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Reading the Swazi reed dance (umhlanga) as a literary traditional performance art

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Swazi Reed Dance (*Umhlanga*) as a literary traditional art form actuated through performance/ or dramatic elements that involve song, dance, symbols as well as audiences. A literary reading of some of the event's specific texts elucidates meanings of its diverse themes such as: rituals of performing the monarch's power; circulation of traditional hegemonic and patriarchal ideologies; virginity and HIV/AIDS; gender and human rights; democracy as well as modernity and globalization. All these issues are pertinent to Swazi society. The thesis key focus is to interrogate the literary role of *Umhlanga* in mediating perceptions about the Swazi people in contemporary Swaziland. In this regard, *Umhlanga* is examined as an art form that reflects the Swazi people's socio-cultural, economic and political way of life. In order to achieve this goal it was important to closely examine the mechanisms involved in the event's orchestration and reception/ or consumption by the Swazi people in their diversity as well as tourists. Throughout, the study highlights ambiguities, contradictions and conflicting views that challenge the beliefs, myths surrounding the ritual's precepts and guidelines and by extension the ruling monarch. These are attributed to the influence of modernity and globalization. A major finding is that *Umhlanga* generates multiple texts proving the dynamic nature of tradition and culture. The study primarily employs an ethnographic approach focusing on the period between 2004 and 2007.