



## Mobilizing Dance/Traumatizing Dance: *Kongonya* and the Politics of Zimbabwe

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**K***ongonya* is a dance born of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle of the 1970s against the white Rhodesian regime of Ian Smith. *Kongonya* was grown and nurtured as the guerrillas and peasants together executed what is called the Second Chimurenga—the stage of armed struggle carried out by the armed wings of the Patriotic Front (PF), also known as the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU PF), and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF ZAPU).<sup>1</sup> The First Chimurenga was the 1896–1897 war of resistance against the British colonial forces in which the Africans of Zimbabwe were defeated, resulting in the creation of the settler colony, Rhodesia. Mbuya Nehanda was one of the spiritual leaders of that war of resistance or “uprising.” After being captured by colonial forces, Mbuya Nehanda refused to be converted to Christianity, and was hanged. She is said to have defiantly performed a traditional dance and prophesied that “my bones will rise,” meaning another Chimurenga “uprising” would follow. Leaders of both the Second and Third Chimurenga have always turned to the First Chimurenga as a cultural reference point to justify their deeds, some of which Mbuya Nehanda might never have condoned had she lived to see them.<sup>2</sup>

Previously analyzed Zimbabwean dances include those associated with major Shona subcultures. (The Shona people who include the Zezuru, Karanga, and Manyika, are the largest ethnic grouping in Zimbabwe; they speak the Shona language.) The Zezuru, the Karanga, and the Manyika subcultures have, respectively, recognizable cultural dances such as *jerusarema*, *mbakumba*, and *muchongoyo*; these dances can function as courtship, ceremonial, or ritual (Asante 2000).<sup>3</sup> I, however, see *kongonya* as markedly different from earlier dances. I initially conceptualized this 1970s dance as transcending ethnic boundaries—a dance with popular national appeal born out of a desire for a wider cultural independence—a conception no longer as stable and acceptable today. My argument is that *kongonya* has played an important, previously unacknowledged sociopolitical role in Zimbabwe. Disturbingly, it appears that *kongonya* has been mobilized to benefit ruling party politicians before and after independence.

However, since *kongonya* only emerged in Zimbabwe with the 1970s war for independence, I take my analysis of it from my recollections of those later years, and after. During the 1970s liberation struggle, *kongonya* was danced at all night political meetings (*pungwe*) called by ZANU PF guerrillas. *Pungwes* were meetings held in the bush, where guerrillas lectured the peasants (amidst song

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and *kongonya* dance) about the justice and necessity of the war against the Rhodesian regime. For a people waging a war of liberation, *kongonya* facilitated political mobilization, morale boosting, psychological anchoring, and, above all, a comforting sense of the ordinary in an otherwise traumatic context. But in the independence years—especially after 2000—the values that *kongonya* dance had become associated with were subverted, and became contestable.

I present here what I have seen and gathered about *kongonya* since my childhood. I have widely consulted those linked to it through personal interviews and testimonies; I also offer a historical exposé of the contexts giving rise to *kongonya*, particularly the wartime *pungwe*, the contemporary political rally, the 2000 land reform program, and the 2003 gala phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> I am particularly interested in *kongonya* because I suspect the dance has undergone a significant functional metamorphosis: though originally well intentioned (particularly during the 1970s liberation struggle against colonial rule), in post-2000 Zimbabwe, those intentions have become distorted.

However, because *kongonya* was originally performed during the 1970s war, and since major participants of the war traveled across the country's provinces, *kongonya* was spread as far as the war went, and, therefore, could not be pinned down to one cultural location. Arguably, it weaned people from the limitations of regionalist definitions and styles of dance. Instead of *kongonya* being a Zezuru, Karanga, or Manyika dance, it was the Zezuru together with the Karanga and Manyika dancing *kongonya*. But peasants who danced it then never consciously linked *kongonya* to narrow political party thinking. Etymologically, however, the literal meaning of the word “*kongonya*” derives from the Shona lexical term “*kongonyara*,” which describes the swaggering movement of a mature male baboon, or from the saying, “*Masvanhikongonya kutarisana kwevakarambana*” (the defiant and mocking stares or gapes of those who have permanently terminated a love relationship or divorced). A war song of mockery related to *kongonya* says, “*Mabhunu sori yayaya, sori maruza*” (Shame Boers, you have lost the war). Guerrillas, collaborators, and parents danced provocatively to such songs. The *kongonya* had staying power because of the generally defiant mood and stance of the oppressed peasants.

While historians generally focus on big events and consequences, this article ferrets out the seemingly small and innocent catalysts of those outcomes. Historians tell us that in 1966, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) of the ZANU PF made its first armed incursions into Zimbabwe, engaging in battle in one incident with the Rhodesian soldiers at Chinhoyi town (Bhebe 1999). They tell us that guerrillas were defeated and that they retreated, leading to the indecisive lull of 1966–1971. Historians also argue that the Chinhoyi incident, though a failure, was a learning point for the ZANU PF. Apparently, the guerrillas had been routed because the masses—uneducated in the philosophy of liberation—had cooperated with the state soldiers. The year 1972, however, marked the decisive turning point in the fortunes of the war of liberation that came to be known as the Second Chimurenga (Chung 2007). Here, dance played a significant role in mobilizing and politically educating the peasants in an atmosphere of apparent entertainment. Interviewees believe that *kongonya* not only got participants into the spirit of war, but it also invoked a kind of spiritual hypnosis associated with ritual beliefs where its performers believed (albeit incredibly) in the invincibility of the “spirit-protected” *kongonya*-dancing guerrillas and their supporters. Chinyowa (2001) notes how the *pungwe* (the mother of *kongonya*) typified the *bira* (a traditional ritual ceremony involving late night dancing, where the spirit of a dead family member is accepted into the family of ancestors) as being highly participatory, with the dance involving cultural healing, spiritualism, song, dance, and drama. The *pungwe* was, however, more than just an occasion for cultural intercourse and political indoctrination through *kongonya*, song, and speech. It was also a psychologically massaging and lulling performance: “Taken as a long communal journey through the night, the *pungwe* was also a social gathering that helped to release the people's tension arising from the pressures of the armed struggle” (Chinyowa 2001, 14).

