

The Right To Respond

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By Gugu Mkhulisi

For quite some time, YouTube classified videos of the Umhlanga Reed Dance Ceremony of Swaziland as age-restricted content (BBC News, 2017). This was solely because the videos contain images of women in the Swazi traditional attire- Indlamu. Indlamu is mainly a short, beaded skirt and a sash which leave the dancers' breasts and, sometimes, a part of their buttocks exposed (Braun, 2009). In short, what led to the ban was the nudity of the women who attended the dance.

According to the YouTube Help Page, any content that may not be appropriate for all their different audiences qualifies to be age-restricted. This includes; vulgar language, violence and disturbing imagery, portrayal of harmful or dangerous activities as well as nudity and sexually suggestive content.

The videos of Umhlanga were therefore banned under the nudity and sexually suggestive content.

The Ceremony is attended by unmarried maidens to celebrate their chastity and attracts tourists, travel bloggers and media houses from different parts of the world to come to Swaziland. This is mainly how coverage of the ceremony is shared with other parts of the world. However, many of these reports that come out into the world after the ceremony are negative ones and ironically, they reel in more people every year despite the nudity that it promotes. BBC Africa recently published an article which mentioned that YouTube finally lifted bans from videos of the event



because, “YouTube allows nudity when culturally relevant and properly contextualised.” (BBC News, 2017)

Let me unpack the ways in which people with misconceptions about the ceremony (mainly Western media) portray the ceremony:

Objectification

The articles that I have read, which report on Umhlanga tend to objectify the dancers instead of seeing them for what they are, dancers. This is ironic because the journalists who write these are aiming to expose a culture that objectifies women but they end up objectifying women more than the culture seems to.

Here, objectification is defined as, “to degrade a woman to the status of a mere object.” Martha Nussbaum, came up with different types of objectification and Rae Langton added to Nussbaum’s list. I will use some of the types of objectification that these two came up with to portray different ways of objectification that the reports contain.

- Instrumentality

Various reports mention that the girls are dancing for the pleasure of the King. This portrays them instruments of pleasure for the King. The age range of the dancers is five to twenty-five and all of these are portrayed to have the function of entertaining the King for pleasure.

- Silencing

Most reports have interviewees being people who are against Umhlanga and people who do not attend the ceremony, yet these are meant to represent the girls who go. The dancers are barely interviewed their purpose of attending is not considered, instead, people who do not qualify to go, are interviewed instead. The reports quote, “a 29-year old teacher,” or “Zwane, a mother of 6

children” and these two would not attend because you cannot attend Umhlanga at twenty-nine and you cannot attend Umhlanga as a mother. Therefore, silencing the dancers and replacing them with sources which are not credible is objectifying them.

- Reduction to body

Using headlines which contain the words, “bare-breasted” also reduces the girls’ bodies to their body parts. Anything could be used to describe the dancers, their bright outfits or just their nationality but in order to promote the propaganda, they use words that will attract perverts to view their articles. Therefore, using their lack of knowledge on the context of the event allows them to reduce the dancers’ bodies to their breasts.

“Alternative Facts”

As aforementioned, the Reed Dance attracts people from different countries who come and marvel at the beauty of the celebration. However, there is a lot of false information that they put out pertaining the ceremony:

- Umhlanga is for women to dance naked for the King so he can choose a wife

This is a problematic misconception that is constantly being fed to the world pertaining Umhlanga. The purpose of Umhlanga is, according to the Swaziland National Tourism Authority, “for young girls to cut reeds, present them to the Queen Mother- to repair the windbreak around her royal household- and then dance in celebration.” (Braun, 2009) The dancing is done in full view of the Queen Mother, the King, members of the royal household and members of the public. Therefore, the girls are not dancing “for the pleasure of the King,” he is just in attendance. Also, princesses also participate in the reed dance, wearing the same outfit as

everyone else, therefore this would also suggest that they also dance in front of their father for his pleasure, which is absurd. The Indlamu is worn by all participants, every year so he report that in 2017, maidens were old to wear short skirts is also misinformation of the repoterbecause Indlamu has been the standard outfit for Umhlanga since the first time it was celebrated. In other years, the King unveils his new wife at Umhlanga which people assume to be him choosing a wife at the ceremony. However, the new wife dances in the red lowry crown, which is only worn by members of the royal family, which distinguishes her from the other maidens. Therefore, Umhlanga is actually not for the King but the Queen Mother but he unveils his new wife there because she must also pay homage to her mother in law.

- Girls pay a fine is they do not send daughters to Umhlanga

The Guardian newspaper interviewed “a 29 year old teacher” who mentioned that “families who don’t send their children to the Umhlanga have to pay a fine, usually a goat or a cow.”

