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# National Erotica

## The Politics of “Traditional” Dance in Tanzania

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*Laura Edmondson*

The stubborn persistence of the “primitive” and “erotic” African stereotype provides rich terrain for ongoing explorations and interrogations. “[T]he stereotype,” Homi K. Bhabha declares, “is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (1994:66). Bhabha’s concept has proven immensely useful as a means of excavating the anxiety that underlies the perpetuation of the “duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African” (66). This postcolonial framework, however, does not account for the proliferation of cultural stereotypes in the domain of African popular culture, where the colonial gaze presumably does not need to be affirmed. In my first encounter with Tanzanian “traditional” dance in 1996, I was immediately faced with such stereotypes, even though I was exploring urban popular culture in Dar es Salaam instead of tourist performance “on safari” in the Serengeti plains. Despite my own anxiety to question and deconstruct these initial images, the stereotypes seemed at first impervious to theoretical tools.

This encounter occurred in a bar called Vijana Social Hall located in Dar es Salaam, the commercial center of this East African country (5 October 1996). Like countless other bars throughout this city of approximately three million people, Vijana Social Hall doubles as a performance venue for local theatre groups and bands. Mandela Cultural Troupe, which was the group performing that particular night, adhered to the usual vaudeville format that characterizes Tanzanian popular theatre, intermingling a dizzying variety of dances, music, plays, and acrobatics in the course of the four-hour performance. This night, Mandela opened with a version of *sindimba*, the most famous—and notorious—“traditional” dance (*ngoma*) in Tanzania.<sup>1</sup>

As a newly arrived researcher on constructions of gender and national identity in popular theatre, I tried to suppress my unease as I watched the women of Mandela Cultural Troupe dance in a circle, swaying their hips in a sexually inviting way. Meanwhile, the men of the troupe approached them from behind and “tried out” each in turn. A male dancer with an especially youthful appearance approached one of the older female dancers and ground his hips

into hers, eliciting shouts of laughter from the audience: “She can be your mother! Mind your manners!” The women steadfastly danced in their circle, smiling all the while. I dutifully watched as Western stereotypes of the “bestial sexual license of the African” and the passive African woman were gleefully played out before my discomfited gaze.

In the course of my fieldwork, I saw *sindimba* performed time and time again, in addition to several other *ngoma* that accentuated the women’s erotic movement of the hips and pelvis. In contrast, the male dancers vigorously stamped their feet, turned cartwheels, and improvised comic routines around their pursuit of the ever-smiling, hip-swaying women. I learned that this hip-swaying movement, called *kukata kiuno* (to cut the waist), had become virtu-

1. *Sindimba*, performed by Muungano Cultural Troupe on 25 October 1997, in Jamhuri Stadium in Morogoro, Tanzania. Note the vigorous movements of the male dancer, while the female dancer performs the hip-swaying movement of *kukata kiuno*. (Photo by Laura Edmondson)



2. Rashid Chikaptura of Mandela Cultural Troupe becomes “possessed” during a performance of the Makonde dance called *ngokwa* at Kawe-CCM bar in Dar es Salaam, 13 September 1997. This is an example of the “savage African male” pose found in the popular theatre, but not in tourist performance. (Photo by Laura Edmondson)



ally synonymous with the concept of ngoma in the cultural imagination. The ubiquity of this image could be explained as an inevitable result of urban commodification in which African traditional dances are appropriated and “depopularized.” Gaurav Desai describes this process as a means of “entertain[ing] the urban elite and reassur[ing] the developing nation that it has not ignored its national culture” (1990:68). It could be argued that a similar process enshrined Tanzanian ngoma as a cultural stereotype of African “tradition”; concomitantly, the female body was appropriated and contained by this repetitive, rotating motion.

This containment, however, occurred through a complex process of inventing, counterinventing, and reinventing tradition. In the course of this article, I examine the state’s appropriation of ngoma as a national symbol, the transformation of this symbol in the domain of popular culture, and its recent incarnation as a tourist attraction. Through an interrogation of the smiling, hip-swaying women in *sindimba*, the following analysis pays tribute to the multiple interactions among performers, audiences, and the state, as well as introduces the global factor of cultural tourism. The contextualization of ngoma in this network of forces foregrounds the underlying anxiety that sustains this cultural image of the sexualized, passive Tanzanian woman.

Of course, a blanket categorization of ngoma as commodified would dismiss the agency of performers and spectators in the moment of performance. The final section of this article investigates a provocative example of how women seize the “right to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege” (Bhabha 1994:2) in ngoma through the employment of “tradition” as a resource. The “otherness” of ngoma within urban society clears a space for certain marginalized ethnic groups in which difference is *recognized* instead of denigrated and suppressed. These examples are scant in comparison to the numerous performances in which the stereotypes of “tradition” and “woman” hold firm, but the vividness of these exceptions complicates the effort to fix Tanzanian dance as a static fact of female oppression and as a tool of national homogenization.

