



Engaging in wars and dances for no good reason

Cultural imperialism

Many people in the townships are familiar with youth clubs and the 'good work' which they do in keeping children and the youth away from the streets.

All social institutions are set up for furthering the aims and ideology of one or other section of the community. We shall use this space to examine youth clubs and the kinds of activities they offer, as well as where they belong in terms of the different facets constituting a 'community'.

Firstly most youth clubs operate under one or other umbrella body. These umbrella bodies play important financing and controlling functions. The majority of youth clubs in Soweto are controlled and financed by WRAB. Youth clubs not falling under this category are mostly affiliates of the SOUTH AFRICAN ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH CLUBS. Though the Association has a lot of influence in determining the activities of the clubs, youth clubs can, and do, appeal to wealthier organisations for financial support. Money is a strong tool with which the financing class dominates classes in need. The wealthy organizations do not just part with their money — they only do so when they are sure that their money is put to 'good use'.

Some organizations such as the Group Chairman's fund of Anglo American, and Mobil, claim to give donations to community organisations without any strings attached. But before these organisations give out any money they make a serious study of the constitution of the youth club appealing for funds. They will then give out money on the basis of what the constitution says about the club. Clearly if they are faced with a constitution that challenges their interests they will not offer any support. Some big business funders (Mobil for example) will go to the trouble of 'assisting' in drawing up a constitution. Because Youth clubs need venues (rent), electricity, equipment, etc, they would find it impossible to operate without anyone funding them. They therefore comply with the expectations of their funders by structuring their programme so that their activities do not embarrass their funders. Instead of making youth clubs centres for children of the working class parents (by undertaking activities that will enable youths to understand their position as working class young people, and prepare them for challenging the system), youth clubs undertake neutral activities such as ballroom dancing, gumboot dancing, sports, and so on. All these activities will satisfy the funders and in no way question their position.

It is obvious in this regard that youth clubs operating under the auspices of WRAB or the community councils, whatever they do, are always subject to their superior's sanction. This is done more directly through the employees of

WRAB (employed as full time youth leaders).

Though there may occur friction between the superiors and the subordinates, the superiors always wield power and their word is final.

As suggested above, it is not only where the money comes from that will determine the class direction an organisation takes. The activities undertaken by the organization have a great influence and effect on the participants. We shall take a close look at some of the youth club activities.

Ballroom dancing

This activity is foreign to the culture of the townships. It is therefore useful as part of capital's strategy of undermining the culture of the working class. Middle class activities such as this are introduced to make the workers doubt their own culture. Ballroom dancing in youth clubs also depends on competitions to exist. With competition arises lots of hostility among competitors. If there is not hostility there is no competitive spirit. This is a kind of empty hostility based on no genuine human feelings but only necessary to create this 'spirit'. Within this activity, based on partnership (male and female) there arises among participants a certain kind of



unreal relationship. The language used determines this relationship. Men are referred to as 'gentlemen' and women as 'ladies'. The terminology suggests that dancers are noble. These people are also affected by this terminology, and start trying to adjust to their titles, thereby trying to perceive themselves differently. They start to relate to one another differently too – they lead a life based on titles ie based on some vague middle-class title.

Festivals

These activities are organised so that youth clubs may display their day to day activities. In most cases festivals and concerts are just a series of performances by youth club members. They display several activities – drama, dancing (several kinds) and music. Youth clubs operating under the auspices of the Association – Thusong in Alex being one of them – are discouraged from performing drama other than tribal dramas – that is, the children are discouraged from performing their experiences. Dramas based on tribal themes, as opposed to the living experiences of the youth, are useful to capital in that they are neutral about the issues of the present. "They do not provoke young children to become tsotsis or anything disgusting like that". On the other hand these tribal dramas fail to approach any historical events seriously. They merely conform to the stereotype of tribal/traditional plays – they present no useful or new way to approach history. They make tribal history feeble and reduce it to a series of events involving drunk chiefs and their indunas engaging in wars and dances for no good reason.

Working-class culture

Members of a Youth Centre do not themselves usually invent their activities. These are already structured. Ballroom dancing is performed in a fashion created long ago, somewhere else, overseas perhaps. You don't make up the waltz, you learn to obey its rule. Even the kind of dramas put on by youth clubs have a prescribed formula: so that at drama festivals you will see the same thing time and time again – tribal nonsense. Scenes of life on a township street are actually forbidden.

It is quite different with activities that are invented by working class youths themselves, uninterfered with by authorities or middle-class misleaders. In this case it is youth themselves who produce their own culture, which, if they are working-class youths, is also working-class culture. In this section of the article we intend to discuss certain youth groups that are well known in black townships.

A re yeng mapantsuleng

What sense can be made of Pantsula activity and style? It is not very useful to take the view that these youths are merely gangsters and loafers. Even if it were true that many Pantsulas really are tough and aggressive, this is only one characteristic, and it is not shared by all youths who might call themselves Pantsulas.

Clash van die jewish

Let's examine their style of clothing. They go for trousers that seem deliberately shapeless – I refer to those called voops – which don't fit under the crotch, they are loose around the waist, so that the belt hangs down as if the buckle were too heavy; then the trouser legs are rolled up, or they have turn-ups (ash-trays) that flop over the shoes, and seem to scrape in the dust and get

caught under the heel. A majita wearing these pants looks like he has stolen them from some big fellow on the golf course. In actual fact, he did not steal them, but paid a lot of money for them, and he keeps them dry-cleaned and perfectly pressed. He may look untidy, but he definitely is not. It's the same with his shirt: even if it is a Christian Dior costing sixty, he will wear it with the sleeves too long, or an end hanging out of his trousers. He's trying to prove something. Shoes the same. If he wears takkies, they will be untied and the tongues are lolling out like two tired dogs – really untidy. But on the other hand those takkies are clean, clean, clean. He takes a lot of care.

Contrasts

In these contrasts (contradictions) we can read messages about the conditions of life in an urban ghetto. The Pantsula does not disguise his origins. His style borrows openly from the style of the tsotsi, whose second hand trousers and shirt have, generation after generation, covered a hungry frame and an Okapi.

Now this very Bra Boy-Boy whose clothes seem shapeless, and he himself seems lazy, in fact holds himself highly alert. He is manotcha, wakker. "Hy kyk en blaai, dinner en dinner, jare en jare, tot die laaste dag." He sees to it that he remains wide awake, and not a moegoe. Under his clothes that don't fit, the Pantsula is tense and ready. Hy's fluks.

But these symbols of the tsotsi are only half the style: the other half shows extravagance and ambition. Pantsula's clothes are not cast-off, but new, expensive, clean and fashionable; and they are worn as such. They shine. In this way these clothes are not just things to wear; they are messages revealing the complex lives of youths who accept that they belong "by die lokasie", but don't conform to it. They admit that they are oppressed, but they declare their freedom. Their style of dress combines oppression and ambition, shapelessness and style, the ghetto and their mockery of the ghetto. Pantsula style is a statement of working class life in South Africa. In fusing contradictions it tries to be in some way a solution to working class problems.