

Chapter 3

Gumboot Dancing and Steppin': Origins, Parallels, and Uses in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

South African gumboot dancing holds similar origins and parallel characteristics with African American Steppin'. This chapter includes a brief history of South Africa as it relates to its influence on gumboot dancing along with a personal account of the author's own experience of South Africa's transition from Apartheid to Democracy. The influence of gumboot dancing on African American Steppin' is discussed in reference to overlapping styles and practices. Further discussion on the uses of these two contemporary Black cross-continental dance styles are presented as a tool for P-14 educators for exploring African music, developing culturally sensitive listeners, and connecting students with the sonic power and relevance of these unique and historically rich dance forms. An original gumboot dancing and Steppin' lesson plan that can be adapted for various ages is included toward the end of the chapter as well as a suggested list of additional resources for self-study.

A HISTORY OF GUMBOOT DANCING

The precise origins and influences of gumboot dancing are as diverse as the multitude of ethnicities that it represents. The uniquely South African contemporary dance form is more commonly known by its traditional name, *isicathulo* (phonetically pronounced ee-see-ca-too-lo) which means "shoes." The introduction of shoes by missionaries to native South Africans is a convincing interpretation of the origin of the term because precolonial dance was traditionally performed without foot wear. But the most widely

accepted birth of the term is in reference to the gumboots worn by miners in the gold and diamond mines of South Africa in the late 1800s.

In South Africa, the discovery of gold in 1886 led to significant political and economic changes in the country. Immigrants flocked to the mining areas, which produced over 25 percent of the world's gold.¹ The South African government ruled by a White minority responded to the threat of an emerging stable Black urban population by enacting the 1913 Natives Land Act, which limited the amount of land that Black people could own. Many Black people left their villages to work in the mines and since permanent urban residence was forbidden, they lived in mining bunkers returning home only at the completion of their contracts or for family events such as weddings and funerals. The mining culture was strictly governed and highly segregated. Individual ethnicities were housed within the same unit, fueling the internal division between the various races and ethnicities.

In an attempt to homogenize the wealth of cultural diversity represented by the Black male mine workers who travelled from various provinces in South Africa and neighboring countries to work in the mines, all symbols of their cultural heritage, including clothes and jewelry, were replaced with uniform overalls. Gumboots, or Wellington rainboots as they are often referred to, were issued to workers to protect their feet from the wet and potentially hazardous working conditions. The use of traditional languages was restricted in the mines, and as a means of communicating underground in the mines, workers created rhythmic patterns with their feet by stomping and slapping their gumboots.² This practice would usually go unnoticed by the mine bosses who vigilantly monitored miners' productivity.

Gumboot dancing evolved from its original intent of communication to a widely celebrated social dance form performed during workers' free time. Unlike many other traditional African dances, gumboot dancing includes the use of footwear. Its unique

¹ Veit Erlmann, *African Stars: Black South African Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

² David Akombo, *The Unity of Music and Dance in World Cultures* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2016).

style drew from the traditional dances of the many ethnicities of miners who worked in the mines, especially in and around the city of Johannesburg. Johannesburg is commonly referred to as *Egoli*, the City of Gold because of its rich mining culture that has spanned across two centuries. Gumboot dancing soon became a blend of various tribal influences including Bhaca, Yao, Zulu, Xhosa, and many more.³ The combined influences became a form of cultural expression as well as a symbol of solidarity between the mine workers who endured harsh working conditions under White supremacist rule.

Mining executives later began to support gumboot dancing as a form of competitive dance permitted for entertainment and recreational purposes, especially for tourists and visitors. Competitive gumboot dancing contributed significantly to the transformation of the dance style from social dancing to complex, highly structured dance routines often performed in specially created arenas. By the 1930s gumboot dancing had evolved from its original form of communication into a formal activity that shaped the shared cultural identity of various ethnic groups within the mines.

Because gumboot dancing was taught experientially through word of mouth by miners who travelled back to their communities, it lent itself to rapid evolution and continues to represent a very organic, ever changing dance style. But unlike other dance styles that are well documented, the scarcity of primary source materials documenting the evolution of gumboot dancing from its inception in the late 1800s to today has significantly influenced the limited number of published sources on the topic. And the absence of many authentic notational or video archives of traditional gumboot dancing also limits the accounts of its evolution. The earliest published works that include descriptions of gumboot dancing were recorded by Hugh Tracey, one of African music's most prolific ethnomusicologist. A British immigrant to South Africa, Tracey produced countless recordings of traditional African music dating back as far as 1929. In 1954, he founded the International Library of African Music (ILAM) in Grahamstown, South Africa, known as "one of the world's greatest repositories of African music. A

³ *Dances of Southern Africa*, directed by Alfred Gei Zantzinger, (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology).

research institution devoted to the study of music and oral arts in Africa, it preserves thousands of historical recordings going back to 1929 and supports contemporary fieldwork.”⁴ According to Tracey, “Zulu men, particularly from the southern part of Natal, have developed a kind of step dance which, nowadays is performed in Wellington gumboots from which the dance derives its name.”⁵

Since its first appearance in the late 1800s, gumboot dancing has evolved to include instrumental accompaniment, singing, and various modifications to boots and attire that include noise makers and other sounds. Today’s gumboot dancing is still performed in gumboots and is a highly energetic, fast-paced dance form that relies heavily on synchronous foot stomping in combination with thunderous boot slapping and powerful hand clapping to create pulsating rhythms. It is an amalgamation of language, music, and dance that still continues to evolve.