### *Inventing Tradition*

In his inaugural speech in 1962, the late Julius K. Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania (then Tanganyika)<sup>2</sup> spoke eloquently of the need to reclaim African culture from the clutches of the former colonial powers: “Of all the crimes of colonialism there is none worse than the attempt to make us believe we had no indigenous culture of our own; or that what we did have was worthless” (1967:186). The newly created Ministry of Culture, he explained, would promote the traditional arts as a reminder of the vitality of this precolonial era and thus rekindle “our pride in our own culture” (187). With these words, Nyerere trod the usual path of Third World nationalisms in his nostalgic construction of a glorious precolonial past. Moreover, in his formation of a socialist Tanzanian society, Nyerere asserted that socialism heralded a return to this past since African society was “traditionally” communal and harmonious (1968:12). With these statements, Nyerere smoothly swept the diverse cultures of 120 ethnic groups under the carpet of harmonious village life.

In the attempt to reclaim “tradition,” the newly independent administration proved to be as repressive of certain indigenous structures as the former German and British colonizers had been (Forster 1995:109). Long-established villages were uprooted in the name of building socialist societies, and secondary school students, teachers, and government officials were frequently transferred to distant regions in order to suppress ethnic ties. A crucial step was the designation of the Swahili language as the national language—a policy that sharply

contributed to the decline of ethnic “traditional” languages. In the realm of ngoma, the Ministry of Culture took careful steps to contain dynamic and ephemeral performance traditions through an intricate network of bureaucratic procedures, which required an often bewildering series of permits for performances and travel (Askew 1997:288). In the interests of nationalism, the state resolutely marched down an authoritative path toward a homogenous society.

In the process of homogenization, ngoma legislation and rhetoric consistently revolved around issues of female sexuality and rural, “primitivist” Tanzania. In a discussion of English nationalism, Bhabha draws attention to “how the demand for a holistic, representative vision of society could only be represented in a discourse that was [...] obsessively fixed upon, and uncertain of, the boundaries of society and the margins of the text” (1994:144). This concept suggests that the rural and the female body, both located on the margins of the Tanzanian state, serve as objects of obsession and uncertainty. As such, these bodies are subjected to state control in an effort to maintain a holistic vision of the unified nation. Although this particular article focuses on the politics of gender, an oscillating tension between ethnicity and gender emerges in an examination of contemporary ngoma performance.<sup>3</sup>

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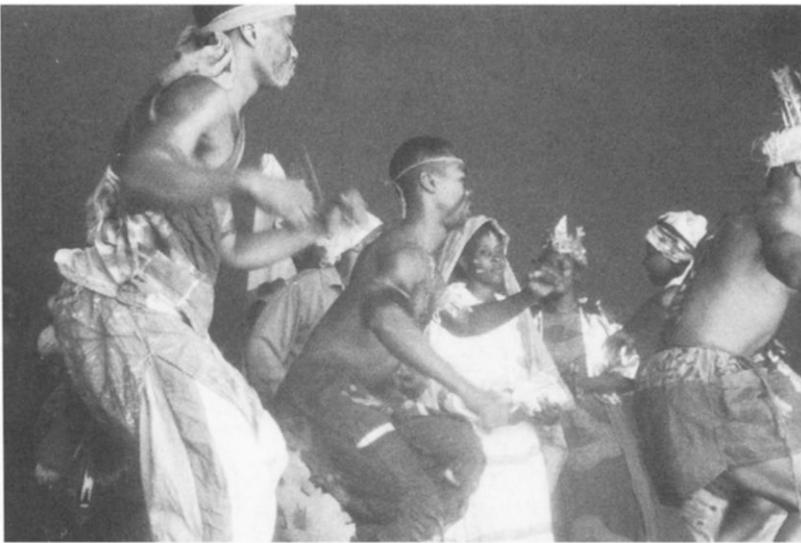
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This framework helps to illuminate the restricted choreography that currently defines female movement in the ngoma. In the early 1980s, the Ministry of Culture founded the College of Arts in the coastal town of Bagamoyo in order to uphold the preservation of officially sanctioned culture. The college, which accepts 10 to 15 students each year, offers a three-year course of study in drama, music, acrobatics, and ngoma. For the most part, the inventiveness and creativity of the students and faculty prevents the college from becoming a cultural museum, which, as Eric Hobsbawm points out, is a common result of cultural nationalist agendas (1983:2–4).<sup>4</sup> In the case of ngoma, however, this creativity is replaced by conformity to official guidelines that dictate the form’s codification and the subjugation of female dancers.

In accordance with the official policy of nationalization, the college teaches its multi-ethnic student body a variety of ngoma from across the country which supposedly reflect the diversity of Tanzania’s 120 ethnic groups. A closer examination reveals that this apparent diversity can be distilled into a group of eight ngoma, all of which have been taught to successive generations of students for years.<sup>5</sup> Like a canon of literature, these dances have been distilled into a representative group of Tanzanian ngoma sanctioned by the authority of the state. The ngoma canon is disseminated throughout the country in ways similar to those of literary canons, which are locked into a cycle of self-perpetuation through their repetitive use in education. Students usually graduate knowing only this canon of ngoma, which they subsequently use in their own work as teachers in various far-flung regions of the country.

