNESCO *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible heritage of humanity* list, making it one of the few African cultural expressions accorded such recognition. This paper looks into the history of the dance, the material culture and the skills and know-how associated with the unique performance. Observations in this paper were inspired by the research carried out by the committee formed to prepare a nomination file for the *Mbende* dance to the UNESCO masterpieces list in 2003, of which I was a member.

## Introduction

In many cultures of the world, dance occupies an important role in the lives of the people. In Zimbabwe, traditional dances and performances such as *Jerusarema* are still important living traditions practiced in many contexts and still revered by the local communities. These numerous traditional dances are

performed for entertainment, for ritual purposes, at festivals and for commemoration and celebration. The widely accepted explanation of the origins of *Jerusarema* is that it was performed as a war dance and diversionary tactic by the Shona during military encounters (Welsh-Asante, 2000a, 2000b). Currently, *Jerusarema* is performed on all festival occasions such as weddings,

celebrations, recreational competitions, funerals and political gatherings.

*Mbende* features as one of the most outstanding cultural expressions that are still practiced by the Zezuru people living in the Murehwa district in the Masholand East province of Zimbabwe. The dance has been passed down through many generations and remains one of the most important traditional performances in contemporary Zimbabwe. Threatened by colonial administrators, missionaries and westernisation, the dance has managed to survive and continues to be embedded in the social, political and cultural fabric of Shona society. *Mbende* features as one of the most outstanding cultural traditions that is still practiced by the Zezuru people living in the Murehwa district in the Masholand East province in Zimbabwe. Because of its importance, the dance is no longer restricted to the communities in Murehwa but has been adopted by other Shona and non-Shona groups, urban-based dance clubs and traditional performing groups, for tourists, political gatherings and other social events. Its evolution as a cultural expression has led to various changes. The drum, rattles and whistles, which used to

accompany the dance, have been replaced successively by poor quality modern instruments, contributing to the detriment of the *Mbende* dance. As the context within which the dance is performed changes, so do other important aspects, such as the traditional knowledge and skills, messages and material culture associated with the practice.

## Description of the Dance

The dance is characterised by sensual, acrobatic waist-shaking and hip movements by women in unison with men, both dancers ending with energetic thrusts of the pelvis directed towards each other, thereby creating exhilaration amongst the audience. It is such movements which made the dance unpopular among the missionaries who interpreted them as sexually explicit and suggestive. The music is performed by one master drummer, well supported by clappers, rattles, and costumes. (See Fig 1 and 2) The drumming, singing, clapping and rattle playing produce a polyrhythmic sound that drives the dance movements.

There are two foci of activity during the dance - the line of musicians who are constantly playing the

**Figure 1**  
*Jerusarema* dancers, drummer and musicians

**Figure 2**  
*Jerusarema* dance movements



rhythms, and the group of women and men who take turns to dance.

The dance can also be illuminated by Asante's (1985) observation of *Jerusarema* as an 'image dance' in the sense that it imitates an animal. However, in the case of *mbende* (mouse/mole), the purpose is not exclusively to imitate the mouse, but instead to use the mouse as a symbol of quickness, fertility, sexuality and family. While it projects the image and qualities of a mouse, there is little actual mimicking or caricaturing of a mouse. However, in the course of the dance, the men often crouch while jerking both arms and vigorously kicking the ground with the right leg in imitation of a burrowing mole kicking soil to the surface.

## Struggle and Survival of *Mbende*

The uniqueness of *Jerusarema* and its dramatic impact and meaning, made it liable to various interpretations and this continues to the present day. The purpose and meaning of the dance is continually misunderstood; it is condemned for being too seductive and erotic and its immense popularity within the community was seen as a threat to the Christian Church's attempts to attract followers. In the urban metropolis the dance has been commercialised and new distorted versions have emerged that are also much criticised. Recently, the dance has been manipulated and adapted by the post-colonial administration seeking to create an 'acceptable' form for use during state political occasions.