The musical characteristics of gumboot dancing include inobtrusive changing meters, accents, and polyrhythms that are performed through imitation, improvisation, and call-and-response. Synchronicity, precision, and speed are the primary visual characteristics of gumboot dancing, which is always performed in dance troupes. Traditionally, gumboot dancing was a male-dominated dance form performed without instrumental accompaniment. Both traditional and contemporary gumboot dancing include multiple dancers, moving together as one, in quick response to a leader who usually calls out various commands. Improvisations by individual dancers is common practice in any gumboot dancing performance and highlights the strength and virtuosity of dancers.

Unlike the first dancers in the mines of South Africa, gumboot dancing is no longer restricted by place, purpose, or person. It can be found on school playgrounds, street corners, sports events, and concert stages around the world. It has transcended its original intent of communication to become a highly complex and appreciated dance

⁴ International Library of African Music, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.ru.ac.za/ilam/about/>.

⁵ Hugh Tracey, *African Dances of the Witwatersrand Gold Mines* (Roodepoort: African Music Society, 1952), 7.

style. And it is no longer restricted to Black males and is performed by females as well as people from various races and ethnicities. Several prominent musicians including Johnny Clegg and Paul Simon have used gumboot dancing in their musical performances. The rich symbolism of gumboot dancing effectively communicates the pluralistic society from which it was born as well as the social and political changes in the country of its origin.

BRIEF HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA

A deeper understanding of the evolution of gumboot dancing and the musical traditions that surround it requires a brief contextualization of key historical, political, and social events in South Africa's history that influenced gumboot dancing's presence on the world stage today.

On April 27, 1994, I stood with my mother in the election line that wrapped around the circumference of the sports stadium near our home in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Too young to vote, I was still inherently aware of the significance of the day and the historical impact it would have on every aspect of my daily life in South Africa. On May 10, 1994, Nelson Mandela (known by his native name, Madiba, "father") was sworn in as South Africa's first Black president and so began the transition from apartheid to a fully democratic government. The years following would bring remarkable change both to the social landscape and political climate of the country. Racial reconciliation from the previous apartheid regime was seen in every aspect of South African life, especially the arts. At the grassroots level, for me as a White middle-class South African girl, I would share a school desk with students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds for the first time. I would learn native languages unfamiliar to my colonial English ear and I would be exposed to music and dance that would give birth to a new coterie of styles and rhythms.

Years later, as a first-year music teacher, I was challenged by the high school general music curriculum to include gumboot dancing in my instruction. My post-apartheid college music education saw significant revision to all content areas, but

music education still centered around Western art forms with little preparation to teach traditional African music to my diverse student population. So, I did what any good teacher would do: I took to the streets of my hometown to observe and document gumboot dancing in its authentic and varied settings, and my interest began to flourish. It would be another ten years, my departure from South Africa to the United States, and my observance of African American Steppin' before I began to make clear musical, visual, and historical connections between gumboot dancing and Steppin'.

In many ways, gumboot dancing was a symbol of and foreshadowing for Apartheid, a system of oppressive racial segregation implemented between 1948 and 1994 in South Africa by the ethnic White minority who ruled over the Black majority with fear and tyranny. Early Gumboot Dancing represented the defiance of Black people over White totalitarian rule. The forceful movements of dancers exemplified Black South Africans' fight for equal rights and cultural identity. Contemporary gumboot dancing now serves as a visual historical representation of the oppressive reality of Black South Africans' daily lives during their struggle for democracy and highlights the reconciliation of ethnic groups and crossing of cultural barriers established by political and social constructs.

For almost fifty years, apartheid succeeded in separating Blacks and Whites in almost every aspect of life. During this time, many White South Africans were unaware of the rich tradition of African music and dance largely because of the system of education that was in place. The unequal and divided system of education consisted of different education departments separated according to race, geography, and ideology, enhancing the indoctrination of White superiority over Blacks. Education was used as a tool for strengthening divisions within society during apartheid. No indigenous musical arts were included in any White school content areas. In Black schools, English was used as the primary vehicle of education, neglecting the many native languages spoken across the country and marginalizing indigenous tongues. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 reinforced inequalities by restricting knowledge and controlling intellectual development of Black children to ensure subordination through separate education systems, which included the abolishment of traditional cultural practices such as song

and dance in the curriculum. Gumboot dancing was restricted to informal settlements called “townships,” the playgrounds of Black schools, and with permission, in White areas like concert halls.

The implementation of economic sanctions on South Africa in the mid 1980s by foreign countries including the USA was successful in fueling the uprising to pressure the South African government to end apartheid. But sanctions had far-reaching consequences, including a resolution by the United Nations (UN) for “all writers, musicians and other personalities to boycott” South Africa. This formal recommendation continued the limited exposure of gumboot dancing with one exception, Paul Simon’s *Graceland* album. Paul Simon violated the UN’s cultural boycott of South Africa when he collaborated with South African musicians and recorded parts of his album in Johannesburg in 1985. The cross-cultural experimental album was a true synthesis of American and South African cultures that rejoined American music with its roots.⁶ Many controversies surrounded the album’s creation, but its release in 1986 and its success in elevating South African music and dance to the world stage is unquestionable.