Despite such evidence, nationalist historians have ignored the important role that *kongonya* played in changing the complexion of the Second Chimurenga in favor of the guerrillas. In the Second

Chimurenga, mass mobilization involved the use of song and dance at *pungwes*. Maoist teachings, which ZANU PF followed, advocated that revolutionary parties should establish an atmosphere within the state where masses were "... like water and the guerrillas the fish who inhabit it" (Bhebe 1999, 94). At *pungwes*, through speech, song, and dance, villagers were reminded of their grievances against the white settler colonialists (Bhebe 1999). Dance, as a site of cultural production, reminded the colonized people that they could reclaim their pride through cultural expressiveness. Notwithstanding this, researchers have neglected to probe the explicit and implicit influence *kongonya* had on the overall equation of liberation. As interviews I held with peasants [responses are interspersed in this article] seem to confirm, politicians and guerrillas understood all too well the value of *kongonya*, and they exploited it—a fact that historians and even dance researchers have passed over in silence (Asante 2000; Bhebe 1999; Pongweni 1982; Thram 2003).

Zimbabwean art criticism, not unlike art criticism globally, lacks serious dance discourse. Actually, there has been sparse writing on Zimbabwean dance. Asante (2000) has codified the traditional *jerusarema* and *muchongoyo* dances of the Shona and Ndebele. But these are not the only big dances. Pongweni (1982) translated "the songs that won the independence of Zimbabwe" into English, but ignored the accompanying victory dances. Zindi (2003) writes biographies of popular Zimbabwean musicians, commenting on musical developments, recording, and financial challenges, but does not discuss the accompanying pop dance. Thram's (2003) work on *dandanda*, though instructive on its therapeutic functions, does not suggest similar functions in other Zimbabwean dances.<sup>5</sup> Virtually nothing has been written on the mobilizing function of *kongonya* in colonial Zimbabwe, or how the independent state has tried to enlist the dance in its fight against a new political opposition and white farmers. On the other hand, in post-2000 Zimbabwe, the gala phenomenon has keenly interested both civilians and politicians, particularly for its renewed possibilities of promulgating *kongonya*. Yet research has not successfully delineated the place of *kongonya* as either a liberating or traumatizing dance with full artistic, or politically communicative, significance.

If politicians used *kongonya* both as a tool to mobilize indigenous Zimbabweans against settler domination during the years of British colonialism, they also used *kongonya* to coerce and manipulate Zimbabwean nationals to support and identify with Zimbabwe's 2000 *jambanja* (a Shona term for disorganized violence describing the forceful repossession and redistribution of the formerly white settler-owned farms by blacks; the violence was spearheaded by ZANU PF war veterans who christened it the Third Chimurenga).

This article outlines the hitherto neglected role *kongonya* played in furthering the interests of the Second Chimurenga that ended with independence in 1980. It then explores the changing character of *kongonya* during the Third Chimurenga, the period of post-2000 independent Zimbabwe. I examine the transformation of the dance in these differing political climates in order to explain the spontaneous (or subtle) influence of *kongonya* in the continuum from the Second to the Third Chimurenga.

## The Second Chimurenga, *Pungwes* and *Kongonya*

Nationalist historians underestimate the political contributions of *kongonya* dance by creating an impression that the peasants, whose grievances coincided with those of nationalists, willingly accepted the demagoguery of the political commissars (Muzondidya 2009). Such analyses have tended to project the material justification of the war. By so doing, they ignored the fact that for those unarmed participants, ordinary life had to continue amidst the guerrillas and Rhodesian soldiers' gun battles over those grievances. Thus, they minimized the crucial role played by art in general and dance in particular—oiling the morale and mentality of collaborators and villagers. Below, I offer an account of one of my first encounters with *kongonya* being performed at a *pungwe* held in

the bush. It was at the height of the military confrontation between guerrillas and the Rhodesian army.

... The time was around 10:00 p.m., sometime in 1978. Great fires illuminated a radius of thirty meters or so, beyond which pitch darkness stretched darkly into the crouching savanna bushes. This was a typical *pungwe*. After introducing a political speech, the presumably most educated and articulate guerrilla (known as a political commissar) punctuated it with revolutionary song and *kongonya*. On that night, he passionately led the chorus “*Sori Yayayaya, Sori Mabhunu*” (“Very sorry, Boers, You will lose the war”). The villagers, parents, collaborators, young boys and girls who huddled together between the fire and darkness responded to the tune. The song suddenly rose into a defiant crescendo that was carried kilometers away, compelling some guerrillas (and a few villagers) to dance *kongonya*. As they sang and danced, both the guerrillas and peasants seemed oblivious to the dangers posed by possible ambushes by the Rhodesian forces, instead pinning their hopes on myths of the spiritual intervention by spirit mediums such as *Mbuya Nehanda*, *Kaguvi*, and *Chaminuka* whom they invoked through song and *kongonya*.<sup>6</sup> From the walls of darkness, more and more guerrillas rushed into the firelight and danced *kongonya*, waving their assault rifles in the air. Thereafter, collaborators (guerrilla assistants) popularly known as *mujibhas* (male couriers) and *chimbwidos* (female morale boosters) joined in the dancing—wriggling their posteriors provocatively. As “the spirit of war” seemed to possess the dancers, they began to form into clear serpentine patterns with a lead dancer; the others, as followers, going into line position and clutching the waist of the dancer in front. They rhythmically danced in that human chain fashion, gyrating their waists and stamping the ground until the lead dancer found and clutched the waist of the last dancer in line, marking an area around which they formed a tight circular enclosure. Then they danced, a combination of abundant waist swirling, hopping, and jogging steps, retreating to the center before returning to mark their boundary. The atmosphere became so infectious during the *kongonya* dancing that even we, small boys and girls, joined in and grabbed the waist of anybody from behind, and started stamping the ground with our feet, while whirling our waists and whistling in excitement and abandonment. That was when the otherwise nervous civilians literally mingled with the guerrillas, dancing as equal participants.

