

# Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)*  
*is the institutional research repository for*  
*Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Citation

Okagbue, Osita. 2019. Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics after Apartheid. By Louise Meintjes, with photographs by T. J. Lemon. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. xiv + 338 + 142 illus. \$94.95 Hb; \$26.95 Pb. Theatre Research International, 44(1), pp. 108-109. ISSN 0307-8833 [Article]

## Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/26295/>

## Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk).

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk)

*Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics After Apartheid.* By Louise Meintjes,  
with photographs by TJ Lemon. Durham and London: Duke University Press:  
2017. ISBN: 9780822362654 (pbk); Pp. xiv+ 338. Price; N/A

Osita Okagbue

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

For anyone who has neither heard of nor watched Ngoma music or dance, Louise Meintjes's book provides a captivating introduction to the vibrant and dramatic spirit that the Southern African art form is. The book informs the reader that specifically the

'Zulu ngoma tradition grew out of a system of migrant labor developed by South African state and mining interests through the twentieth century.... There are three Zulu ngoma substyles: *umzansi*, *isishameni*, and *isiBhaca*. Each style combines choreographed group work and individual improvisation and is danced to call-and-response singing and clapping.... Each style features the kick, though its execution differs stylistically.  
(p, 8)

The book describes ngoma as a 'living aesthetic with a deep past... [and] that most of the time, singing and dancing is more than a political act or a representation of cultural identity.... Sometimes, it is a way of being in the world that exceeds explanation. Sometimes it is just playing'. (p. 25) The Zulu ngoma which emerges from the book is a warrior dance characterised by competitive energy and high drama as the embattled warriors push and are in turn pushed by their opponents to emotional and physical limits; each

'warrior/dancer is expected to work to 'be in control at the edge' which is a way to register vital components of Zulu masculinity'; *isigqi*, an underlying aesthetic in ngoma – contributes toward the articulation and expression of 'forms of masculine authority and beauty' (p. 48). *Isgqi* is described 'as a sense of power experienced when all resources are momentarily consolidated.' The ability to render this sense of power, politics, danger and virtuosity constitutes the high point of Zulu artistry:

*Isgqi* is an aesthetic principle that is rendered in ngoma's finest moments, produced individually as a sense of power danced, and cultivated collectively as a form of competitive solidarity or brotherhood. It is best rendered when ngoma singer-dancers are in control at the edge. (p. 65)

The push to and control at the edge often elicits *ulaka* – the need to respond to accept the challenge of the one at the edge that happens during the one-to-one dance-offs is central to ngoma performance. *Ulaka* is a key element of Zulu masculinity and is highly regarded. (p.65) This dance of skill, the test of masculine endurance and élan, Meintje brings to life on the pages of her book. The book traces ngoma's evolution as dance and politics through the lens of South Africa's apartheid, through post-apartheid history, culminating in the devastating emergence of HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s to the 1990's and the new millennium. The book also looks at the place of ngoma and its artists in contemporary national and international music culture and commerce – what future is there for these artists and their art.

*Dust of the Zulu* has eight chapters – each aptly titled to capture the multifaceted character of ngoma - with an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter

1, 'Turning to be Kissed...', discusses ngoma's performativity and the celebration of Zulu masculinity. Chapter Two, 'The Unwavering Voice...' explores eloquence, affect and the expression of moral anger. Just as the body is pushed to the limits, so also is the voice during an ngoma performance; but, the voice must not waver – the singer must remain in control so as to outlast the opponent, who should be righteously angry almost to the point of 'violence' – ulaka – violence rendered through art. Chapter Three, 'Feet of the Centipede...' explains how ngoma as a dance of the warrior is underpinned by a military aesthetic that offers a space for reconciliatory politics – a kind of 'socially productive practice that offers the community the capacity to accommodate difference...' (p.97) Chapter Four, 'To Quell the Dancer's Dust...' continues the theme of violence embodied in the figure of the warrior and how this is central to ngoma performance. The chapter argues that ngoma cannot be understood without an understanding of its relationship to mediated violence. Chapter 5, 'The Crossing...' is mainly on Johnny Clegg (Sikeyi) – the White Zulu - and his fusion of ngoma with rock to create a unique internationally recognised Afro-rock music with his band, Savuka, and Chapter 6, 'Dancing Around Disease'- although a bit tedious and overdone – outlines the link between the devastating HIV/Aids epidemic in South Africa and its impact in the very population out of the which the singer-dancer-warriors are drawn. Chapter Seven, 'The Digital Homestead...' asks the key question of how ngoma can emerge from the margins imposed on it by the structures of South Africa's apartheid history, especially how the past is still affecting ngoma professionalism and production practices within contemporary post-apartheid musical industry. Ngoma musicians want to produce music that is of international and of professional standard, but paradoxically in order to subvert and free themselves from the domination they experience because of the past apartheid structure, they have to compromise by making lower quality music produced under inferior

production conditions and facilities; however, but this enables them to retain a measure of agency and control in the process. And Chapter 8, 'Brokering the Body...' examines the brokerage of culture/ngoma both by the singer-dancers themselves and by the emerging diaspora cultural entrepreneurs, who all wager on ngoma warrior cultural image for an international stage. Chapter Nine is appropriately titled 'Closing...' concludes by linking ngoma's masculinity and South Africa's complex struggles through and post apartheid.

On the whole, the book contributes to the ever-growing literature on indigenous African performance practices and cultural forms. The book's greatest strength is the author's captivating descriptions of the dance and the drama of the competitions. Unfortunately, the book is also weakened by an idiosyncratic first person style that detracts from what are its inherent intellectual and critical aspects.