In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from Robben Island prison where he spent eighteen of his 27-year sentence as a political prisoner of anti-apartheid. This event was the beginning of a new democratic South Africa that symbolized the end of apartheid and opened doors for the arts, including the exposure of gumboot dancing, such as the 1994 visit by steppers from Alpha Phi Alpha Inc. to the Soweto Dance Theater in Johannesburg. The birth of South Africa’s democracy began with several key legal and symbolic transformations. The first was the creation of a new Constitution approved by the highest court in the land, the Constitutional Court on December 4, 1996.⁷ Prior to 1996, South Africa had adopted three previous constitutions, all of which discriminated and oppressed Black South Africans by denying them basic rights such as the right to vote. The South African Constitution includes a comprehensive list of enumerated rights governed through a parliamentary structure that allocates powers to

⁶ *Under African Skies*, directed by Joe Berlinger (A&E Television Network, 2011).

⁷ South African Government, accessed May 30, 2019, <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996>.

provincial governments as well as a Constitutional court with eleven appointed non-renewable Justices. As can be expected from a country that suffered almost fifty years of racial oppression, human rights are given prominence in the Constitution. The Constitution includes the Bill of Rights, which states that every South African citizen has the inalienable right to life, equality, human dignity, and privacy.

Symbolic transformations included the 1994 adoption of a new national flag and national anthem. As a symbol of democracy and equality, the new flag included six primary colors which began as two paths that converge into one to form a "V" shape. This symbol of unity represents the merging of many aspects of South Africa, including the adoption of eleven official languages, the recognitions and freedom of religion, and unity of the "rainbow nation" which is commonly used to refer to the immense diversity of cultures and traditions in South Africa. In the same year, President Nelson Mandela proclaimed the combination of two songs as the national anthem of the "new" South Africa. The songs included "*Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*," written in 1897 by Black composer, Enoch Sontonga. The song was originally used as a church hymn but would later be recognized as a song of political defiance against the apartheid government. The second song was "The Call of South Africa" written by C.J. Langenhoven in 1918. The combined songs represent five of South Africa's eleven national languages, namely Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and English.

Lyrics	Language	English Translation
<i>Nkosi sikelel' Afrika</i>	Xhosa, Zulu	Lord bless Africa
<i>Maluphakanyisw' uphondo lwayo,</i>		May her glory be lifted high
<i>Yizwa imithandazo yethu, Nkosi</i>		Hear our petitions
<i>sikelela, thina lusapho lwayo.</i>		Lord bless us, your children
<i>Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso,</i>	Sesotho	Lord we ask You to protect our
<i>O fedise dintwa le</i>		nation
<i>matshwenyeho,</i>		Intervene and end all conflicts
<i>O se boloke, O se boloke</i>		Protect us, protect our nation

setjhaba sa heso,

Protect South Africa, South Africa

Setjhaba sa South Afrika - South

Afrika

Uit die blou van onse hemel,

Afrikaans

Out of the blue of our heavens

Uit die diepte van ons see,

Out of the depths of our seas

Oor ons ewige gebergtes,

Over our everlasting mountains

Waar die kranse antwoord gee,

Where the echoing crags resound

Sounds the call to come

English

together,

And united we shall stand,

Let us live and strive for

freedom,

In South Africa our land.

The national anthem of South Africa in many ways mirrors the unique transformations of the country. Not only does the anthem combine two different songs and contain five languages, but it also begins in one melodic key and ends in another. The combination of these distinct characteristics along with the anthem's relatable pulse, alacritous tempo, unique history, and passionate birth have afforded it much international recognition including *The Economist's* Best National Anthem in the World award in 2017. Many of these characteristics can be seen in gumboot dancing that commonly uses different languages, includes a variety of ethnic references in its dance sequences, and epitomizes the African spirit of *Ubuntu*, which means "togetherness."

One of the many contributing factors of gumboot dancing's continued exposure and prominence in South African dance culture is its significant presence in the cultural landscape of the country. Gumboot dancing can be found in all walks of life, including education. Post-apartheid education saw significant revisions along with an emphasis on traditional music and dance in schools. An Outcomes Based Education System focused

on interculturalism with the premises that 1) intercultural relations are better when people are introduced to each other's cultures in schools, and 2) education is better when presented from various perspectives, derived from culturally different social groups.⁸ The fundamentals of education aligned with the societal values, roles, and responsibilities as stated in the new Constitution, such as the right to basic education, the right of equal access to education institutions, the right to choose the language of instruction.

Even though many of us (teachers) were schooled in early post-apartheid South Africa, our first exposures to many indigenous art forms was out of necessity to teach it as part of the prescribed curriculum. In many cases, our students knew more than us. We relied on a combination of teacher-led research and student-based experience to explore indigenous music and dance. We made connections with similar dance forms from popular culture, including Steppin', to help guide our own education.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE ORIGINS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STEPPIN'

A complete historical overview of Steppin' expands beyond the boundaries of this chapter, but the roots of Steppin' have held claims to a variety of influences such as traditional African dance, tap dance, military behaviors, and gumboot dancing. The most widely documented birth of Steppin' is from the founding Black African American Greek fraternities and sororities originating predominantly out of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) but also found at some predominantly White universities in the 1920s. According to Carol Branch, the first African American Black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha Inc., "trace their style of stepping to the boot dancers of South Africa...stepping is a way of honoring their African brothers who struggled under

⁸ Francis Ryan, "The Perils of Multiculturalism: Schooling for the Group," *Educational Horizons*, 71:3 (Spring 1993), 134-138.