As a representative sample of the “traditional arts,” these ngoma reveal an especially troubling politics of gender. At the college, the erotic movement of *kukata kiuno* is markedly subdued in the canonized ngoma, in keeping with the state’s directives to desexualize the dances (these directives are discussed in more



3–5. A dance-drama performed on 28 September 1997 by the students at the College of Arts in Bagamoyo, Tanzania was billed as “traditional African theatre.” In this scene, the men are showing off their dancing skill to the “princess.” Performers: Richard Mziray, Omari Mwarape, Morris Chifunda, Betty Kazimbaya, Hilda Malechela, Mwangaza Kang’anga, and Joyce Kiriho. (Photos by Laura Edmondson)



6. Student Hilda Malechela (the passive princess in plates 3–5) displays her skill in acrobatics on 25 September 1997 at the College of Arts in Bagamoyo, Tanzania. Acrobatics are not considered “traditional,” so the female students have greater rein to display their strength and daring. (Photo by Laura Edmondson)

detail below). Even so, the women are marked as subordinate through their restrained movements, which contrast sharply with the male students’ expressions of vigor and strength. Moreover, the women almost always exit before the men, leaving the men to dominate the stage in the final moments of the ngoma.

The popular *ukala*, a hunting dance of the coastal Zigua people, is an especially vivid example of female subservience. The men mime the use of a bow and arrow in the course of the hunt, stamping their feet in a vigorous rhythm. Once the men have mimed the successful kill, the women enter for a brief interlude as “window dressing,” during which they gather the meat and celebrate the men’s bravery through song.

Even when the ngoma is inclusive of a greater variety of female movements, the narrative of restraint intrudes. In a vigorous harvest dance called *bugobugobo*, for example, both men and women twirl hoes over their heads and around their bodies at a dizzying speed. The teachers saw fit to add an introductory skit in which the female dancers greet the men in true “traditional” fashion by kneeling before them.

Of the many versions of *bugobugobo* I observed, only the college adopted this particular introduction, which situated the women’s energetic and powerful movements within a framework of submission.

Students invariably responded to my questions about this pattern with the invocation of “tradition.” They insisted that men were permitted greater freedom of movement because it was “true” to the way ngoma is danced “in the villages” (*kijijini*)—the usual barometer of a dance’s authenticity. In an ironic example of the vast difference between the codified “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983) at the college and its fluid existence at the local level, Stumaii Halili, a faculty member, conducted research on *ukala* among the Zigua people. She found that one of the lines in the song, in which the men order the female dancers to prepare the meat, was removed because it was disrespectful to women.<sup>6</sup> The faculty subsequently resolved to discard the offending line in order to conform to the “authentic” tradition. The teachers and students had become so accustomed to singing this line, however, that they usually neglected to exclude it. Although this forgetfulness is more indicative of the force of a codified habit than a reactionary agenda, the commensurability of this particular habit with the pattern of female oppression in the ngoma canon at the college is strikingly coincidental.

In the concluding section of this article I address an example of ngoma in which the students challenge this narrative of subjugation. For the most part, however, the creativity and imagination that the students and faculty display in numerous performance traditions at the college become abruptly curtailed in ngoma. Representations of ethnicity and gender are thoroughly tamed and controlled, which indicates that a potential source of anxiety for the state has been successfully subdued. Even so, popular culture has managed to subvert the postcolonial government’s cultural agenda. In the counterinvention of tradition, the rhetoric of cultural nationalism is playfully defied.

### *Counterinventing Tradition*

On the surface, the urban popular troupes in Dar es Salaam mirror the College of Arts in their seeming embrace of nationalist rhetoric, marked by numerous ngoma songs in praise of Tanzanian culture. A closer examination of

the popular troupes' ngoma, however, reveals that the incessant praise serves as a pretext for the troupe's own particular version of national culture—a "counter-canon" of ngoma. In an intriguing theorization of nationalism, anthropologist Michael Herzfeld suggests the "possibility of the subtle recastings of official discourses that we might call *counterinventions* of tradition, in which local and minority groups variously (and often discordantly) propose a host of alternative pasts" (1997:12; emphasis added). The official version of the precolonial past, as adopted by the College of Arts, excludes the erotic dances of the south such as the sindimba described above. In contrast, the popular troupes propose an alternative past through their "subtle recastings" of the ngoma canon in which the sexuality of southern ngoma prevails.

These recastings can be discerned in the suggestive choreography. Although the popular troupes avoid criticism of the government and the ruling party in their lyrics, their physical movements directly refuse the directives of the state that call for subdued sexuality. The seemingly un-ironic praises can be explained as an "erotics of politics" (Sommer 1990:76), in which sexual movements are danced to the tune of official praise. Theatre scholars at the University of Dar es Salaam react uneasily to these spectacles, as demonstrated in Elias Songoyi's study of the commercialization of ngoma. After relating his experience of watching a cultural troupe perform the erotic *lizombe* while singing: "The chairman of Tanzania, Nyerere/ Live forever," he rails:

[A]s one watched he [sic] could clearly see that there was no correspondence between the vigorous [...] waist wriggling and stamping on the one hand and the song on the other hand. What was all the violent waist wriggling [...] expressing? Happiness? Not at all. (1983:34)

Leaving it to the reader to answer the question of what the dance *was* expressing, Songoyi proceeds to lament that in urban versions of ngoma, "movement is all that matters," as opposed to rural versions in which the lyrics provide a vehicle for responding to immediate local concerns. The movement "that matters" was, and continues to be, *kukata kiuno*. *Lizombe*, a

7. & 8. Tanzania One Theatre performs *lizombe* on 7 December 1997 in T. Garden Bar, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This is the most popular moment of the dance, in which the dancers simulate intercourse onstage. (Photos by Laura Edmondson)



ngoma of the southern Ngoni ethnic group, is second only to *sindimba* in notoriety for its overt simulations of sexual intercourse within its choreography.