As I later reflected on that evening, I realized that *kongonya* was vital for instilling and spreading the values of liberty, patriotism, and self-respect among the peasants as, between bouts of political education, they danced (or watched others dance) a dance they associated with their liberators. I also perceived that *kongonya* promoted a sense of group identity and reciprocity, both among and between guerrillas and villagers; they danced together and jointly appealed to the spirits of war. I noted that the influence of *kongonya* was demonstrated in the *pungwe*-goers’ unconscious acceptance of the power that unseen forces possessed to intervene and protect them from the enemy—an enemy who, most presumably, could have heard the noise, but was perhaps rendered too weak by the dance itself to attack. Otherwise, how could it be imagined that joyful dancing could be juxtaposed with bloody warfare? Finally, I also reflected that *kongonya* was an effective mobilization tool because it excited dancing amidst a context of colonial repression and war; *kongonya* engendered the feeling in the oppressed masses that a little more sacrifice would procure them everlasting joy and celebratory dances. As for the young boys and girls, the sheer love of *kongonya* dance and the opportunity *pungwes* offered the youths to freely express themselves, in an otherwise restricted and dangerous political climate, encouraged them to attend almost every other *pungwe*. I remember one night outwitting my father, who had directed me not to attend that night’s *pungwe*, by simply waiting in the dark as he proceeded to the meeting; then I joined a group that was behind him and followed it to the *pungwe* to enjoy *kongonya*.

In my desire, years later, to give a linguistic account of *kongonya*, I closely watched three couples dancing *kongonya* at a belated 2010 ZANU PF election victory celebration party held in a village in Masvingo province, and I scrutinized their dance routines. My intention was to come up with a description of *kongonya* as a dance with specific moves and influence among Zimbabweans. I also asked these male and female dancers (and watchers), who were mostly from the rural areas, what they knew about *kongonya* and whether they thought the dance contributed to our understanding of Zimbabwean politics. It should be understood that not everyone who attends a ZANU PF political function is a genuine supporter of that party and its culture. The following is my linguistic identification of *kongonya* dance as it was performed at that political function.

Watching the couples dance, it became evident that *kongonya* dance requires great physical stamina. Their dance routines went through a few basic moves. They began from a hopping position, the women in front and the men behind. Then they sprang, and stamped their feet through space to the rhythm of the lyrics of revolutionary songs. Their waists, poised in an arch, allowed the pelvis to propel as the dance moves progressed. In another impassioned move, each had one hand hold the side of the head while the other hand held the outside hip—a mockery gesture reflected in the face.

Apart from horizontally pounding the ground, the couples also twisted and wove their legs repeatedly about the knees, and twirled their thighs vigorously. A characteristic group move also had the female in front, followed by a male. Everyone absent-mindedly clasped the pelvis area of the leading partner. Both feet stamping the ground at the same time, dancers gyrated, enchanted. With the human chain broken, dancers danced facing each other, challenging each other for the furthest thrust, culminating in an embracing dance whose moves are reminiscent of the vibrant polycentric hip shaking of the traditional *jerusarema* dance recognized by Asante (2000).

Here, I observed that *kongonya* dancers invoked what Thram (2003) considers as Zimbabwean dance's ritual function of reconnecting participants with ancestors. Zimbabwe's liberation war has been linked with spiritualism, particularly with the spirit mediums of the 1896 First Chimurenga uprising (Nehanda and Kaguvi), to whom *kongonya* has been dedicated (Chung 2007). ZANU PF politicians have appealed to these ancestors of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle through dance, song, and rhetoric. Again, *kongonya* has always been the performed dance during the Second Chimurenga liberation struggle, the Third Chimurenga, and during campaign rallies for national elections. Born in the popular liberation war, *kongonya* was about Zimbabwean patriotism—a dance expressing the people's consciousness, defiance, and courage. A female dancer said: "During the 1970s war, dancing *kongonya* made us cope with a very harsh situation: racial and gender oppression, violence of war as experienced by civilians caught between trained armies, and also coming to terms with the blood of relatives killed in crossfire, or as we watched. Vigorous dance was necessary in order to forget." Such utterances imply that *kongonya* played a practical, psychological, and spiritual role in a war situation fraught with political tension. Both the guerrillas and the civilians needed *kongonya*: the guerrillas to bring the peasants bodily and mentally closer to them, and the civilians as a cushion against a latent fear of their predicament.

Interviewees noted how *kongonya* served a sociopolitical purpose through a defiant reaffirmation and restaging of the traditional dances. *Kongonya*, therefore, provided a countercultural response to colonialism, which had sought to suppress all forms of dance considered uncomely and sexually explicit. Asante (2000) has elsewhere noted that certain Zimbabwean dances including *mbende/jerusarema* had been repressed and outlawed by European missionaries and colonialists for being "licentious." In a further reference to the spiritual and ritualistic nature of the occasion of *kongonya* dance, Chinyowa (2001, 14) hints, "[T]he Shona people believed that a harmonious combination of melodious song, skilled instrumentation, and rhythmic body movements would create a complete

ritual experience.” All these are in keeping with the interviewees’ agreement that *kongonya* played a crucial socio-political-cultural role during the resistance war against British colonialism and Christian cultural imperialism. *Kongonya*, then, was a dance that ritualistically fused kinesic rhythmic movements and revolutionary lyrics in a communal performance of human and psychological interaction—for political purposes. The spontaneous hip and waist gyrations were originally an expression of defiance by a society that refused to see all its dances as “wild” or “exotic” (when viewed by Western eyes), but as an expression of cultural independence. The circular, or enclosure format, of the dance was symbolic of the defined Zimbabwean territorial space to be defended against outsiders. Dancing *kongonya* helped forge a oneness and a national identity in a period of political strife.

