

# ***RHYTHMS AND MOVEMENTS OF AFRICA: STUDY ON AFRICAN DANCE ON BORDERLINES OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND AESTHETICS***

Wiesna Mond-Kozłowska<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The paper is examining pre-dance multifaceted existential reality the African dancer goes through before he or she starts dancing. However, at the very outset it would be safe and wise to admit that the notion of an African dancer and the notion of an African dance are semantically vague and abstract alike. The continent is huge, its culture complex and heterogeneous, with the indigenous spirituality progressively ousted or gradually being transformed by Christianity and Islam due to advancing Christianization and Islamisation, followed, sadly enough, by ineluctable Westernization. Regardless the implied irrevocable changes that always result in cultural hybridism, I argue that both phenomenon of African dance and phenomenon of African dancer is perpetually undeniable and plausible reality that requires some sophisticated research approach that should take in consideration religious, social, historical, political end ethical context of man's behavior in question. I consider this statement to be a point of departure for my further investigation.

**Keywords:** African Dance. Anthropology. Aesthetics. Sacredness.

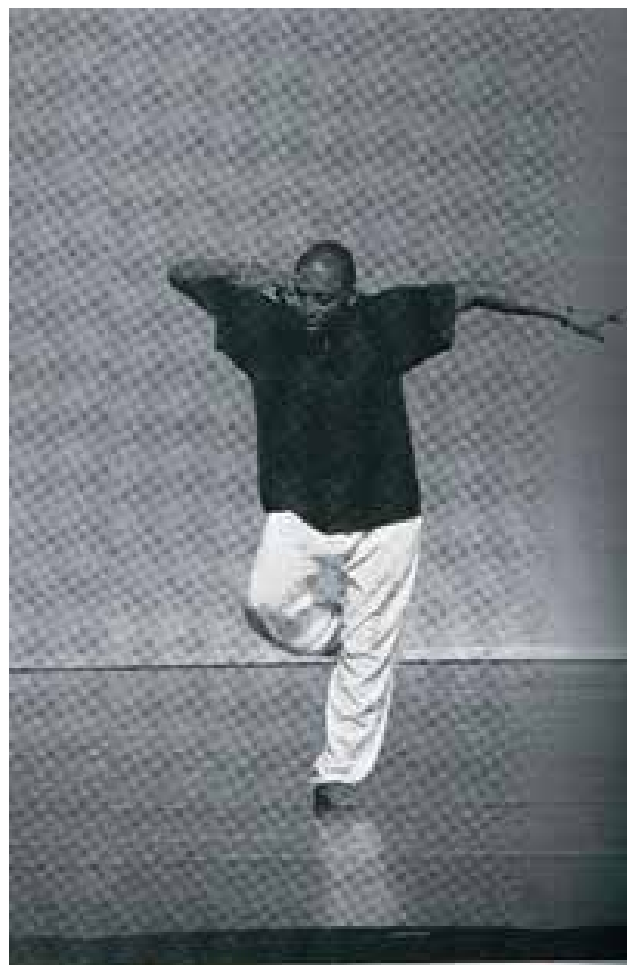


Figure 1 - Vincent Mantsoe, an African dancer par excellence, RSA, France, photo: Zbigniew Bakota, Kraków 2005

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Polish Society of Anthropology of Dance, freelance, (Poland/ UK). [www.wiesnamond.pl](http://www.wiesnamond.pl)



However, I am not going to evoke any mythical image of by gone era that saw authentic tribal life on the Black Continent, let us say, before European invaders came there, that is in times when the continent seemed to have enjoyed a constant protection of ancestral spirits and the totemic Elephant. My research proposal is a kind of an attempt to define an ontological concept of both a dancer and a dance that surfaces when we hear ethnic African music, be it Dogons's one, or watch African dance in authentic ritualistic environment, take the case of the mukanda rite, the Chokwe boys' rite of passage.

A vantage point of my investigation is gained through anthropological and aesthetic approach endorsed by choreological studies. The former, grounded in anthropology and religious studies, describes and defines physical reality of the dance, be it psychophysical reality of a dancer or social environment of its performance. The latter, imbedded in aesthetics, deals with the form of dance, investigating primarily a nature of the aesthetic experience that is lived by both a dancer and a beholder relatively. Since the 20th century choreological, studies seem to provide appropriate research tools that allow describing and interpreting dance thoroughly.

Having determined my methodological objective, I will proceed now with analysis of the following subject matters:

1. **The existential reasons for the African dance** is obviously the same like everywhere on the Earth. There is no doubt that dance worldwide is first expression. A person dancing shows that he or she goes through something. The performance may manifest both sheer joy and sorrow of life or express an act of participation in *something*, be it dancer's intimate life or the Beyond reality, conceptualized as the experience of the sacred. Gabriel Wosien recaptured this phenomenon as 'encountering Gods'. Accordingly, she holds that *dance is God's gift of grace to man*, and that *in the act of communion in the dance we are at-oned with the creative source of life*. Thus thinking of African dance one inevitably refers to its religious and ritual origins, what will determine the further direction of the discourse I propose, narrowing it to danced expression of the lived sanctity of existence.

This narrowing choice is explainable for it is widely accepted that pertaining to ritual is a distinctive feature of African dance culture. This is what is perceived intuitively and shortly when we approach the indigenous movement culture of the Black Continent, either in its fontal place, or in foreign lands where Africans were forced to live through slavery industry.