Although the popular troupes are commonly blamed for the “degradation” of ngoma, this particular recasting of tradition predated the formation of the popular urban troupes in the 1970s. In the early 1960s, shortly after independence, the government banned *sindimba* in public performances (Lange 1995:56), indicating that authorities were already trying to establish a suitably tasteful “canon” of ngoma. These attempts apparently failed; in 1974, Louis A. Mbughuni and Gabriel Ruhumbika referred to *sindimba*’s enduring popularity in their critique of Tanzania’s cultural policy:

If you ask a primary school boy what *utamaduni*, culture, means the answer will most certainly be: *Sindimba*—a traditional dance which apparently is the favourite of school-masters, even though when performed out of context, as it is at the schools, it borders on obscenity. (276)

Schools were encouraged to teach “traditional” dance in the interest of fostering national culture. As this passage indicates, however, schools also cast “tradition” as they saw fit and participated in the widespread eroticization of official rhetoric.

The conflation of *sindimba* with “culture” endures, despite the Ministry of Culture’s efforts to separate the two. Theatre scholar Amandina Lihamba cites a Ministry directive from the 1980s that reiterates its stand on sexually explicit performances: “It is clearly understood that the guidelines for Tanzania emphasize national integrity and respect. Therefore, the nation forbids all acts which are hooliganistic in nature and corrupt values for the good upbringing of children” (in Lihamba 1985:480). The directive then mentions nudity, vigorous hip movements “without cause,” and fornication as examples of actions that were unsuitable for the stage. The positioning of *kukata kiuno* in the same category as the sexual act itself implies the magnitude of the officials’ distress. More recently, in a 1997 article in the English-language newspaper *The Guardian*, Michael Eneza bemoans “the continuing waist wriggling culture,” calling it the “African version [...] of the worldwide provocative music [referring to singers such as Madonna and Michael Jackson] which has for years been accepted as the hallmark of Western decadence.” Instead of nation formation, ngoma serves as a symbol of nation decay.

A contextualization of *kukata kiuno* clarifies this ongoing controversy. This movement is supposedly taught to girls of certain southern and coastal ethnic groups during initiation rites (*unyago*) as part of learning sexual techniques with a male partner. Although these rites are shrouded in secrecy, they have assumed an apocryphal, titillating status among urban Tanzanians. Men especially delight in sharing stories of what “really happens” during *unyago*, particularly in the rites of the southern Makonde, whose women are considered to possess special sexual skills in comparison to women of other ethnic groups. Concealed from the public eye, *kukata kiuno* is symbolic of the private space: the “inside” identified by Partha Chatterjee as the domain of the female and spiritual in postcolonial cultural nationalism (1993:119–21). The transformation of *kukata kiuno* into public spectacle reverses the usual hegemonic flow of nationalist discourse from center to periphery. Herzfeld notes that: “In the intimacy of a nation’s secret spaces lie at least some of the original models of official practice” (1997:4). In this instance, the nation’s secret space—the female initiation—is a model of official practice. Official directives changed in response to audiences’ tastes and thus disrupted the hegemonic flow.

This counterinvention, however, largely caters to male spectators. Herzfeld points out that intimate aspects of cultural identity that “provide insiders with

their assurance of common sociality” are transformed into a source of embarrassment when externally placed (1997:3). As a result of the external placement of *kukata kiuno*—a source of “common sociality” within the confines of female initiation—female spectators now shun *ngoma* out of embarrassment and shame. In all of the performances I watched, male spectators occasionally participated in dancing *ngoma*, but only once did I see a woman do so (17 August 1997). Her participation immediately prompted comments from other spectators that she must be intoxicated, with the subtext that only chemical influence could have loosened her supposedly embedded sense of propriety. The postcolonial vogue of *kukata kiuno* has resulted in women’s rejection of *ngoma*—a form that has historically served as a uniquely female means of artistic and political expression.<sup>7</sup> In other words, while the cultural troupes have rejected the state’s invention of tradition, the female spectators are in turn rejecting the counterinvention. They do not hesitate to participate in other segments of the performance, such as during the plays and musical acts; *ngoma* alone proves too “embarrassing” for these urban women.

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Issues of ethnicity and sexuality overlap in this point of contention, for the intermingling of primitivism and sexuality in the southern erotic female body flaunts the cultural mission that the college supposedly upholds.

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Students and faculty at the College of Arts also seem “embarrassed” over the blatant sexuality of the popular troupes’ *ngoma*, and they often expressed concern that I would interpret those versions as “authentic” examples. Although the college’s *ngoma* canon includes various sensual movements for female dancers, such as slow shoulder rotations and a gentle swaying of the hips, the absence of explicit *kukata kiuno* marks the college’s alignment with official cultural rhetoric. Students and faculty also disparage the troupes’ *ngoma* with the assertion that the eroticism makes the entertainment unsuitable for children, who make up a sizable percentage of urban audiences. In turn, the troupes claim that the college’s dances are uninteresting and dull. Issues of ethnicity and sexuality overlap in this point of contention, for the intermingling of primitivism and sexuality in the erotic southern female body flaunts the cultural mission that the college supposedly upholds.