By dancing *kongonya* alongside the often-mystified and vilified guerrillas (“terrorists” and “bandits”), villagers likely came to accept them as ordinary human beings. For the much-traveled and war-harassed fighters, the dance also offered a psychological tonic. Through dancing *kongonya*, bum jive, or Swahili dances learned in Tanzania or Kenya, the guerrillas could cope with homesickness.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, dancing *kongonya* helped ingratiate the guerrillas with the masses, and allayed thoughts about desertion, mutiny, or joining the salaried Rhodesian army.

At the height of the country’s liberation struggle, the persecution or execution of perceived and confessing “sellouts” and “witches” at *pungwes* (Chung 2007) was often preceded by *kongonya*.<sup>8</sup> Thus, *kongonya* appeared to be a social and political tool that persuaded the people to accept war-time realities. The dance seemed to help in psyching people up for such violent acts. I was around ten years old when the Zimbabwean liberation war mood intensified in the rural and commercial farming areas of Masvingo. I would sometimes carry our supersonic record player (guerrillas expected families who owned record players to avail them for entertainment purposes) to a *pungwe* (where it would be played overnight), and would bring it home at dawn. I saw that in some cases, after much *kongonya* and song, the guerrillas would randomly ask anyone from among the dancing civilians to thrash a suspected “sellout.” Hence, *kongonya* acted as a psychologically stabilizing or hypnotizing tool, and also as a preparatory backdrop to violence. While that could be defended for the reasons of seeking freedom from the white settler regime, it is difficult today to justify the ZANU PF politicians’ persistent reinvention of this cultural rallying point—*kongonya*—to traumatize their political opponents in the subsequent post-independence Third Chimurenga and post-2000 national elections.

The ZANU PF government that spearheaded *jambanja* following 2000 had embarked on a drive to resuscitate that party’s waning influence, appease the overcrowded rural population, and also punish the white farmers for supporting the newly formed Movement for Democratic Change party (MDC) (Raftopoulos 2009). *Jambanja*, or the Third Chimurenga, as the much acclaimed land reform exercise came to be known, was soon hijacked by powerful members of the ruling party who used party supporters to take over farms on their behalf. While politicians became multiple farm owners (like some white settlers before them), the majority of rural farmers remained largely landless.<sup>9</sup> However, to legitimize the discredited and flawed land reform exercise, the ruling party saliently used song and *kongonya*, thrusting the landless masses at the front to lead in the land invasions. As the people took over the farms in acts of dramatic performance (often before television cameras), they sang revolutionary songs of the 1970s and danced *kongonya*.

### ***Jambanja*, the Third Chimurenga, and *Kongonya***

Beginning in 2000, Zimbabwe embarked on the controversial Third Chimurenga, an “often violent take-over of white owned farms” (Masunungure 2009, 81). For the *jambanja* to appear credible, ZANU PF revisited the old war tactics of song and dance that made it appear that ordinary people dictated the pace of the process. It has been widely publicized how the aggressive land grabbers

would arrive at a white man's farm, singing and dancing. After the white farmer had come out to inquire, the party youths would announce the takeover of the farm, then, turning to the psychological weapons of *kongonya* and song, encircle the farmer. Farmers became traumatized and abandoned their farms and property; some were killed. Below is an account by a participant "land invader," an acquaintance of mine, who is now an A1 farmer in one of the former white farms in Chatsworth, near Masvingo town.<sup>10</sup> They wanted to remind the white farmer to leave the house in three days since the government had "repossessed" the farm.

... We danced in twos, then as a group. Finally, we danced in a line going right round the farmhouse fence. Though initially I was not so sure of how this whole thing would end, dancing the enthralling, hip-shaking *kongonya*, singing and gesticulating scornfully put me in the mood of self-given freedom associated with the Second Chimurenga where no one is really in charge but your own emotions. The farmer locked his family and himself in the big house. Now and then, he would peep out from behind the curtains, but no police would intervene since this was not a criminal but a political case. After making sure that the farm owner had got the message, the commander told us to go back to our bases in the farmland where tree clearing had already started. ...

The above account, once again, demonstrates the mobilization and cheering effects of *kongonya*; however, this time twenty years after independence. It also shows how *kongonya* promoted fear and trauma in a targeted spectator. Through dancing, the youth and party vigilantes mentally prepared themselves to mete out violence to the farmer, his laborers, and MDC party members. That could be the reason why interviewees viewed *kongonya* as a dance into unconsciousness, madness, and murder. Instead of putting dancers into positive spirits, *kongonya* sometimes tended to facilitate their transmutation from rationalism. On post-2000 use of *kongonya*, one nondancer observed:

It seems the politicians' attempts at the total control of the youths' bodies is through the realization of intensive *kongonya* by the youths themselves. Leaders let beer flow down the throats of, and music and song drown the ears of the youths. When the youth begin to dance *kongonya* with abandonment, the ZANU PF politicians know the youths are ready to commit political crime for them, intimidate the opposition. They are like possessed party spirits who do not feel responsible for the violence.

Simply put, *kongonya* seemed to be an instrument of overwhelmingly coercive power, preparing participants for the roles they would play.

It has been documented how during the 2002 and 2005 election campaign process, and in the run-up to the June 2008 presidential runoff elections, bases were opened where opposition members were tortured and politically re-educated (Masunungure 2009). Disappointingly, nothing has been written about how the persecutors' mocking *kongonya* dance and the victim's being asked to dance it were just as important as the lacerations or mutilations on the victim's back and buttocks in ZANU PF's agenda to naturalize and perpetuate rejected rule.