European domination.”⁹ The Alphas of Howard University visited Johannesburg in South Africa on two separate documented trips. The first was in the 1960s when cultural exchanges included presentations of gumboot dancing.¹⁰ The second was in 1994 when steppers shared their dance skills with the Soweto Dance Theater. They in turn gave lessons in gumboot dancing to members of the Alphas.

Alpha Phi Alpha Inc. was established in 1906 at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.¹¹ Alpha Phi Alpha Inc. is historically the most widely respected Black fraternity. Well-known members include Martin Luther King Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Bishop John Hurst Adams, Jesse Owens, and Duke Ellington. They are overseen by the collaborative organization that includes nine International Greek fraternities and sororities, the National Pan-Hellenic Council. In 1908, Howard University in Washington, D.C, followed suit by establishing several other fraternities including Alpha Kappa Alpha Inc., the first Black women’s intercollegiate Greek organization founded at a Black university. Among the membership of Alpha Kappa Alpha are Edwidge Danticat, Kamala Harris, Toni Morrison, Phylicia Rashad, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Wanda Sykes.¹²

Since their inceptions, most Black fraternities and sororities have held a long tradition of Steppin’ that has expanded to include national conferences and international competitions such as the National Step League. Steppin’, also known as “blocking,” “hopping,” or “yard steppin’,” was often performed at universities in centrally located areas accessible and visible to students. The earliest documented account of “Yard Steppin’” dates back to the 1930s when it was often used as a vehicle for protest, especially during segregation, as well as a recruiting tool and point of pride for members. Black Hawk Hancock states that “African American reliance on the body as a

⁹ Carol Branch, *Steppin’ Through these Hallowed Halls: Performance in African American Fraternities* (PhD dissertation: University of California Los Angeles, 2001), 134.

¹⁰ Branch, *Steppin’ Through these Hallowed Halls*, 161.

¹¹ Lawrence Ross, *The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2000).

¹² “Notable Members of Alpha Kappa Alpha” accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.theroot.com/notable-members-of-alpha-kappa-alpha-1790874163>

means of expression has a long history tied to racism and economic impoverishment."¹³ Steppin' has historically also been used as a sonic guise for the freedom of expression. Today, Steppin' is an important part of many fraternity and sorority pledging rituals, often requiring members to learn intricate signature steps representative of the fraternity or sorority's rich history. Today's Steppin' is most often found at college homecomings and step competitions. Steppin' is a fast, complex, and powerful ritual performance of group identity that demonstrates both history and innovation and combines a variety of dance styles and music alongside traditional signature steps.¹⁴

The historical and innovative nature of gumboot dancing and Steppin' are recognized by many American choreographers who acknowledge the significant contributions of the African diaspora. The 1960s Black Arts Movement category, "Black Dance," includes a blend of traditional styles alongside contemporary expressive movements which contribute significantly to the culture of dance in America today. Angela Fatou Gittens asserts, "With more awareness of the specific historical background of cultural symbols, traditional dances, music styles, and other types of visual expressivity, African Americans feel more empowered and connected to their African heritage as they make knowledgeable choices to create new versions and fusions of expressive forms based on African traditions."¹⁵ Examples can be found in the educational paths that Steppin' provides as seen with the non-profit organization StepAfrika!, the "first professional company in the world dedicated to the tradition of stepping."¹⁶ Founded in 1994, the company educates its audience on the historical roots of Steppin' with a focus on teamwork and cross-cultural understanding that includes the variety of influences, including Gumboot dancing.

¹³ Black Hawk Hancock, "Steppin' Out of Whiteness," *Ethnography*, 6:4 (2005), 427-461.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Fine, *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Angela Fatou Gittens, "Black Dance and the Fight for Flight: *Sabar* and the Transformation and Cultural Significance of Dance from West Africa to Black America 1960-2010," *Journal of Black Studies*, 43:1 (2012), 49-71.

¹⁶ Step Afrika, accessed June 18, 2019, <https://www.stepafrika.org/company/what-is-stepping/>.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN GUMBOOT DANCING AND STEPPIN'

Portia Maulsby states, "Black people create, interpret, and experience music out of an African frame of reference—one that shapes musical sound, interpretation, and behavior and makes Black music traditions throughout the world a unified whole."¹⁷ Like most other dance styles, neither Steppin' nor gumboot dancing is confined to one primary influence, and limited scholarly works have been published on their evolution. However, many key elements of both dance styles share stylistic features and practices that often make them indistinguishable from each other in performance. The highly rhythmic regimentality of their routines makes it difficult not to see parallels between the two dance styles or to draw conclusions on the comparisons between their musical, visual, and political characteristics.