(AllAfrica, 2017) This piece of information also appeared on numerous other sources and the fine is paid to the monarchy. However, according to my interviewees, nobody is forced to attend umhlanga because it is a celebration and you cannot be forced to celebrate your chastity if you are not willing to. Some families do, however, force their daughters to attend Umhlanga because of the incentives available to girls who attend and these range from school supplies, food and clothes. They also force their daughters to attend in order to keep a good image because isf your daughter is chaste then that means that you raise her well. Seluliwe mentioned that, “I have skipped a couple of reed dances in my life but my family did not have to pay a fine to anybody because we are not coerced into attending Umhlanga.” (Vilakati, 2017) This, perhaps, is one of the reasons why people believe that Umhlanga is one of the ways in which the monarchy takes away girls’ freedom of choice, yet, the monarchy has no direct control over who attends Umhlanga.

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- If girls do not attend the reed dance, they will be publicly whipped.

August is one of the busiest months in Swaziland with the Trade Fair and the Bikers' Rally. The Trade Fair attracts business owners from within Swaziland and the Southern African region who all come into Swaziland to showcase their products. This Fair ends with an all night music gig. The Bikers' Rally is a retreat of bikers from the different parts of Africa into Swaziland for a weekend of fun filled activities. These two events coincide with Umhlanga and girls usually evade Umhlanga to indulge in alcohol fun festivities with men who attend these two events. Girls leave their homes and communities escorted by three guys from their chiefdoms (*Tindvuna*) whose job is to ensure the safety and well-being of these girls. Therefore when the girls evade Umhlanga, Tindvuna are held accountable for anything that happens to the girls. In 2004, an Indvuna from Mbilaneni mentioned that if the girls "travelled to the event but do not attend the ceremony, they will be beaten on the buttocks when they returned to their homesteads." (All Africa, 2017) This quotation is also in numerous articles but is not used in the context in which it was said, which then makes it seem like not attending Umhlanga is a punishable act. They omit the fact that the beatings are for lying and not just not attending the ceremony. As for beating children up, corporal punishment is legal and used in many institutions and homes in Swaziland therefore, it is a norm rather than a form of abuse.




Young women at the protest against YouTube, in Durban , South Africa. 2017

It is a Western thing view bodies in a sexual way even if that is not the intent. Umhlanga is portrayed as uncivilised and sexual so much so that even reports are made to sound as though it is a sexual ceremony even though that is not why Swazis have it. The reduction of women to just breasts is not how people within the culture view the dancers, what is more important is how dance and how bright the colours of their Indlamu are. How much of a job would it be for the King to scrutinise the bodies of about a hundred thousand girls every year to see which one of them would be his ideal wife? How much of a pervert would the King be to look at his 5 year old daughter in a sexual way- for his pleasure. Why then would so many media houses portray Umhlanga as such if the reporters are not the ones who are trained to view women's bodies in a sexual way? "I do not wear Indlamu to display my body to anyone. I wear it to celebrate Umhlanga and what's important to me is the brightness and how it moves when I dance. I feel so

liberated, free and beautiful in Indlamu. And unless you are conditioned to see a woman for boobs and booty, you will overlook the brightness and beauty of Indlamu and just look at those things,” said Kgomotso, (Magagula, K. 2017) when I asked her why she wears Indlamu, even though it exposes the body for spectatorship.

Therefore, Google removing videos of Umhlanga from the internet based on nudity violations, it only showed that Swazi women’s bodies are being sexualised out of context. Nobukhosi Mtshali, in an interview with *Mail and Guardian*, mentioned that, “I, as a South African, want to celebrate my culture. Having my photos labelled as inappropriate or regarded as porn, I take that as a direct attack on my cultural heritage. I take it as a sign of ignorance. If I’m posing in a sexually suggestive manner that is one thing, but if I’m posting pictures of me standing there in my traditional attire, that is a completely different context.” Her views were seconded by head of TV Yabantu, an online video company which, “protects, preserves and restores African values.” (Allison S., 2017) These two started an array of protests against Google’s act of banning videos from Umhlanga and these protests are what led to Google finally unbanning this content from Youtube in October 2017.

Therefore, it is wise to have background knowledge or at least grasp the context of why certain events are happening or why certain things are done. Most educational systems ensure that before you report on something, you investigate whether or not your sources are credible and find secondary sources to backup the information that you obtained. However, I think that the misinformation of people on Umhlanga is an issue of ignorance and poor judgement of what Swaziland is. Many journalists who keep going into Swaziland to report on Umhlanga, go there with conclusions of what Swaziland is and then report from a narrow minded perspective. They do not go there to learn what the culture is but rather, to expose a culture that sexualises women, and thus, end up with the information that they publish to the people.



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