I asked my cousin, an unemployed General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) graduate, about what went on in the bases, since he was compelled to go there. He told me that because (in Gutu district, for instance) the MDC party had won four out of five constituencies in the March 2008 election, ZANU PF had clearly changed its campaign tactics for the June presidential re-run, declaring that the people had voted wrongly. Rural folk were expected to voluntarily visit the base to show loyalty to the ZANU PF government. At the base, captured members of the MDC were beaten, forced to surrender their party regalia, and denounce their party leader in preference for the party that had brought their freedom to vote. He added:



... Part of the day would consist of political teaching, singing of revolutionary songs and dancing *kongonya*. All returning errant men and women, especially the youths, would be expected to give their testimony, sing revolutionary songs, and dance *kongonya*. We danced *kongonya* until we didn't care what happened to our neighbors, to our parents, or to ourselves. *Kongonya* was the right tonic; it diverted you from thinking deeply about other things but only the rightness of what we were being taught. How they so wished that to dance *kongonya* meant you supported ZANU PF, to dance *kongonya* meant you agreed with ZANU PF ideology—an ideology antagonistic to the regime change agenda of the foreign backed MDC!

Pinning its hopes on the new but partisan media and culture industry, to appeal for support to a wider audience and to criticize opponents of the 2000 *jambanja*, the Zimbabwean government (through the Ministry of Information and Publicity) introduced the gala concept, conceived along the lines of all-night *pungwe* dance sessions. *Kongonya* and revolutionary music were henceforth broadcast from sports stadiums via the single state television channel. The much-attended galas, which, incidentally, brought *kongonya* to city stages, would present a veneer of unity among Zimbabweans, as far as their government's policies were concerned, to viewers and the world. Music and dance would concretize these ideas in the minds of otherwise doubting twenty-first century Zimbabweans and a suspicious global village. However, the changing political tide unleashed by the MDC was by then too strong to stem, leading to the inconclusive March 2008 harmonized elections and, subsequently, the bloody June 27 presidential re-run elections.

## Zimbabwe After 2000: The Place of Galas and *Kongonya* Videos

During Zimbabwe's 2000 *jambanja* and after political and economic meltdown, the government continued to manipulate the people's love of dance. The Ministry of Information and Publicity exploited every opportunity to gain political advantage for ZANU PF in the guise of promoting Zimbabwean culture and dance. For example, there were Independence Day galas, Heroes Day splashes, Unity Day *pungwes*, and commemorations of deceased senior politicians—namely *Mzee Bira* for Simon Muzenda and *Mdhala Wethu* Gala for Joshua Nkomo (both former vice presidents). The gala concept, which gained fame after 2003 (a time when ZANU PF was losing popularity), became an attempt to reincarnate the 1970s wartime *pungwe*. The *pungwe* had itself been “a form of a *bira* in disguise,” with partakers appealing to departed spirits of *Chimurenga* to direct the ongoing liberation struggle (Chinyowa 2001, 14).<sup>11</sup> Both established and amateur musicians were invited *en masse* to perform to thousands of urban music and dance fans. These galas resembled political meetings. I realized that ZANU PF politicians hoped to influence the fortunes of the nation through the gala. Key politicians also attended the galas I attended; they attempted a *kongonya* move, uttered slogans, and threw in political speeches. They looked to tradition and culture, to wartime party authenticity, and to new technology to win the support of a disenchanting populace. The following is my account of the symbolism of the 2006 *Mzee Bira* at Mucheke Stadium in Masvingo town:

The stage foreground, which would possibly be viewed worldwide, was bedecked with images and symbols surrounding Mzee (Vice President, Simon Muzenda) that embodied the successful transformation from subsistence farming to mechanized agriculture. The posters and imagery of tractors and farm implements personified the success of Zimbabwe's land reform program, hence the need to celebrate the deeds of gallant founders of the agrarian nation through *kongonya*. On stage, the several ministers and politicians danced *kongonya* to music by a liberation fighter turned musician, Comrade Chinks, “Hondo yakura muZimbabwe, hondo yeminda.”<sup>12</sup> On Independence Day in 1980, he had sung it to the accompaniment of *kongonya*, as Prince Charles waited to officially bring down the Union Jack for the last time.

I consider these galas and *bira* to be a performance of a desired political reality—that ZANU PF, the originators of *kongonya*, are still in full control, as evidenced by their dominance everywhere, dramatized in the cultural arena where *kongonya* is superimposed over and above all other dances.

I also witnessed the evolving of an unhappy situation: the musician/dancer was caught up in an ambiguous role in terms of social justice. For instance, established musicians known for attracting large crowds and being popular with fans because they criticized the state and social inequalities were being co-opted to lend credence to galas. On the other hand, the national television actively promoted the *kongonya* of charlatans whose only credit was that they blamed whites and the British for Zimbabwe's woes. (Tambaoga danced *kongonya* as he sang: "The Blair that I know is a toilet," punning on Tony Blair's name and that of the Blair who popularized the building of toilets).<sup>13</sup> Moyses (2009, 44) notes that at a time when social services, structural employment, and democratic processes were crumbling, "The government hijacked the national public broadcasting corporation (ZBC) and used it relentlessly to disseminate propaganda discrediting the opposition and enhancing the image of the ruling party." All night, state television transmitted the improvised *bira* to millions of hungry Zimbabweans and even beyond, in keeping with the minister, Jonathan Moyo's belief in "packaging" and "exporting" *kongonya*.<sup>14</sup> To open the gala or *bira*, traditional singers and dancers played spiritually scintillating Zimbabwean *mbira* (thumb piano), *hosho* (rattles), *marimba* (xylophone), and a variety of African drums revered to evoke an atmosphere reminiscent of a ritual ceremony. After that farcical ceremony, they would encourage the electric guitars and modern instruments accompanied, preferably, by *kongonya*.