In terms of praxis, however, the college’s mission is becoming increasingly rhetorical. Despite the professed distaste for the troupes’ erotic choreography, the college increasingly participates in this counterinventing move. Although *lizombe* is excluded from the canon, the 1997 dance majors sought to learn it on their own in response to the dance’s popularity with local Bagamoyo audiences. The college’s version was more “tame” than that of the popular troupes; however, it remained undeniably sexual. Instead of male and female couples simulating intercourse, a female dancer performed a solo in which she would slowly rotate her hips as the audience shrieked with delight. *Lizombe* was often the high point of the college’s public performances, marking the victory of popular taste even at this bastion of national culture.

Economic factors are highly influential in the college’s contradictory attitude toward *kukata kiuno*. The faculty of the college has formed a group called Bagamoyo Players, which, in addition to working on theatre for social change and various development projects, also provides entertainment for expatriate or business functions. Disparagement of the popular troupes’ counterinvention

aside, the Bagamoyo Players are quick to participate in erotic performances to suit their audience's expectations. When the Bagamoyo Players performed for the National Cashew Association in the elite Kilimanjaro hotel in Dar es Salaam (20 February 1997), the women performed a dance that depicted female initiation, in which the older women are teaching *kukata kiuno* to the young initiate. Before the dance began, the women pretended to chase away the men in the group, scolding them for peeking at a "woman-only" dance. This tactic called even more attention to the numerous European, African, and Asian men in the audience, who watched as the initiate gradually learned the movement until she closed her eyes in ecstasy, gyrating slowly to the cheers of the other women. Granted, this version of *unyago* was enacted in the (private) confines of one of the most expensive hotels in the city and thus does not signify the public sphere to the same extent as the college's auditorium or Vijana Social Hall. Even so, it pushes officially acceptable limits to the same extent as the performances of the maligned "immoral" popular troupes.

The force of the counter-canon threatens the country's bastion of cultural nationalism as popular pressures increasingly take precedence over decades of nationalist rhetoric. In recent years, however, the tourist economy has entered to reshape the dominance of southern *ngoma*. In the section that follows, I theorize the emerging patterns of *ngoma* in tourist performance as a *reinvention* of tradition. Tourism is linked to nationalism as a hegemonic force that reworks popular conceptions of *ngoma* to suit new audiences and shifting political needs.

### *Reinventing Tradition*

An examination of Tanzanian *ngoma* would not be complete without a discussion of tourism, given that the tourist economy is threatening to take up the hegemonic slack left dangling in the wake of socialism's demise.<sup>8</sup> As anthropologist Siri Lange points out, "Tanzania's cultural bureaucrats have realized that the idea of building a national culture on the many ethnic dances did not work out, but they can still use dance as a symbol to the outside world" (1995:66). The need for such a symbol has markedly increased since the state has prioritized tourism as a means of economic survival in an attempt to compete with neighboring Kenya. During 1997, three *ngoma* troupes formed with the express purpose of playing for tourists; their names—Simba, Serengeti, and Kilimanjaro—correspond to three major tourist attractions: lions (*simba*), Serengeti National Park (a favored safari destination), and Mount Kilimanjaro. As implied by their choice of names, they are carefully marketing themselves for a growing tourist audience. In the course of my fieldwork, each troupe approached me with the boast that their work was more "traditional" than Muungano, Tanzania One Theatre (TOT), or Mandela—the three popular troupes that were the focus of my study. Aware of foreigners' liking for "authentic" dances, they assumed that these claims would pique my interest.

In general, however, these troupes are more likely to challenge the tourist gaze than satisfy it. The "invasion" of mass tourism is still relatively new to Tanzania, and local producers of tourist art have yet to become familiar with typical Western expectations of the "performative primitive" (MacCannell 1992). Furthermore, the legacy of Tanzania's historical emphasis on nationalism pervades even tourist art. The combination of these factors has resulted in tourist performances that do not fit the descriptions of "savage male" and "erotic female" typically found in descriptions of tourist performance (Desmond 1997; Balme 1998). Seldom did I see stereotypes of the "primitive savage" played out; instead, the restrained, subdued quality of the tourist per-

performances seemed more appropriate for an audience of cultural officials than for tourists. Because of this subdued, desexualized quality, I have categorized tourist ngoma as a reinvention of tradition, since it has led to a *return* to the “invention of tradition” seen at the College of Arts discussed above.

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This discursive bleeding of nationalist discourse into the domain of tourism is not surprising, considering that the performance of nationalism also demands “staged authenticity.”

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For example, Lange tells of a troupe’s performance at a tourist hotel, in which the announcer boasted that none of the dancers were from the places where the various ngoma had originated. Lange notes:

[H]e had internalized the governmental policy of nation-building and de-tribalizing, happily ignorant of the fact that the tourists probably would have been more excited to hear that what they were about to see was the such and such tribe performing their authentic esoteric dances. (1995:18)

Although troupes have become more savvy about tourists’ preferences since the period of Lange’s research in the early 1990s, disruptions of these expectations still proliferate. As revealed in a Swahili newspaper article (Komba 1997), for example, the tourist group Serengeti also participates in the rhetoric of nation-building. The leader of Serengeti, after boasting to the reporter about the number of times his troupe had performed in tourist hotels, proceeds to criticize the popular troupes TOT and Muungano for perpetuating European culture (*uzunguni*). His own troupe, he claims, preserves “traditional” culture (*utamaduni*). His investment in participating in anticolonial discourse demonstrates the troupe’s alignment with cultural nationalism, even though fellow Tanzanians are hardly the targeted audience.