- **Origins**

African American Steppin' is highly influenced by traditional Subsaharan African dance styles brought to the United States through the Midatlantic Slave Trade. References to this heritage are often explicitly mentioned in step routines, and symbols of Africanism appear in colors, costumes, words, and step names such as Phi Beta Sigma's signature step, "African Step." Some say that the emphasis of rhythmic movement in Steppin' instead of rhythmic drumming was a carryover from the Black slave tradition that maintained traditional tribal rhythms out of necessity because they lacked traditional instruments such as drums. Similarly, the rhythmic movements of gumboot dancing are an amalgamation of various Subsaharan tribal dances that grew out of a need for miners from different tribes to communicate with each other while still maintaining their tribal roots and traditions of music and dance. Gumboot dancing was

¹⁷ Portia Maulsby, "Africanism in African American Music," in Joseph Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture*, 2nd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 185-210.

a unifying practice for Black South African miners who had to navigate the tribal diversities of their coworkers as well as the oppressive practices of the mining executives. Similarly, Black Greek fraternities resorted to Steppin' as a "mutual support vehicle for Black students who found themselves ostracized and discriminated against in a predominantly White environment."¹⁸

Originally, both dance styles were performed primarily by male dancers. But today, these dance styles are not restricted by gender. Gumboot dancing and Steppin' also share the uniqueness of their original performance spaces. Because both styles were essentially banned at their inception¹⁹, their performance space did not resemble those of other dance styles of the times, which usually included a raised platform and seated spaces for audiences. Unlike more traditional performance stages which both contemporary dance forms utilize today especially in competitions, Gumboot dancing and Steppin' were performed using available space that was rarely elevated and provided a close connection with the audience. In the early gumboot dancing traditions of South African miners, the competitive performance spaces were usually available open spaces presented as makeshift arenas sponsored and controlled by the mining executives. Similarly, Steppin' utilized available spaces on campus, such as the quadrangle at Howard University in the mid-1920s favorably referred to as "the Yard."

Steps are learned through oral transmission for both styles. In Steppin' the "step master" usually takes the lead in teaching step routines to pledging members of fraternities and sororities. In gumboot dancing, routines were transferred from the mines to the communities of the miners who lived there. Because of this extension and many other factors, both dance styles have absorbed a variety of influences and are very organic by their very nature. According to Tara Firenzi, "within indigenous African

¹⁸ Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Dancing was prohibited by many administrators during the early years of Black college development (see Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues*, 197).

communities...dance is often based on one's place in the social hierarchy." This sense of status is often represented in both dance styles also.²⁰

- **Movements and Performance**

The movement and performance routines of both dance styles are strikingly similar. Both rely on fast, complex foot work and both were traditionally unaccompanied practices. A step show typically includes an introduction, body, and exit. The introduction is meant to rally the audience, whose participation is integral to the success of the performance. It can also include a skit that represents the theme of their performance as well as various talking sections. The body consists of various choreographed and improvised sequences, and a powerful exit is usually designed to encourage arising applause. Similarly, gumboot dancing relies on strong movements that set the tone for the performance and engage the audience in a rhythmic exploration of history. Several unique exceptions to the similarities between step styles occur in Steppin' as used in children's handclapping games in some earlier sorority step routines as well as contemporary inclusion of Steppin in' pop music dance routines.²¹

In both dance styles, the formation of long sets and circles are common practice. Both dance styles use the circle as a means of audience participation, especially in earlier performances in "the yard" and mining communities. Early gumboot dancers in the Witwatersrand are photographed in arenas where the audience circles the performers.²² Similarly, yard steppin' has been documented in early records at Howard University where students perform in an audience-created circle or enter/exit from a circle.

The synchronized performance movements of Steppin' differentiate from the casual spontaneous step movements exercised in social settings. The latter is often referred to as *yard steppin'* while the former is called *Show Steppin'*. Similarly, gumboot

²⁰ Tara Firenzi, "The Changing Functions of Traditional Dance in Zulu Society: 1830-Present," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 45:3 (2012), 403-425.

²¹ Elizabeth Fine, "Stepping, Saluting, Cracking, and Freaking: The Cultural Politics of African American Step Shows," *The Drama Review*, 25:2 (Summer 1991), 39-59.

²² Tracey, *African Dances of the Witwatersrand Gold Mines*, 7.

dancing is used as a form of solidarity and social dance in many settings that may appear less synchronized or mastered than the performance versions of the same style. The rapid evolution of both dance styles is highly attributable to its competitive nature, which lends itself to constant change and innovation.

Both dance styles flourished with the encouragement of competition, especially when cash awards were presented. Mining executives encouraged gumboot dance competitions that included prizes of food incentives and later monetary awards. Steppin' also gained its competitive edge with the first syndicated stepping competition in 1992, S.T.O.M.P.

- **Sound Color**

Both dance styles rely on a variety of sound colors to connect with their audience. Although Steppin' has evolved to include more speech patterns and musical accompaniment, like gumboot dancing, it still relies primarily on the sound color produced by the body. The dark sounds of powerful stomps produced by shoes on hard surfaces contrast with the color variations produced by crisp thigh slapping, hand clapping, and chest thumping. Individual and paired hand clapping includes complex forehand and back hand motions, and the chest is also a percussive device that provides a darker sound to contrast the sharpness of hand clapping or finger snapping. Gumboot dancing has expanded its sonic repertoire by including the addition of makeshift rattles and shakers tied to the ankles of boots. Similarly, some fraternities and sororities use white canes in their signature steps that enhance the variety of available sound color.

- **Communication**

The speech patterns in both dance styles are predominantly used by the leader of the group. Gumboot dancing calls usually focus on the upcoming dance sequence such as those heard when the leader calls for *singles*, which prompts individual dancers to improvise movements as a solo performance. Many other calls such as *Bopha*, *Voetsak*, and *Aiya* indicate the proceeding dance sequence. The origins of these words are attributed to the mining language of *fanakalo*, a combination of various languages and

original words that created a unique language and allowed mining executives to communicate on a basic level with miners.²³ The gumboot equivalent of *singles* in Steppin' is called *freakin'*. Freakin' is rarely used as a call but rather as a description of improvisational skills. In Steppin', the contrasting terms *cracking* and *saluting* are commonly heard. Cracking was used as ritualized insults and referred to movements that were meant to demean a group; cracking is no longer permitted. Saluting, on the contrary, pays tribute to a group and symbolizes respect.