The ensuing harnessing of *kongonya* by the former liberation party (ZANU PF) appeared calculated to whip up memories of the 1970s liberation war in the context of twenty-first century democratic election campaigns. Meanwhile, there remained a skewed balance of media power in favor of the former ruling party. As far as the abuse of *kongonya* is concerned, that suspicion is vindicated when you realize that the only permissible political jingles on national television today are those that eulogize the President and his deputies from ZANU PF as the masterminds in the Government of National Unity (GNU). The jingles totally ignore the roles of the Prime Minister (MorganTsvangirai), his deputies from the MDC, and their ministers.<sup>15</sup> Through repeated broadcasts of *kongonya* jingles, a picture of wishful stasis is presented to the majority of Zimbabwean viewers—that it is ZANU PF and not MDC that wields power. *Kongonya* seems then to be arrogantly employed as a constant reminder of ZANU PF's history of coercive mobilization. *Kongonya* becomes a remembered symbol of ZANU PF's relevance and unshakeable power—a means to express defiance and to openly ridicule its ruling partners in the GNU who have no cultural history as nationally acknowledged as *kongonya* to fall back on.

Many interviewees have, however, decried the hijacking of an otherwise rich cultural phenomenon (*kongonya*) to serve the interests of an increasingly self-seeking political clique. They were concerned that the erstwhile unifying 1970s *kongonya* was being distorted and contorted by political leaders of independent Zimbabwe, whose only remembrance was that *kongonya* was a people's dance; these leaders' current belief was that *kongonya* could intercede and help them get what they wanted. Such interviewees also bemoaned a tendency to transform a dance of the oppressed into a dance of the oppressors. According to such interviewees, in post-independence, *kongonya* was no longer culture of the people but culture for the people. Most people no longer willingly dance *kongonya* but are obliged to, or coerced.

The fears of these people are confirmed when you realize that currently (in the context of Zimbabwe's unstable GNU, where one party in government apparently wields uneven control over state organs and institutions that can be mobilized for the purposes of undermining partners in that inclusive government), we find *kongonya* being exploited in the numerous political jingles to provoke and mock opponents. In one of the DVDs that has been turned into a jingle by the force of

its repeated airplay and showing, women sing and dance, mockingly urging viewers to properly consider who is actually ruling in Zimbabwe. The chorus goes:

Unzwe kutonga (nyatsoteerera unzwe kutonga)  
Unzwe kutonga (nyatsoteerera unzwe kutonga)  
Nyatsoteerera unzwe kutonga  
Aaah muoffice muna Bob nyatsoteerera unzwe kutonga (three times)  
Unzwe kutonga.  
(Listen, pay attention and notice whom is actually in charge. Listen carefully and observe. It is only Bob [Mugabe] who is in office all the while!) [My translation]

Using sarcasm, the *kongonya* dancing singers imply that MDC partners in the GNU are playing second fiddle to Comrade Mugabe and his ZANU PF. In the video, the vigorous dancers are shot in close-up. The camera zooms up to them as they gyrate with their backs to it, such that the exterior body zones of those dancing women fill up the whole screen. The shaking, swinging, and gyrations of the buttocks appear so much in the viewers' faces that they cannot help but notice the spirit behind the dance—to make viewers aware of the implacability of the guardians of *kongonya*. The manner in which this part of the body is thrown about seems so carefree that viewers cannot miss the defiantly obscene gesture intermixed with seemingly unreserved submission of the dancing body to political party purposes.

That curious behavior on public television can be appreciated better from the perspective that Masunungure (2009) uses to analyze ZANU PF's scorched earth policy campaign evident in the run-up to the "militarized" June 27, 2008, presidential election run off. Masunungure (2009, 92) observes that "the top ZANU PF political generation and its allies in the military/security establishment have an 'end of history' perspective to the liberation struggle and the achievement of independence in 1980." The successful Second Chimurenga against Rhodesians "marked the end of all struggles, and the triumph of ZANU PF was the last triumph" (Masunungure 2009, 92). Any opposition to ZANU PF would therefore be construed as an attempt to reverse history and resurrect coloniality. In that particular video, *kongonya* dance is arrogantly harnessed to both include and exclude; it includes those of the revolutionary party, the custodians and performers of *kongonya*, and contemptuously excludes the enemies of that party's policies. The action behind the dance is reminiscent of Asante's (2000, 111) observation that "[d]ance as the most visible and recognizable cultural form in Zimbabwe evokes emotional and passionate responses from audiences. . . ." Most of the polarized Zimbabwean audiences relate to dance used in such a manner based on political ties, thereby obscuring and compromising the standard cultural function and value of dance.

I argue, therefore, that through the recently introduced gala performances of 2003 and after, the state attempted to appropriate *kongonya*, a national cultural asset, for a narrow partisan agenda and through current (following 2009) televised *kongonya* political jingles and DVDs, wherein a political party in the GNU selfishly used its influence in the Ministry of Information and Publicity. With that process, the party defies the spirit of national inclusivity typified in the GNU, by persistently screening partisan and scornful images of hip-shaking grandmothers-of-the-liberation-struggle-era to a nation seeking spiritual and moral intervention in order to prevent a relapse into a failed state of ever-contested election outcomes. Hence we find a proliferation of music and dance that seeks to promote one political party. We see songs and dances that ridicule opposition politicians and paint them as stooges of the West, implying, therefore, that the people still need the services of *kongonya* (and other accoutrements) in order to be completely free, liberated.

Recent statements by the ZANU PF co-chairperson of the Constitutional Parliamentary Select Committee (COPAC, co-chaired with MDC), Munyaradzi, P. Mangwana, suggest that ZANU PF has not abandoned its "guerrilla-type campaign to force the people into supporting the party views." Casually commenting on how ZANU PF coached its supporters on the views to present

during the 2010 constitutional outreach campaigns, Mangwana apparently confesses that his party had reverted to the *kongonya* strategies that led ZANU PF to win Zimbabwe's maiden elections in 1980: "The way we used to have our *pungwes* (all-night meetings) during the liberation struggle is the same tactic we employed during the constitution making exercise" (Mafirakurewa 2010, 4). Historically, the emerging nation's social and political history is inextricably linked to dance and music: Witness the invitation of Bob Marley, a reggae maestro, to support local dancers and musicians on Zimbabwe's independence eve in 1980. Since then, politicians have sought to gain support through an appeal to people's memories of liberation songs and dance.