This discursive bleeding of nationalist discourse into the domain of tourism is not surprising, considering that the performance of nationalism also demands “staged authenticity.” Dean MacCannell writes that “tourism is not just an aggregate of merely commercial activities; it is also an ideological framing of history, nature, and tradition; a framing that has the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs” (1992:1). This same definition could easily be applied to nationalism, given Nyerere’s revision of the African past to conform to socialist ideals and the legislation of “tradition” enacted by the Ministry of Culture. The “ideological framing” of both nationalism and tourism require the containment of tradition into a realm of purity, supposedly uncontaminated by modernization and Westernization. Christopher B. Balme identifies the peculiar irony in the “aporia of the tourist gaze, which on the one hand appears to demand authenticity and on the other works to deauthenticate anything which comes into its field of vision” (1998:64–65). This irony can be likened to Hobsbawm’s “invention of tradition,” a phrase which itself encapsulates the underlying contradiction of cultural nationalism.

This intermingling of tourism and nationalism is most clearly discerned in the performances of gender in tourist ngoma. Since Western notions of African authenticity include stereotypes of the eroticized, passive “African woman,” the tourist economy seems unlikely to disrupt the sexual stereotypes performed in

the counterinvention of ngoma discussed above. The rendition of the female initiation ceremony performed by the Bagamoyo Players for the Cashew Association, which was staged for foreign visitors as well as local elites, provides one such example of this eroticization of the female body. This exception aside, however, I did not find stereotypes of either the “savage male” or “erotic female” played out. Instead, the tourist choreography often reverted to the “appropriately” desexualized movements preferred by the state. For example, the troupe Simba performed a version of sindimba that was far more restrained than anything I had seen performed by the popular troupes. Although the characteristic kukata kiuno remained the defining movement of the female dancers, it was greatly subdued, and the usual segment in which the male dancers “try out” the females was discarded. Furthermore, the female dancers do not conform to conventional standards of attractive female bodies as defined by the West. In each of the tourist groups mentioned above—Bagamoyo Players, Simba, Serengeti, and Kilimanjaro—the female dancers embody a variety of physical shapes and ages. While this variety apparently pleases the Tanzanian male gaze, it once again confounds the tourist’s objectification of the African woman.

In an attempt to “cash in” on tourist dollars, the popular theatre troupe Muungano created a striking example of “nationalized” tourist performance. In December 1996, Muungano tried to secure a contract at Nyumba ya Sanaa (House of Arts), an arts-and-crafts shop catering to tourists located next to the Sheraton Hotel. They managed to produce one performance on the evening of 3 December; the admission fee was 3,000 shillings (U.S.\$5), three times the cost of their usual performances in neighborhood bars. For this occasion, they eliminated plays from the program, realizing that tourists would be unable to follow the Swahili dialogue. Despite these attempts to conform to a tourist aesthetic, however, they (inadvertently) managed to defy the expectant tourist gaze at every turn. Muungano retained the boisterous and unwieldy quality of its popular performances, with the sound system turned up to top volume despite the intimacy of the performance space. As a result, pained *wazungu* (foreigners, usually with connotations of whiteness) clapped their hands over their ears throughout the show. The Sheraton building looming overhead was unable to dampen Muungano’s exuberance; as a result, Muungano failed to secure the coveted contract.

The intermingling of popular culture and the reinvention of tradition meant that Muungano’s representations of gender defied tourist expectations at every turn. For example, an abrupt desexualization of ngoma signified the discursive meshing of tourism and nationalism described above. Muungano went a step further than the group Simba and dropped sindimba from the performance altogether; indeed, the ubiquitous kukata kiuno did not make a single appearance throughout the evening. They did, however, include their vigorous and eye-catching version of bugobugobo, the harvesting dance often performed at the College of Arts, described above. In addition to the use of twirling hoes, Muungano added a segment in which the male and female dancers marched with wooden guns, followed by a “gender war” between the men and women enacted through hand-to-hand combat. Instead of the eroticized African woman, Muungano served up images of female soldiers insisting upon their rights. They finished the evening with a round of *taarab*, a genre of musical performance in which Islamic women sing dramatic tales of love and betrayal, which typically cause a stampede of female fans onto the stage to dance and tip the singer. Instead, my fellow *wazungu* seemed more amused by the singer’s elaborate sequined gown than impressed by her powerful stage presence.

The Muungano performance provides a reminder of the ways in which ngoma exceeds the limits of commodification. Michael Denning has argued

that in late capitalism very little cultural production survives other than in the form of commodities (1990:9), an argument that seems applicable in the age of the “new” market-driven Tanzania and the commodification of ngoma throughout official, tourist, and popular spheres. Even within this framework, however, moments that invite identification rather than alterity counteract these stereotypes.

### *Narrative Disruptions*

The following examples of narrative disruptions fall into two categories—those ngoma performances in which ethnic identities are celebrated rather than commodified, and those in which the subjugation of “woman” is challenged. This division echoes Bhabha’s point that marginal communities are focal points of anxiety in the construction of a homogenized nation, as discussed above. The “either-or” pattern of these examples—either ethnicity is celebrated *or* female subjugation is challenged—serves as a reminder of the systemic control in which ngoma is embedded, for I never found the two disruptions integrated into a single performance. Those moments of ethnic celebration were often performed through the objectification of the female body; in turn, those moments of female agency excluded marginalized ethnicities.