Both as a form of cultural expression and as a symbol of the struggle for survival - and ultimately for freedom - through a turbulent history, the *Mbende* traditional dance now popularly known by its Christian name, *Jerusarema*, is unique not only for the people in Murehwa, but for the whole nation, as it features as a prominent performance at all national functions. It is widely believed that the traditional name of *Jerusarema* was *Mbende*, with the former being a biblical derivative from the holy city of Jerusalem in Israel, supposedly to make the dance more acceptable to Christian missionaries. *Jerusarema* continues to be practiced in both the rural and urban districts. Numerous *Jerusarema* dance clubs proliferate in Murehwa and beyond and the dance continues to feature on festive occasions, at funerals, political rallies and weddings, while urban based dance clubs list *Jerusarema* as one of their key performances.

There are many versions of the origins of the dance

and its significance in the pre-colonial era, that is, the period before white settlement in the 1890s. Some say it symbolised fertility, sexuality and family. Others associate it with war, especially during the military raids by the Ndebele warriors on parts of Mashonaland during the Mfecane wars of the 1830s in southern Africa (Welsh-Asante, 2000a). According to this account, the dance was used as a diversionary tactic. The sensual and vigorous dance movements were used to divert the attention of the enemy before battle. Because of the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural practices, it is always difficult to ascertain the original form and purpose of such cultural performances which often manifest spatio-temporal variations. Nonetheless *Mbende's* curious name reveals much about its vicissitudes over the centuries.

The white missionaries saw *Jerusarema* as licentious, lustful, indecent and provocative, and collaborated with the Native Commissioners to ban *Jerusarema* which in their view was a hindrance to conversion of the locals to Christianity. Due to its prominence it also angered the early white settlers who were faced with the arduous task of recruiting African labour for the farms and the mines.

Writing in his award winning novel, *Ancestors*, Chenjerai Hove (1996) an acclaimed Zimbabwean writer, presents a local commenting on how *Jerusarema* was banned thus:

*When 'Jerusarema' came, even the men who had wanted to avoid annoying the white man had to abandon all plans to go to Jo'burg [Johannesburg] to work and raise taxes for the white man. They refused and fought back when the white man came to capture them to put them to work on the roads and in the mines. Some went to hide in the mountains and hills during the day and came out at night to dance 'Jerusarema' with the women and men of the village. So the white man sat down one day and said: this dance is another problem. We must stop it. The dance gives too much pride to these men who refuse to work in our mines and on our roads. We must stop it forever. Never to be danced again. Never again to hear the songs which start this dance. Death to anyone who sings the songs. Death to anyone who dances the dance. That is how 'Jerusarema' was killed. We only hear of it in distant parts these days (Hove 1996: 128-29).*

Owing to such pressures *Jerusarema* was banned as early as 1910. It was this banning which necessitated the change of name to make it more acceptable. On the

other hand, the changing lifestyles caused by urbanization also altered the way it was performed. It seems that while certain performers modified the dance to please the white settlers by taking away those movements perceived to be unacceptable, another change seen by the local community as a distortion was taking place in the towns. Due to increasing urbanization from the 1920s onwards, *Jerusarema* was often performed for recreation in the township bars and beer halls. Welsh-Asante (2000a), argues that in this environment, the dance evolved into a dance that reflected the despair of a people dominated by colonial rule. She argues that the joy of dancing was contrasted with the despair of subjugation, and that the dance clubs spoiled the decency and meaning of a dance which was supposed to be ceremonial, by putting more emphasis on exaggerated sexual innuendo. While it is difficult to assess the impact of urban based *Jerusarema* performances on the performance of the dance elsewhere, one can agree with Welsh-Asante that such distortions vulgarised the dance. These urban based performances in dancing clubs seem to have shaped how *Jerusarema* was perceived in urban settings in the period after independence (post 1980).

The community in Murehwa continues to bemoan these exaggerations and distortions of the dance which have recently been made worse by some groups who perform mainly in concerts and for tourists. Two of the most prominent performing groups in Zimbabwe, 'Hohodza' and 'Inkululeko Yabatsha School of Arts' (IYASA) seem to perpetuate these misrepresentations. On their websites and promotional material they both list *Jerusarema* as one of their dances and describe it as:

*A dance performed at night by men and women of marrying age. It is performed in pairs any time of the year. The dance is basically an exhibition of sexual prowess. The women show their flexibility while the men show their strength. Individual men and women boast of their sexual prowess and challenge each other to a "contest". They then dance the sexual encounter and, more often than not, the men are defeated by their mates and they stagger away, ashamed of themselves (Hohodza webpage, 2007).*