I have already noted that one of the driving forces at *pungwes* was *kongonya*, and thus it is public knowledge that whenever ZANU PF holds a meeting today, it is always punctuated with revolutionary song and *kongonya*. I have no problem with that. The problem comes only when the dance is used as a subterfuge, to justify the unjustifiable, or as a token to deny others their freedom of choice.

## Interviewee Reflections

The views of ordinary Zimbabweans, as represented by predominantly rural interviewees (most of whom witnessed the 1970s guerrilla war and performed *kongonya*), suggest the dance has a Janus face. All noted that during the war for independence, *kongonya* embodied nationalist culture and politics, realized through that armed struggle. On the one hand, *kongonya* strengthened the fighters' resolve to win the liberation war; but, on the other, it acted as an embrocation (the ointment applied to relax muscles) to soothe the trauma of unarmed collaborators and villagers. Interviewees' comments suggest that the guerrillas' nationalist speeches at *pungwes* were easier said to those with whom they had danced. The dancing of *kongonya* by peasants expressed their yearning for cultural independence and created receptivity among them to the day's political demands. *Kongonya* dance was, therefore, a mobilizing tool for nationalist resistance.

The 1980 political independence, brought through the efforts of *kongonya* dancing combatants and collaborators, had led people to believe that there could be more dances than *kongonya*. But the dance, *kongonya*, was shamelessly dragged in to forestall cultural diversity and to fight a moral war on behalf of an immoral, trigger-happy platoon whose war zone extended to claim even public television broadcasters. Consequently, citizens have been bombarded with *kongonya* on national television, ruling party campaign jingles, and at "all-must-attend" political rallies until they have become passive dancers. Popularized in the music dance halls by former Second Chimurenga guerrillas-turned-musicians such as "comrades" Chinks, Max Mapfumo, and Marko Sibanda, *kongonya* became associated with the dance of the modern ruling party supporters. After 2000, it has, nevertheless, been received with mixed feelings. One interviewee said, "If *kongonya* was danced freely in the 1970s, and by implication, guaranteed peasant support for the guerrillas, in June 2008, dancing *kongonya* was a prelude to coercive mobilization of support for ZANU PF. *Kongonya* has accompanied revolutionary songs, the whip, humiliation, and re-education as weapons against political opposition members." It can be conjectured then, that *kongonya* awakened the people to their identity before it led them into symbolic craving for the blood of the enemy.

Again, the recent gala concept presented the nation as if it were in a state of war in which it would use all weapons available for self-preservation. One of the most readily available weapons was the general love of dance ubiquitous in the Zimbabwean body. Zimbabwe had people who danced *kongonya*, *chibhasikoro*, and *borrowdale* among the big dances. But not all these people supported ZANU PF. The question was how to bring all of them to buy ZANU PF's story that, if Zimbabwe lacked anything, it was the West, which was to blame. Bringing so many people together in a relatively social manner at an advantageous venue became the desire of the state. So it modeled those gala events along the traditional ritual healing ceremonies, trusting "the therapeutic efficacy of performance" (Thram 2003, 118). The nation's problems could be danced away.

Contemporary dance (such as *kongonya*) has the capacity to transcend culture, gender, and class; the ability to socially and aesthetically unite individuals of disparate ideologies and intellectual standing; and a penchant to be robust and extravagant with an increased number of performers and watchers. All these made it a pliant tool in the hands of the politically mighty, in the furtherance of their ambitions throughout Zimbabwe's troubled political life. On the state's recourse to dance and arts in general, a dancer commented:

The arts and dance have brought people together, either for good or bad. Dance was part of political mobilization during the war of liberation, dance is used to welcome big leaders at Harare's airport tarmac, and dance is used in the struggles for power between ZANU PF and the MDC. On the other hand, the socially and economically weary people of Zimbabwe sought to drown their sorrows in dance and music. That's why they accepted the gala concept to commemorate whatever event.

This seems to confirm Ranger's (2004) and Muchemwa's (2010) fears of a continuing "disturbing mediatization of society, culture and politics in post-2000 Zimbabwe that became the lynchpin in rule by historiography" (Muchemwa 2010, 473).

Interviewees seemed to concur that dance naturally facilitates spontaneous expression of bodily sensations, puts people into or out of their right minds, and, hence, is prone to manipulation. They lamented, however, the abuse of the sociopolitical and cultural function of dance. Interviewees noted how the state, as if benignly, dictated the tastes of Zimbabwean music and dance lovers by selectively picking those musicians and dancers to invite for galas, those to perform during prime time viewing, and those to perform very late when viewers are asleep. Behind all that, however, lay naked social imperialism. The paternalistic state tried to hoodwink its citizens into believing that the nation was under the threat of Western cultural imperialism, and everyone was obligated to defend his or her culture. Thus, the state seized that opportunity to divert people's attention from real problems through propaganda, while the politicians had the opportunity to campaign against the "Western-sponsored opposition."

