

The Brotherhood Social Club



■ Brotherhood Social Club members pose in Vrygrond township, Cape Town.

The elegant clothes and energetic dancing of South Africa's Brotherhood Social Club are only a small part of its story

Words by Stephan Van Diest, photographs by Isabel Corthier

■ 'In our community, some men beat their wives. Even kids are sometimes abused. There's a lot of criminality. Gangs are formed. Drug and alcohol abuse are common problems. It's very difficult to change this behaviour,' says Mncedisi 'Izzy' Sogwangqa, president of the Brotherhood Social Club. 'Nevertheless, that's what our group tries to do.'

With an average of 58 murders a day, South Africa is one of the world's most violent countries. Gender-based violence is sky high. Every day, an average of 116 rapes are reported, while many more probably go unreported. Between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020, more than 2,700 women were murdered – one every three hours. With 943 children

killed in the same year, it's painfully clear that even the most vulnerable members of the community aren't spared.

Police figures show that violent criminality often has its roots in alcohol and drug abuse. In 2019, Cyril Ramaphosa, South Africa's president, compared the situation to that of a country at war and called gender-based violence a national emergency. Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, minister of women, youth and persons with disabilities, says that the problem is so deeply rooted in South African society that the government needs the help of local communities to stop the silence around gender-based violence and to expose the perpetrators.

The Brotherhood Social Club offers one (rather original and very South African) way for a community to help achieve that goal. Belgian photographer Isabel Corthier wanted to learn more. 'They contacted me in the hope of gaining more popularity through a photo essay. I was convinced straight away because of their goals, their enthusiasm and the love with which they interact with each other and the community,' says Corthier. 'South Africa is not only doom and gloom, it's also a magnificent country with very positive and strong people. The Brotherhood Social Club embodies that optimism.'

The club was founded in 2014 by five men with a passion for pantsula – a dance and fashion style born during the 1950s and '60s in South Africa as a reaction to the forced displacement of the Black population into townships. Fed by the anger and frustration at the loss of fundamental civil rights under apartheid, the pantsula dance originated as a secret code. Using a combination of



■ Female club members are called *Kofifi*, after Soffiatown, a legendary black cultural hub during the apartheid era.

■ Brotherhood president Izzy tries to help ex-gang member Thulani (not his real name) get back on track. Having gained Thulani's trust, Izzy visits regularly. 'We don't judge anybody because we understand the situation.'





■ Xolani: 'I grew up in a rough neighbourhood where alcohol, drugs and crime dominate. Every man in South Africa should stand up to this violence.'



high jumps and sharp, rapid movements, the dancers mirrored the techniques that Black civilians used to evade flying bullets and other police brutality. The dance fused with a new fashion culture that was spreading throughout the Black community: leather loafers combined with the tight suits worn by US jazz musicians. With their polished look, pantsula dancers wanted to make a clear statement: 'We are not criminals, so don't treat us like criminals.'

Today, the bullets and violence often come from within the community itself. This is why, half a century later, the Brotherhood Social Club uses the same dance and fashion style to send a similar message: 'Who dresses like a gentleman will behave like a gentleman.'

'Before 1994, we respected each other as a Black community – we were a group,' says Izzy. 'After apartheid, everything changed. Of course, a lot in a positive way, but our style has gone and with it, our good behaviour.'

The Brotherhood regularly holds community walks through the streets

of the townships. Members dress in exquisite clothes in order to get people interested in meeting them. There is often an enormous response from bystanders. People on the roadside clap their hands; elderly people reminisce about the old days; youngsters take selfies with the stylish members; and there's always a lot of laughter. Gaining respect and acceptance is essential for the Brotherhood as it helps members to understand the community's dynamics. Further down the line, they're in a good position to contact individuals who are falling into difficulties.

'Because the younger generation is the most vulnerable and is more likely to end up in crime, we tend to focus on them,' explains Izzy. 'Many youngsters grow up in a single-parent family, without a father. We aim to fill the gap of a father figure, but that is a relationship that has to be built up little by little.'

Ex-gang member Thulani (a pseudonym) is one example. Izzy gained his trust and now tries to keep him away from crime. Thulani dropped



■ Although the club is called the Brotherhood, women are now joining in increasing numbers.

■ Bongani Jantjies (30) is the club's vice president and founder of several branches in the Eastern Cape. 'I put videos on Facebook and Youtube, and lots and lots of youngsters follow me and take me as a role model,' he says.



■ Bongiwe Lolwana (24) wants to take a stand against the increasing violence against women. She borrowed the hat she's wearing from her friend Norman.

■ Getting noticed for a mixture of exquisite clothes and positive energy is part of the club's strategy for connecting with the community.

out of school at the age of 12 and, as a result, has no qualifications, which makes it more difficult to find a job, even one with an extremely low salary. Criminality on the other hand, provides fast, easy money and is therefore a constant temptation.

'He's doing much better these days. In the past, he carried guns and knives,' says Izzy. 'But I can't visit him too often or people might think we have a deal because they know him as a gangster. We have to be careful about this as Brotherhood members.'

While the older members are often called *tata* (father) and respected almost automatically, the Brotherhood also needs to be able to identify with the younger generation. The dress code, the

accompanying show and the resulting selfies all help with recruitment. Many young people are very good pantsula dancers and arouse interest and respect with their spectacular moves. The hope is that they will go on to set a good example to others their age.

'I try to positively influence my peers in the communities,' says Phumzile Manaka, one of the Brotherhood's younger members. 'As an example, there was a 16-year-old boy who I knew had started to smoke drugs. At first, I took him out to dance and bought him some food. Step by step, he got more interested in pantsula. Today, he's all passionate and has stopped smoking drugs. I think that he will soon become a member.'



■ Members dance pantsula, a frenetic style that originated in South Africa's Black townships during the apartheid era.

■ Shoes are a big part of the fashion. 'We have taught ourselves to add an extra 6mm rubber shoe sole so the shoes wear out less quickly.'





For township inhabitants with very low salaries, the fashionable clothing is expensive, but members of the Brotherhood have conjured tricks to drop the prices. They might shop in a group, or look for small mistakes in the fabric so they can negotiate a good price. Another trick is to attach an extra layer of rubber under the expensive shoes to help extend their lifespan.

'We don't like the materialistic world where it's all about fast consumption. I have a pair of Crooked and Johnson shoes that I bought in 2003. I still wear them,' says Izzy with a proud smile.

Although the club has been around for five years, on 9 November 2019, it

organised a large march in the township of Weltevreden Valley North in Cape Town for its official inauguration and the nomination of Izzy as president. Currently, the group counts more than 100 members, spread over seven establishments in South Africa. While the group is a 'brotherhood', women have recently started to join.

'Together with the use of social media, their physical presence in the community makes them, for me, the real influencers of South Africa,' says Corthier. 'Not to promote a consumer society, but to help the beautiful South Africa evolve towards the respectful and just society of which Mandela dreamt.'



■ For the Brotherhood, drawing attention is the goal – and it seems to work.

■ The Brotherhood tries to deliver a serious message in a positive and stylish way.



■ Izzy: 'We focus a lot on the younger generation because they are the most vulnerable to ending up in crime. Lots of single-parent families in our community lack a father figure. We try to fill that gap.'

■ Izzy: 'I tell them that I care about them and how they will end up if they stay on the street. So they'd better make something out of their life. If they want, I can help.'