Despite the distortions and changes, good and bad, that have happened, the dance continues to have a special role in the present community and has assumed

an influence that transcends the boundaries of the area from which it originates. Because of its popularity, *Mbende* drumming was selected as the introduction and signature tune for all radio and television news bulletins by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) at the attainment of independence in 1980. Such was its influence that a public outcry erupted after ZBC replaced the *Jerusarema* tune in 2000 and the national broadcaster was forced by public pressure to reinstate the tune. During the struggle for independence from the British settlers in the 1970s, the dance acted not just as a cohesive force among members of the community but also as an important conduit between the freedom fighters and the masses. The fighters, who largely employed guerrilla tactics, would disguise themselves and attend dance performances, giving them the opportunity to gather intelligence information and material support from the communities. In the period after independence this politicisation of the dance continued, with the dance featuring at political rallies and state functions. Its current popularity, therefore, does not merely emanate from its social and cultural uses but also from its adopted political function.

In 2005, *Mbende* was among the 43 cultural expressions from around the globe that were proclaimed as *masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity* acknowledging the dance as a crucial living cultural heritage that is fragile and perishable, but essential for the cultural identity of the community, and one which represents an outstanding example of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, testifying to the world's cultural diversity and richness. *Mbende* was recognised among some of the best living traditions from around the globe. Other notable performances listed from the Southern African region include the *Makishi* masquerade from Zambia, the *Vimbuza* healing dance from Malawi and *Gule Wamkulu* (Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique). While the dance was nominated for the UNESCO list in 2005, Douglas Vambe, the renowned master drummer, was entered for the 2006 UNESCO cultural music heritage competition, where his drumming will compete with other traditional musical performances from around the world. Vambe was one of the chief informants during the compilation process for the UNESCO candidature file for the nomination of *Mbende*. The compilation process involved the wider community; stakeholder participants included dance clubs, chiefs, spirit mediums and the local leadership.





**Figure 3**  
Examples of *Jerusarema* material culture

### Material Culture Associated with *Mbende*

Though dance movements may be a skill and invaluable intangible phenomena, *Mbende* also embodies a rich material culture. The unique dance movements give the dance its character, but it is the material culture that gives the dance its unique identity. The diversity of objects it uses from the natural environment re-inforces the diversity of the relationship of man and nature.

Describing the role of material culture in musical traditions (Dournon:1981) notes that a musical instrument cannot be limited to the mere production of sounds. Traditional music and instruments convey the deepest cultural, spiritual and aesthetic values of civilisation, transmitting knowledge from many spheres. Material culture, besides having utility value, has always been used as an identity marker to establish uniqueness among groups. *Mbende* dance and its salient material culture are connected to the local people's history and experiences, culture and identity.

Two categories of material objects constitute the majority of objects used by the dancers; these are costumes and musical instruments. A variety of musical instruments and dancing costumes constitute the most dominant tangible aspect of *Jerusarema*. These are material objects exclusively identified with the dance. It is such objects - among other aspects of the dance - that gives it its unique character and distinguishes it from other performances. The material objects serve utilitarian and symbolic purposes and are a manifestation of creativity and craftsmanship within the practicing communities that demonstrates the relationship between the dance and its environment. A study of the objects provides a lot of information demonstrating nostalgia, complex skills, artistic expression and human/nature relationships as well as the continuity and change of the performance.

The major aspects of *Mbende* material culture are the musical instruments. In its setting, a *Mbende* musical instrument becomes imbued, both as an object and as an instrument, with multiple and varied meanings. *Mbende* musical instruments are aesthetically pleasing both to the ear and to the eye. Through an examination of the music, the performance contexts and the instrument itself, it was apparent what the instruments mean to the people who make and play them.

The drum, *mutumba*, is the most conspicuous instrument. Owing to its size it is made out of the *mutiti* tree (*erythrina abyssinia*) or the *mutsvanzwa* tree (*pseudolanchnostylis maprouneifolia*). This is a rare but well protected indigenous tree chosen for the good quality of the wood, its strength and hardness and the superb resonance qualities. In many parts of Africa the sound and the rhythm of the drum expresses the mood of the people. The drum is one traditional musical instrument that is widely used all over Africa. [See figure 3] *Mbende* is characterised by its vibrant drumming and the *Mbende* drum occupies a central role in the dance sequence. So important was the drum that, according to oral information, every chief and village head was expected to keep a pair of drums that would be made available on request to villagers, making the chief an important custodian and protector of the performance.