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Yet the unique role that ngoma plays for marginalized ethnic groups in popular theatre cannot be overlooked. Often, in the creative hands of groups such as TOT and Muungano, southern ngoma such as lizombe and sindimba became affirmations of ethnic identity instead of portrayals of the primitivist other. For example, at a performance on 29 June 1997, TOT announced a special “dance contest” between the Ngoni, represented by lizombe, and the Makonde, represented by sindimba. It quickly became difficult to see the dancers due to the crowds of spectators swarming onto the stage to tip or dance alongside them; occasionally, some spectators would mock the movements, signifying their allegiance to the rival ethnic group. None of this mockery contained hostility; indeed, the sense of celebration and enthusiasm that pervaded the bar during this contest was unparalleled.

On the other hand, TOT’s dance contest could be interpreted as an attempt to channel ethnic identities into carefully contained modes of expression. Once both dances had been performed, the emcee promised that the winner would be announced at the performance the following week. Not surprisingly, no winner was ever declared. The designation of a victorious ethnic group would have contained connotations of tribalism, thus disrupting TOT’s rhetorical support of national unity. Also, this celebration could have been allowed precisely *because* of the marginalized status of the Ngoni and Makonde; T.L. Maliyamkono dryly notes that groups such as the Makonde are expected to speak their languages in public “but it only takes one Chagga or Haya [economically advantaged ethnic groups] to do so for others to conclude that ‘this is tribalism’” (1995:45). Southern ethnic groups are considered

to be especially impoverished and therefore bear no threat to the nation-state. Even with these considerations in mind, however, the intensity of audience participation suggests that spectators seized the potential of performance to reclaim ethnic identities and refuse the homogeneity of nationalism.

Muongano went a step further and staged a contest between races instead of ethnic groups. During a performance at the College of Arts in Bagamoyo (11 February 1997), Muongano incorporated a “dancing contest” into *masewe*, a storytelling dance in which the narrative is intermingled with singing and dancing. In this story, a male traveler returning to his home village came across a dancing contest between white and African women. A white woman, signified as a tourist by her brief shorts, was coaxed onto the stage and instructed to follow the lead of the Muongano dancer, who enacted the movement of *kukata kiuno* to the shrieks of the audience. The bewildered tourist awkwardly wiggled her hips, fulfilling her role as “other” next to the smoothly erotic moves of her African rival. Through an affirmation of racial stereotypes of the “natural” superior musical and dancing ability of Africans, the contest invited Tanzanians to identify with the Muongano woman, who was loudly cheered. Muongano cleverly reversed the tourist gaze by transforming the typical tourist watching an African dance into a spectacle for the consumption of the Bagamoyo audience.

Through staging a contest, both TOT and Muongano clearly intended to invoke a sense of identification—with either the Ngoni or Makonde, with either the awkward tourist or skilled African. These examples gesture to the potential of ngoma as a means of exploring and celebrating ethnic difference.

In each of these examples, however, *gender* difference remained binarized, with the women positioned as subordinate to the men. In the dance contest between the Ngoni and the Makonde staged by TOT, the dancers of *sindimba* enacted a short comic skit in which two male dancers attempted to seduce a woman through their skill. The woman was played by a cross-dressed male, precluding the participation of a female performer in a moment when she could have displayed her own comic skills. Moreover, the racial challenge posed in Muongano’s version of the dance contest was enacted on the site of the eroticized female body—dancing, as usual, *kukata kiuno*.

Aside from the startling exception of Muongano’s *bugobugobo*, described above in the section on tourism, the passivity of female dancers is a trope repeatedly affirmed in the ngoma of the urban popular stage. From a feminist perspective, the outlook for ngoma seems rather bleak, since this recourse to sexual stereotyping sharply delimits women’s subjectivity. Anne McClintock believes that “[a]ll too often, the doors of tradition are slammed in women’s faces” (1995:385). In the case of ngoma, the door seems quite thoroughly slammed in the faces of the women performers, and the female spectators have simply retreated to other segments of the popular performance such as *taarab* music as a more fluid and accessible form of female expression.

Still, a dismissal of urban ngoma as yet another example of appropriation and capitalist commodification does not account for the potential for agency in the moment of live performance. Amidst the sexual stereotypes, I witnessed some striking—albeit few—examples of the potential of using tradition to carve out agency which challenge a categorical condemnation of urban ngoma as a mode of female oppression.

One such challenge occurred at the College of Arts during *masewe*, the storytelling dance described above in which Muongano staged a dancing contest between white and African women. At the College of Arts, the third-year dance majors (Robert Ajwang’, Deograsias Ndonguru, and Aloyce Makonde) worked with their teachers Basil Mbatta and Luiza Maganga to create a

unique expanded version of the dance, which premiered at the end of the term (27 May 1997). In the process of transformation, it became a vehicle of power for Ndunguru, the only woman among the three dance majors.

