

## THE CONVERSATION

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The performance by Ghetto Kids on Britain's Got Talent won them new fans across the world. Screenshot/Britain's Got Talent/YouTube

# Ghetto Kids: what's behind the moves of the Ugandan dance troupe that stormed the world

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A group of young dancers from Uganda, Triplets Ghetto Kids, went viral across the world when they earned the “golden buzzer” mid-performance on the TV show Britain's Got Talent. The golden buzzer sends a shower of gold confetti onto the stage – sending the contestants straight through to the show's final rounds – and it had never been pressed in the middle of a performance before.

In fact, the dance group have been an internet sensation for some years already. They dance with contagious positive energy to hit songs with steps by leading choreographers and release videos on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok.

As a scholar of how African dance styles travel to the rest of the world, I have been interested in how their unique performances draw from popular African songs and traditional African dance forms – with an innovative contemporary twist. Ghetto Kids are proof of the power of dance to transform lives.

### **Who are Ghetto Kids?**

Triplet Ghetto Kids are a part of a family of 30-odd children taken in by Kavuma Dauda. His foundation has offered shelter, food and education to children from the streets of Kampala since 2007. Triplets Ghetto Kids was registered as a non-governmental organisation in 2013 following the dance troupe's unexpected success with the homemade dance video to Sitya Loss by Ugandan singer Eddy Kenzo. The foundation uses music, dance and drama to help children access a better life.

Britains Got Talent:Ghetto Kids From Uganda Africa Wins The G...



Ghetto Kids have attracted the attention of leading choreographers who have worked with them. They've won numerous international dance awards since 2015, including an Afrimma Award, an award from the Recording Industry Association of America and a YouTube Creators Award. They performed at the men's football World Cup in 2022.

### **Rise to fame**

Ghetto Kids first achieved global recognition in 2017 with their dance video to the Afro house song Marimba Rija by Angolan musician Dotorado Pro. With steps by the internationally acclaimed Rwanda-born choreographer Sherrie Silver, the video reached 25 million views at the time.

Marimba Rija was the perfect choice to define the character of Ghetto Kids. The marimba is a percussive instrument that's fundamental for various music styles across Africa. The song was produced by a leading Afro house and kuduro star – kuduro is a music and dance genre developed in Luanda, Angola in the late 1980s. The video made an association with specific traditional dance elements and added original moves born from the group's own creativity and style.

### Sherrie Silver - Marimba Rija Remix Dance Choreography, ft Ghet...



Another video that defines their unique character was recorded in 2021, set to *Laissez Passer* (Let Them Pass), a hit by Congolese musician Diblo Dibala. The song is a fusion of soukous and coupé décalé. Soukous – also known as sakis – is a dance music genre derived from the Congolese rumba and popularised in the 1980s. Coupé décalé is a form of popular dance and music that was created in Paris by a group of young Ivorians in the early 2000s. When combined with kuduro steps, Ghetto Kids' dance shows exactly why we should “let them pass” – they're here to stay!

### **Britain's Got Talent performance**

The choreography for Britain's Got Talent was created from a collaboration by two Ugandan choreographers, Nandala Mathew, who travels the world spreading African dance styles in incredible fusions with hip-hop and funk, and Namata Esther, a talented Ugandan choreographer who works with the Ghetto Kids foundation.

The performance was all about fusion, opening with a nod to US pop star Michael Jackson's famous pelvic dance move and the sounds of a joyful soukous song which then moved to Afro house sounds (electronic dance music with South African roots) with a sprinkle of coupé-décalé.

They mixed some traditional steps of these styles with a few other moves from the numerous fascinating dances of the Ugandan repertoire. Uganda traditional dances include ding dong (a children's play dance from the Acholi people), agwara (a ritual dance today used in wedding and funeral ceremonies), ekoche (a courtship dance of the Langi people), ekizino (from the Bakiga people) and ekitaguriro (from the Banyankore people, also called the cow dance and based on the movements of the cow). Together with several other Ugandan dances they represent one of the richest living dance archives on the continent.

Add to this the personal facial and bodily interpretations of the young dancers and you have a mix that's absolutely fresh.

## **What makes them unique**

The combination of tradition and innovation is perfectly mastered by Ghetto Kids. Their iconic moves reflect the flux of artistic and cultural influence that exists between sub-Saharan African countries.

The group is also aware of the power of both displaying and dispelling stereotypical images of Africa through surprising and funny interpretations of their influences. The iconography of the traditional African village, of rural landscapes and even of African swag (dressing in fancy hats and jackets) are used to propose their own attitude towards life.

A mix of self-confidence, irony and joyful optimism exude from all of their videos and performances. They embrace who they really are and are willing to share their recipe for happiness.

## Why they matter

Ghetto Kids founder Dauda has often spoken of being a street kid himself, unable to afford to go to school. A stranger funded his education and he promised himself he'd do the same for others; he started his foundation after graduating as a maths teacher.

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Dauda's mission takes on particular importance in Uganda, a country that has struggled for decades with civil wars where children have been victims of unstable political conditions as well as abduction and abuse from militant groups like the Lord's Resistance Army and where malaria, respiratory infections and Aids have ended many young lives.

In this context, keeping children visible is also a strategy to protect their lives, to make them count, to stimulate their growth and education, to repair the violence of the past and to denounce their social conditions.

Triplets Ghetto Kids are the expression of the need to convert historical weakness into strengths for the whole community. They are dancing for their education and survival, and they will succeed.

But don't believe me – just watch!