- **Call-and-Response**

Call-and-response is a musical technique rooted deep in sub-Saharan African music. Its use in Western music appears in various styles such as jazz and hip hop. Call-and-response in gumboot dancing and Steppin' is integral to a performance during which the leader calls, either verbally or through rhythmic movement, and the group responds. The response can be an exact repetition of the call or it can vary from the call. Call-and-response provides the foundation for improvisation, which is a cornerstone of both dance styles. Call-and-response often includes audience response.

- **Polyrhythms and Syncopations**

Polyrhythms and syncopations are common practice in traditional African music. Both dance styles at various times during their performance will utilize these rhythmic features. Polyrhythm, or many rhythms sounding at the same time, adds to the tension of a dance sequence while syncopations, playing off the beat, add to the complexity of the routine. Polyrhythms in Steppin' usually involve canes, with dancers performing one rhythm with the cane while they employ another rhythm with their feet. Similarly, a small group of gumboot dancers will perform one rhythm while another rhythm is layered on top. Incredible skill is required to perform contrasting rhythms at the same time whether by individuals or between groups.

²³ Carol Muller and Janet Topp Fargion, "Gumboots, Bhaca Migrants, and Fred Astaire: South African Worker Dance and Musical Style," *African Music*, 7:4 (1999), 88-109.

- **Emphasis on Individuality**

Both gumboot dancing and Steppin' rely on dance troupes to emphasize their individuality, which manifests in two ways: individual improvisations and group individuality. Although both styles of dance rely heavily on the synchronicity of its dancers, they do not deny the virtuosic talents of individuals, and individual improvisations are common practice. The emphasis on individuality is also seen between dance troupes, especially between fraternities and sororities who include signature steps that identify one group from another. Individuality and the need to constantly create new steps has contributed significantly to the constant creation of new ideas either through synchronous choreography, individual improvisations, or inclusion of props, songs.

- **Audience Participation**

Contemporary gumboot dancing and Steppin' are most commonly choreographed and performed for an audience. But traditionally, both dance styles were not created with an audience in mind. Fraternity and sororities performed steps for each other as a form of camaraderie, and gumboot dancing was a means of connection and communication between miners. Although Steppin' has evolved to rely heavily on group discourse in today's performances, the routines of both dance styles include carefully placed steps that aim to elicit audience responses and participation for successful performance. Both gumboot dancing and Steppin' have also grown beyond the audience to include education in their performing repertoire. Non-profit organizations have used the dance styles to mentor troubled youth.

GUMBOOT DANCING AND STEPPIN' AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING CULTURALLY SENSITIVE LISTENERS

South African gumboot dancing and African American Steppin' are both current, authentic vehicles for teaching students of all ages about the historical, societal, and

aesthetic values of their relevant countries. Because both dance styles were born from the perils of racial discrimination and flourished because of the shared struggles of Black people, they present a unique connection that crosses geographical, ethnic, and racial boundaries and can be used as a creative and tactile medium for learning. But aside from the historical significance of these dances, gumboot dancing and Steppin' also serve as a gateway for the exploration of cultural diversity in general because they are examples of the positive impact of cultural diversity on various mediums, especially the arts.

The United States is home to descendants from many African countries, and the influence of African music is present in many American musical genres. Exploring the visual and sonic experiences of traditional and contemporary African music like gumboot dancing is an accessible and culturally responsive tool for discussing diversity with students. The inclusion of music from various African countries, religions, and traditions especially when they represent the heritage of students in your own classroom is a culturally responsive teaching approach that provides an aural and kinesthetic experience of the rich diversity that surrounds us as well as an opportunity to reflect on our own cultural identifiers and shared cultural values. Experiencing gumboot dancing and African American Steppin' is an opportunity to connect with individual students' roots and to explore cultural diversity by developing culturally sensitive listeners who appreciate things that look and sound different. Instruction that includes active participation in these styles of dance is an effective way for students to diversify their musical repertoire and for teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching approaches. Culturally responsive teaching implements equitable practices in the areas of gender, race, and cultural diversity and provides opportunities for consideration of different opinions and viewpoints (Mason, 2019). Instead of focusing on the differences between race, ethnicity, and culture, these dance forms cross geographical borders to highlight the connection of humanity and the importance of music and dance in our shared lived experiences.

Research has documented the value of movement in the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of all children. Dance allows us to feel what we

hear and hear what we feel. Whether or not an individual has maintained their childhood comfort level with movement into adulthood or not, we can all appreciate the beauty of music and movement and its ability to communicate and inspire. Following is an original instructional lesson that includes gumboot dancing and Steppin' and can be adapted for any age.

GUMBOOT DANCING AND STEPPIN' LESSON

Objective and Activity 1: Students will explore gumboot dancing by watching and listening to authentic examples using the list of recommended resources or other online sources. Students will be able to identify the primary steps in gumboot dancing, including step, stomp, slap, clap.