As explained by Mbatta (1997), women of the southern Yao ethnic group typically used *masewe* as a means to educate young girls during initiation.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting its historical role in female initiation, Ndunguru took the role of storyteller, and a humorous storyline often used to teach the initiates about childcare was adapted. In search of a cure for infertility, the female protagonist of the story travels through Tanzania toward the southern region of Mtwara, where she is told she will find a Makonde *mganga* (healer) equipped with the medicine she needs. She experiences a loosely connected series of adventures along the way, many of which are connected with motherhood. Eventually, the woman finds the Makonde healer who provides her with the needed medicine, coupled with a stern warning that she must never let rain strike the child. She readily agrees and immediately gives birth to a son, Katope. Tragedy strikes when rain abruptly begins to fall, and the woman frantically tries to dodge the raindrops to protect him. At this point, the story usually comes to an abrupt end.

In the course of telling the story, Ndunguru spoke of the woman in the third person, but she frequently assumed the woman's character through her actions. For example, she held the new baby out with pride to the audience and other dancers, and she searched desperately for refuge from the rain at the story's conclusion. Her easy movement through a range of characters and her command of the story meant that Makonde and Ajwang' were continually responding to her lead throughout the dance. Ndunguru, herself a charismatic performer with a strong voice, embodied her role as storyteller with authority and presence.

Although three other students were incorporated into the dance when *masewe* was selected for inclusion in the 1997 National Arts Festival, Ndunguru remained the undisputed leader. For the festival performance (25 September 1996), Mbatta expanded the ending: after the mother loses Katope to the rain, she returns to her husband, who scolds her and drives her into the streets. The new ending was meant to warn parents about the dangers of arranged marriages (Mbatta 1997). Apparently, the new version demonstrated that arranged marriages would result in the unhappy end of *masewe*, in which the courageous woman who had traveled throughout the country is transformed into a forlorn abandoned wife.

Ndunguru, however, had other ideas. When the husband, played by Omari Mwarape, began scolding Ndunguru for losing their son, she responded by pushing him to the floor, startling even Mwarape since Ndunguru had told no one of her plan. As the audience cheered with delight, Ndunguru then pulled a child from the audience onto the stage and admonished Mwarape, mocking him for acting no older than this child. The *ngoma* thus ended with a female dancer seizing the moment and proving her improvisational skill. In a showcase of Tanzanian culture, Ndunguru refused to be contained.

Although these moments caution against a categorical dismissal of *ngoma*, they also recall the vexing issues that make *ngoma* a site of unease. At the College of Arts, female performers manage to challenge gender norms; meanwhile, on the urban popular stage, spectators work to reclaim ethnic identity in a challenge to nationalist homogenization. This distinction between performers challenging gender norms in Bagamoyo and spectators challenging nationalist norms in Dar es Salaam recalls the oscillating tension between gender and ethnicity, serving as a reminder of the threat that "tribalism" and female identity pose to the nation. It seems that one cultural "sore zone" (Herzfeld 1997:27) can be safely challenged without censure, but never the two shall meet through the performance of *ngoma*.

Given the limited range of choreography for women dancing ngoma, it is difficult not to conclude this article on a pessimistic note. Studies of rural ngoma are filled with references to the potential of ngoma as a means of female empowerment (Mwakalinga 1994; Swantz 1995); however, with the exception of the isolated examples discussed above, the economy of the stereotypical smiling, hip-swaying woman has effectively contained the female dancers in nationalist and urban popular culture. Bhabha, on his part, cautions against using the stereotype as “the scapegoat of discriminatory practices,” describing it as “a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, [and] aggressivity” (1994:81–82). The anxiety and desire that circulates around female initiation throughout these various inventions, counterinventions, and reinventions serves as a powerful reminder of the potential of ngoma; however, it is a potential that has been successfully subdued. As a result, the “African Woman” almost disappears from view, overshadowed by her leaping, aggressive, and/or comic male counterpart. The nation defines her in terms of her ability to “cut the waist”—smiling all the while.

### Notes

1. *Ngoma* is a broad term that includes the drums and music as well as the actual dances themselves. In the context of this article, however, it refers mainly to the movements and the song lyrics. This article is based on fieldwork conducted on the coast of Tanzania from August 1996 to December 1997.
2. Tanganyika was the name of the mainland given by the German colonizers in the 19th century. In 1964, Tanganyika and the island of Zanzibar formed an uneasy union and the name “Tanzania” was coined.
3. See Edmondson (1999a) for a fuller exploration of the play of ethnicity within ngoma discourse in Tanzania.
4. See Edmondson (1999b) for a more comprehensive discussion of the College of Arts.
5. These eight ngoma include *ukala* of the coastal Zigua, *bugobugobo* of the Sukuma, *mganda wa kikutu* from the Morogoro region, *mawindi* of the Nyaturu (Singida region), *lipango* of the Nyakyusa, and three that are of Makonde/Yao origin: *masewe*, *ngokwa*, and *malivata*.
6. The “offending line” is *mbili mbili kidenyama*, “You have to prepare it.” Words and translation provided by Stumai Halili (Halili 1997).
7. See Geiger (1997) for a fascinating description of how ngoma groups provided a means for women to participate in the independence movement.
8. As the result of a sustained economic crisis, Tanzania began a slow transition from a socialist, one-party state to a capitalist economy and a multi-party state in the 1980s.
9. The Yao are related to the Makonde ethnic group: the two groups are occasionally referred to as the “Yao/Makonde.”

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