## Conclusion

The *kongonya* achieved widespread performance, not from the feat of any one improviser, but from the proud feet and bodies of nearly a whole nation trying to rediscover and reaffirm its national culture; the greater aim was political independence. Yet, it causes despair and hesitation when the potential to unite is subverted, and an erstwhile affirmative dance plays a disenfranchising role against members of the same nation it helped to create. Ironically, the same dance that had been an effective tool for mobilization of Zimbabweans prior to independence is turned into an apparatus for the coercive manipulation of people in independence. I have demonstrated *kongonya* dance as being both a discourse of liberation and repression through my discussion of how *kongonya* was initially used in the context of peasant mobilization during the 1970s liberation war, and how it resurfaced in contexts of the Third Chimurenga and post-2000 elections to traumatize, restructure, and dominate others. I have described the postcolonial state's obsession with that wartime dance as a desperate attempt to reinvent the euphoria of the anticolonial struggle years in a period during which the ruling party betrayed its grassroots supporters through mainly political bungling. In this article, I have argued how the gala concept has sought to control citizenry through an appeal to the ritual curative and lulling nature of dance. The article noted a seemingly warped socialization agenda, whereby the state sought to clandestinely connect the First, Second, and Third Chimurenga by making *kongonya* a dance for land, the gala a site for the nation's reorientation, and the *kongonya* jingle a provocative reminder to forgetful citizens. Thus, *kongonya* is a heritage both powerful and traumatizing—initially used to strengthen the colonized peoples' cry for cultural and national emancipation but, over the years, to exclude and thwart emergent dissenting voices.

Rather, dance, like any art, should be used more to celebrate a national than a partisan ideal; dance should embrace a humane Zimbabwean essence instead of a political party essence. Dance should help bring people together, not break their bones. Hence, there exists the need to impart to the generality of Zimbabweans that dance, particularly *kongonya*, should not be used to mislead people into believing that independence means unchecked irresponsibility. There should be no need to give the Joseph Conrads and Trevor Ropers any excuse to stereotype African dance as an expression of savagery and aggression.<sup>16</sup> It seems, then, that another dance, not *kongonya*, is needed to dance away post-independence disillusionment. Perhaps, it is no longer Western cultural imperialism that is our challenge, but a cultural intrigue by the new national elite who covertly put dance in the service of self-interest disguised as national interest—resulting in a predicament more disorienting than that of colonialism. Thus, the energetic stamping of the ground, alongside the facial expressions of mockery associated with the dance, all point to the complex nature of the 1970s’ cultural and moral justification of the struggle, vis-à-vis the subverted post-2000 *jambanja* of the Third Chimurenga.

## Notes

1. These two parties later united in 1987, seven years after independence, under the acronym ZANU PF.

2. The Third Chimurenga (*jambanja*) or forced takeover of white farms (land had been the first cause of all the Chimurengas) began in 2000 following the “Vote No” campaign in the referendum for a draft constitution of that year, which aimed at retaining great powers for the president and at legalizing compulsory land acquisition. The “Vote No” campaign was spearheaded by the Movement for Democratic Change party (MDC) with the support of labor, civil society, and white farmers. The results angered the president, who ordered his supporters to “strike fear in the hearts of white men.”

3. The Zezuru, Karanga, and Manyika are some of the bigger ethnic groups of the Shona peoples of Zimbabwe. During the Second Chimurenga, these groups were under the influence of ZANU PF, where *kongonya* was mostly danced at *pungwes*. *Jerusarema*, originally known as *mbende*, was a cultural courtship dance with sexually suggestive, energetic moves, performed to assess whether the young, unmarried Zezuru men and women would be good fathers and mothers. It was performed under moonlit skies, mostly in Murehwa and surrounding areas. The colonial administrators banned it for its “licentious” moves, but the people changed its name and presented it to the whites as a Christian “Jerusalem” dance. *Mbakumba* was originally performed by the Karangas of Masvingo. From evening into the night, adults would dance while drinking beer, especially after communal work and for entertainment; *muchongoyo* was a traditional dance of the Ndau and Shangaan offshoot clans of the South African Nguni who crossed into eastern Zimbabwe (Manyikaland) during the nineteenth-century Mfecane. It was originally performed at evening times as a war dance, with men stamping the earth vigorously and competitively while singing self-praise and intimidation songs as women applauded.

4. Galas are recently introduced, televised, all-night music and dance shows held in sports stadiums around the country in commemoration of symbolic public holidays concerning Zimbabwe’s nationalist history of struggle against imperialists (e.g., Heroes’ Day gala).

5. A traditional ritual dance performed for spiritual possession and healing purposes, especially in Chiweshe, Dande, and Murehwa (Mashonaland Province). *Dandanda* dance is normally performed throughout the night in a hut, and the mediums have to be “sexually pure for the period.”

6. Mbuya Nehanda, Kaguvi, and Chaminuka were spirit mediums who in their lifetimes had bravely fought with spears against a colonizing force that had Maxim guns. Their spirits were believed to guide and guard the guerrillas of Chimurenga.

7. Zimbabwean guerrillas underwent military training in countries such as Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, etc., and came back with new dance styles from these different African countries.

8. A “sell-out” purportedly betrays national and patriotic interests by taking sides with the enemy, e.g., giving away guerrilla presence in an area; a “witch” is someone with magical powers, causing illness or death of others. The liberation war claimed to have a cleansing effect against all forms of antipeople powers.

9. Following the post-2000 *jambanja*, the government commissioned a Land Audit that established that senior politicians and activists had actually acquired multiple farms at the expense of ordinary villagers. No legal action was, however, taken against these new landowners.

10. A beneficiary of the Third Chimurenga, of the smallholder model of land divisions.

11. *Bira* is a traditional commemoration through ritual, song, and dance to accept the spirit of the dead into the family of ancestors.

12. “War has grown in Zimbabwe, war for land”: The song, originally sung during the war period, narrated the futility of the white settlers’ clinging to power.

13. An emerging ZANU PF apologist-musician panegyricist known for producing ZANU PF jingles.

14. At the launch of an album, the former Minister of Information and Publicity, Jonathan Moyo, famous for muzzling private media, said the best way to counter cultural imperialism was to put Zimbabwean music and dance on CDs and DVDs.

15. Following the tightly contested March 2008 harmonized national elections and the violent June 2008 presidential run-off, ZANU PF and the MDC parties formed an inclusive, power-sharing government.

16. The European novelist Joseph Conrad saw Africa as the “heart of darkness,” home to savage dances; the European historian Trevor Roper saw Africa as without any history except incidences of indecent gyrations.

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