Objective and Activity 2: Students will discuss the origins of gumboot dancing under the following headings:

- Language diversity: Students will list the most commonly spoken languages spoken in South Africa and explore how gumboot dancing was a way for miners to talk without language as a type of Morse code to communicate secretly in the mines.
- Communication: Students will experience the many languages spoken in South Africa by using common greetings such as *hello* in Xhosa (*Molo*), Zulu (*Sawubona*), Shona (*Mhoro*), and Swahili (*Jambo*).
- Unity: Students will discuss how dancing as a collaborative form of expression served as an act of solidarity between workers in the mines who represented many different ethnic groups. Students will analyze how the synchronous movements of the dancers developed a shared love of music and dance.

Objective and Activity 3: After dividing into pairs, students will take turns to create their own rhythmic patterns through the primary steps of gumboot dancing (step, stomp, slap, clap).

Objective and Activity 4: Students will discuss the background of “*Shosholozza*,” a song that has served as a symbol of freedom from oppression for over 100 years in South Africa. Today, it is considered the country’s second national anthem and is performed at various events, including sporting events and concert halls. The lyrics include a mixture of Zulu and Ndebele words (two of South Africa’s eleven official languages). It is often performed in unison or as a call-and-response. The translation begins with onomatopoeia of the steam train (“*Shoshol*”). The lyrics loosely translate to “Move fast, make way! Here comes the steam train. From far away mountains, the train comes to South Africa.” The lyrics represent the journey by steam train for many tribesmen to the diamond and gold mines of South Africa. The anthem was also used by many as a traditional work song, lending synchronicity among workers and commonly sung with accompanying gumboot dancing.

After learning the historical background of the traditional South African song “*Shosholozza*,” students will be able to compare and contrast differences between an ensemble performance and a call-and-response version; identify the lyrical device of onomatopoeia and the rhythm of mine work; explain the historical components within the lyrics; and analyze the song’s ability to unify individuals into a group.

Shosholozza

Traditional

The musical score is written in 4/4 time. It consists of four staves. The first two staves are labeled 'Call' and 'Response'. The 'Call' part has two lines of music with lyrics: 'Sho - sho - lo - za' and 'ku - le - zo nta - a - ba'. The 'Response' part has two lines of music with lyrics: 'Sho - sho - lo - za' and 'Sti - me - la Sti - me - la'. The third staff continues the 'Call' part with lyrics: 'Wen' u - ya - ba - le - e - ka' and 'ku - le - zo nta - a - ba'. The fourth staff continues the 'Response' part with lyrics: 'Wen' u - ya - ba - le - e - ka' and 'Sti - me - la si - phu - m' South A - fri - ca'.

Objective and Activity 5: While singing “*Shosholozza*,” students will participate in an accessible gumboot dance routine.

1. Requirements: Students are encouraged to wear gumboots and to use noise makers such as plastic bags, bubble wrap or shakers tied around the boot for additional sound colors.
2. Actions: Bend at the knee
Use small steps
Variety of stomp dynamics including single/double stomps
Slap the boot at the ankle with open hand
Include claps, jumps, and turns

Objective and Activity 6: Students will read Alexandra Pajak's poem "An African American Step Show"²⁴ and discuss the reference to South Africa and the poem's ties to both Steppin' and African music:

Thirteen approach the stage dressed as fat policemen.
Teeth of plastic, some incisors "knocked" out,
Afro wigs like black galaxies spinning
Into the gym's rusting bleachers and five hundred faces.
Sauntering onto stage then into single file.

Militaristic. Bold. Right.

[Stomp] Alpha! [Stomp] Phi! [Stomp] Alpha! [Cheers] [Stomp]
Strip their stuffed costumes, swing those plastic smiles
Behind them. The wigs slide slowly off, peel
As—[Stomp] Ladies...! [Stomp] Ladies...! [Stomp]
Air swallows sweat, dimness a dirge. [Stomp]
The wooden platform is a shadow, shoes
Step on South African soil. [Stomp] [Stomp] [Stomp]

²⁴ Alexandra Pajak, "An African American Step Show," *North American Review*, 297:2 (Spring 2012), 12.

Gumboot miners of the darkened heart
 Dance tonight, today's shells, ancient souls.
 Straight line proclaiming a swelling pride.
 The heavy bass of the speakers blare
 The King's heartbeat:
 We here. We now. We Step.

Objective and Activity 7: Students will discuss the African American tradition of Steppin' after screening authentic examples of African American Steppin' from the list of recommended resources or other online sources. They will compare and contrast the physical movements and historical origins of Steppin' and gumboot dancing.

RESOURCES

Countless video and audio sources are available for teachers who wish to explore the dance styles of gumboot dancing and Steppin' for various culturally relevant topics in the classroom. The Putumayo Kids Series serves as a good introduction to the unique musical colors, styles, and rhythms of African and South African music and includes *African Playground*, *African Dreamland*, and *South Africa*.²⁵ The sounds of LadySmith Black Mambazo, the Soweto Gospel Choir, Hugh Masekela, Johnny Clegg, The Black Umfolosi 5, or Paul Simon's *Graceland* album will provide a strong rhythmic base for accompanying gumboot dancing.²⁶ Limited notation of gumboot dancing can be found in scholarly articles including "The Diversity of African Musics: Zulu Kings, Xhosa Clicks, and Gumboot Dancing in South Africa," "Gumboot Dancing: An Introduction," and "A Preliminary Study of Gumboot Dance."²⁷ The online repositories of Smithsonian

²⁵ Putumayo Kids, *African Playground* (CD, 2003); Putumayo Kids, *African Dreamland* (CD, 2008); Putumayo Kids, *South Africa* (CD, 2010).