Associated with drums are the intricate skills of drumming performed by renowned and well trained master drummers. Learning the art of drumming and the dance movements is not an easy activity. It can take up to 25 years of apprenticeship before one becomes a master-drummer or dancer. The art of drumming requires intricate skills, strength and mental alertness. The drummer must always be attentive to everything that is

happening in the dance arena, and when necessary is also the dance instructor. The common practice is that men do drumming while women use rattles and whistles. The *Jerusarema* drumming is rhythmic and considered to have a distinctive 'calling' effect which naturally draws the attention of whoever hears it. Usually two drums are used, though skilled master-drummers can use more drums simultaneously.

Other musical instruments used are wooden clappers (*maja/manja*) which accompany the singing and drumming to give a well-coordinated rhythm. Hard wood trees like the *mutara* tree (*gardenia spatuliflora*) are chosen for their strength. This is required to withstand the impact of constant clapping on the wood. The rhythmic clapping by clappers makes the whole experience thrilling, and excellent skill, physique and mental alertness are required for men to coordinate themselves between the roles of vocal humming, dancing and clapping. Traditionally, rattles made from gourd, and whistles made out of reed, were shaken and blown by women. Clubs currently use modern versions - rattles are made out of metal, plastic or fibreglass while commercially made plastic whistles are preferred.

The second major category of *Mbende* material objects are the dancing costumes (See Fig). Traditionally these were made out of animal skins, but due to the influence of western dress these have been modified and today's dancers mostly use textile costumes in combination with animal skin. The materials used and the structure of the costumes have an aesthetic appeal and enhance the dance movements. The *mbikiza/madhumbu* made of thin stripes of flexible animal skin complement the dance movements and have considerable sensual appeal for spectators. The waist shaking and hip thrusting movements by the women were enhanced by the wearing of flexible animal skin skirts. These were made from the skins of leopards, monkeys, cheetahs and wild cats whose leather is flexible, comfortable to wear and easy to work. The skins of other domestic animals like cattle, goats and sheep are sometimes used but the quality of these garments is much poorer than that of those made from wild animal skins.

The alterations in the objects associated with the dance also affect the continuity of traditional knowledge and skills and the associated environmental knowledge. The knowledge of craftsmanship and construction and conservation of traditional instruments and costumes has

been adversely affected. As fewer and fewer people use traditional drums and other instruments, the production of traditional instruments declines as they are replaced by easy-to-make, poor quality, modern substitutes. For example, as performers discard traditional costumes, their manufacture also declines and so does the know-how of traditional garment makers. The production of traditional costumes survived on good hunting practices and skills, the art of processing animal skins and constructing them into appropriate, comfortable, aesthetically appealing clothing. All this traditional expertise is under threat as the dancers opt for easy-to-buy, cheap, textile substitutes. The preservation of the performance therefore should not focus on the performance alone, but incorporate the various artifacts, skills and know-how associated with the dance. It is such things which guarantee the integrity and authenticity of this unique and important performance.

## Conclusion

Traditional dance as a form of cultural expression continues to occupy a prominent position in many African societies. In spite of pressures, some traditional dances have survived and continue to show resilience. *Mbende* continues to occupy an important position not only in the local area from which it originates, but it has also grown to be a significant national expression exhibiting many qualities worthy of promotion and preservation. The unique dance movements, the cultural significance of the dance in the wider society, the objects it uses and the skills and craftsmanship needed to make them, all form an important intangible heritage. The dance itself continues to be negatively affected by outside influences, hence the urgent need for the preservation of those *Mbende* cultural practice closest to its original form. More importantly, promoting *Mbende* activities will re-establish the dance in society and ensure its continued existence. The nomination of the dance as a UNESCO masterpiece will definitely enhance the preservation of this important aspect of intangible heritage in Zimbabwe by providing the necessary resources and expertise. 🇳🇿

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