²⁶ Paul Simon, *Graceland* (CD, Warner Brother, 1986).

²⁷ Nicola Mason, "The Diversity of African Musics: Zulu Kings, Xhosa Clicks, and Gumboot Dancing in South Africa," *General Music Today*, 27:2 (2014), 35-50; Janice Evans, "Gumboot Dancing: An Introduction," *Orff Beat*, 39 (2010), 19-20; Carol Ann

Folkways Recordings and the International Library of African Music contain accessible and authentic audio sources for gumboot dancing. *Understanding African Music* is designed for high school and introductory level college students who want to learn about the fundamentals of African music that includes gumboot dancing.²⁸ Documentaries abound that highlight the historical and stylistic features of gumboot dancing include *Stomp it Out!*, *Gumboots*, *Gumboot Dancers of South Africa*, *Dances of Southern Africa*, and countless YouTube instructional videos highlighting the versatility of the dance style.²⁹

Steppin' saw its debut in cinematography with Spike Lee's 1988 movie *School Daze*. Since then many contemporary movies have included Steppin' as a backdrop to their stories including *Mac and Me* (1988), *Drumline* (2002), *How She Move* (2007), *Stomp the Yard* (2007), *Step Sisters* (2018), and various *Sesame Street* episodes.³⁰ Documentaries provide both an historical and culturally authentic story, such as in *Stepping* (1998) and *Step* (2017).³¹ The most extensive publications on Steppin' include *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows* (2003), "Steppin' through These Hallowed Halls" (2001), and *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American*

Muller and Janet Topp, *A Preliminary Study of Gumboot Dance* (Honors Thesis: University of Natal, Durban, 1985).

²⁸ Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, accessed June 18, 2019, <https://folkways.si.edu>; International Library of African Music, accessed June 18, 2019, <https://www.ru.ac.za/ilam>; Mandy Carver, *Understanding African Music* (Grahamstown, International Library of African Music, 2012).

²⁹ *Stomp it Out!*, directed by Rachel Dickinson (2014); *Gumboots*, directed by Bauke Brouwer (2012); *Gumboot Dancers in South Africa*, directed by Sipho Mpongo (2017); *Dances of Southern Africa*, directed by Alfred Gei Zantzing, (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology).

³⁰ *Step Sisters*, directed by Chares Stone III (Los Angeles Media Fund, 2018); *Stomp the Yard*, directed by Sylvain White (Screen Gems, 2007); *Mac and Me*, directed by Stewart Raffill (Orion Pictures, 1988); *Drumline*, directed by Charles Stone III (20th Century Fox, 2002); *How She Move*, directed by Ian Iqbal Rashid (Paramount Vantage, 2007); "Sesame Street: Steppin'," (Sesame Street, 2011).

³¹ *Step*, directed by Amanda Lipitz (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017); *Stepping*, directed by Tom Mould (Folkstreams, 1998).

Dance (1996).³² Stepping has been used as a platform for education as seen in The Art of Stepping (AOS), a unique “privately held educational services firm that provides curriculum, educational & enrichment STEAM focused programs... AOS programs mainly help academicians, educators, parents and program participants get excited about STEAM learning by teaching them how to create & perform their own personalized Step & Dance choreography.”³³

CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural comparisons of the performance influences of South African gumboot dancing and African American Steppin’ are a historically rich means of exploring political and social histories. The deep historical significance of communal music-making among Africans and African Americans as well as the ethnic distinctiveness of the movements, music, and symbolism also connect gumboot dancing and Steppin’ on philosophical levels. Unlike many other dance forms that serve as a resource for distinguishing one ethnic group from another, the origins of both gumboot dancing and Steppin’ highlight the reconciliation of ethnic groups as well as serve a symbolic reminder of past discriminations. Both dance forms have transcended their original intent of communication and solidarity to shape the shared cultural memory and identity of various ethnic and racial groups. Both styles of dance inherently cross cultural barriers established by past political and social constructs and are widely accepted popular dance forms that serve to unite and educate through music and movement.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the traditional African name for gumboot dancing? What does it mean?
How does this name represent the historical origins of gumboot dancing?

³² Fine, *Soulstepping*; Branch, *Steppin’ Through these Hallowed Halls*; Malone, *Steppin’ on the Blues*.

³³ Art of Stepping, accessed on June 1, 2019, <http://www.artofstepping.com>.

2. What other names are often used in reference to Steppin'? How do these names represent the historical origins of Steppin'?
3. "Gumboot dancing and Steppin' are no longer restricted by place, purpose, or person." What are the places, purposes, and persons referred to in this statement?
4. Discuss ways that learning about gumboot dancing and Steppin' in the classroom can assist in developing cultural sensitivity in students.

Writing Prompt

Are South African gumboot dancing and African American Steppin' homogenous or diverse dance styles? Why or why not? Consider their traditional origins and contemporary applications. Provide supporting evidence for your opinion. Select one audio or visual example for gumboot dancing and Steppin' from the list of recommended sources or online sources. Analyze the sounds and steps using the five categories of movements, sound color, costumes, call-and-response, and polyrhythms and provide your own analysis for both dance styles.