It is worth noticing here that the meaning of the sacred has been updating recently on the scholarly basis, and this process seems to develop quite proportionately to the extent of the increasing crisis of religious or metaphysical feelings of contemporary man we have been going through for longer than one can remember. Now there is no point referring at length to the extensive and vast literature in the field of religious studies that investigate category of the sacred. Evidently, the scope of the discussion permits only a brief reference to the recent scholarly speculations related to this subject matter, predominantly in the field of comparative religious studies. What really matters for the sake of my further exposition is to define the sacred in conceptual vocabulary of the religious studies that use the term sacred as a referent to transcendent world. Its methodological value might be descriptive or analytical alike. We remember that Mircea Eliade analyzed thoroughly the notion of the sacred as the designation of numinous reality which becomes manifest in the social world through the collective rituals of the human communities and through subjective experience of individuals alike. He was investigating how by the medium of man's creativity, the archetypal contents of the sacred receive their social grounding in mythical narratives and in ritual systems of representation, called in anthropological studies as pre-theatre forms or artefacts, be it sung dance performance or other material objects of art. The sacred either appears as an attribute in vernacular (folk religion) or as a concept employed by religious institution serving as theological concept of religious system, (so called high religion). At that very heart of the person's creative response to epiphany in progress, we might, it seems, capture a point of contact between human

and transcendent.<sup>2</sup> It seems to happen through aesthetic experience of the hierophant-performer, or interacting tribal onlooker is in his/her aesthetic response both to perceived ritual-performative event or to the sacred material object. The Finnish religious studies scholar Veikko Anttonen holds that in cultural specific linguists and anthropologist accounts of the sacred, a new approach has been emerging, the one that deals with the sacred as category of behavior and not as an objective, given reality. He rightly notices that traditionally on the Western hemisphere in the discourse of the religious studies, the comprehension of the sacred and its scholarly construct has been greatly dominated by Judeo-Christian meanings that had become a prototype of the sacred. This is stated in reference to **principles of categorization** which define **the perceived attributes** according to which membership to the category is determined



Figure 2 - Sacredness according to the Bible: *An Angel Feeding Prophet Elija*, Gustav Dorè, the 19th century.

<sup>2</sup> In the first place, I find it clearly recognized that by an aesthetic experience one understands cognitive perception of the world through sensual apparatus, meaning five external senses and proprioceptive ones, from inside of the body, as experienced in phenomenological intentional act of grasping the reality.

(as studied by Eleanor Rosh), and this determination is cultural specific, here conditioned by the Hebrew and the Christian world view (very much influenced by the Greek philosophy and aesthetics) and their related cosmogony.



Figure 3 - Sacredness according to the New Testament : Virgin Mary with a Child, stained glass window, the Middle Ages, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, phot. W.M.-K.

### The Christian ideal of the sacred image

The attributes by which sacredness as an emotion is conventionally determined by both the Hebrew and the Christians are the following: 1. Detachment from every day reasoning, 2. Quietness, 3. Devotion, 4. Purity, 5. Beauty, 6. Unity, 7. A temporality, 8. Infinity, 9. Non-corporeality. Yet a wider point of view of cognitive semantics that investigates the element of the sacred in the human culture, as proposed by Anttonen, treats it as more comprehensive and wider theoretical issue, far beyond cultural heritage of Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition and its semantic implications. Sociologists (to mention only Emile Durkheim 1858-1917), conceptualize sacred as a symbolic vehicle through which ethnic societies have cognized and expressed the conceptual structure which gives them identity as territorially and culturally distinct entities and by which they map and organize their world. In social scientific research, the category of the sacred has been explained comprehensively as collective representations, which are expressed and performed through collective rituals. Therefore, a single value has been placed on things attributed as sacred and their potency for the growth of different cultural entities.



In this tradition, the attributes of the sacred are fixed and consequently, transformative things and objects are marked off, classified, and set apart through the distinction between the sacred and the profane (the opposition methodologically worked out by W. Robertson Smith and E. Durkheim). In this stand, the sacred become a matter of the social control through interdiction, prohibitions and rules of avoidance. Interestingly enough, the sacred and the profane are cognized here as relational and paradoxical categories in systematic ordering and classification of phenomena. In Durkheim tradition, they are perceived as existent and as non-existent at a stroke and bear meaning only when one has learned to perceive them as constitutive elements.

Anttonen explains that ‘in accordance with this logic we can say that the sacred has not autonomous ontological referent, as it is a complementary reality of the profane. It is always culturally produced within culture-specific systems of categories, distinctions and arrangements of the human behavior according to them.’ (Anttonen 38 :)

As a result of his field work in Australia<sup>3</sup>, where he was doing research into Arunta tribe, Durkheim held reductively and narrowly that nothing is inherently sacred, but it is the mark that society imprints into an object which gives its sacred character, pointing strikingly a to case of the Arunta tribe churingas.<sup>4</sup> Later, in the similar vein Mary Douglas, 1921-2007, who in turn did the fieldwork with Lele people of Congo in Africa, argued that superhuman reality, religious and cultural entities are symbolically construed social representations and function as constituents of cultural system and its principles of categorization, the notion of the sacred included.<sup>5</sup> Quite similarly the American scholar of Jewish origins, Roy Rappaport pointed that ‘sanctity is ultimately a quality of discourse’

and not of the objects with which this discourse is concerned<sup>6</sup>. As we can deduce her, the semantic holism explicates how the completely symbolic system refers to itself instead of elucidating how to interpret metaphysical referents of particular symbols. However, Anttonen tries to set a notion of the sacred in a wider theoretical context, being himself a proponent of discussing the sacred as the scholarly category in cognitive studies. He advocates a process of reassessment of the notion of the sacred in the contemporary religious studies in accordance to the last findings concerning the role of categories in the human language and cognition (particularly basing on findings by Lakoff and Johnson<sup>7</sup>). According to him and his precursors in rethinking religion (to recall Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley<sup>8</sup>) it is essential to approach semantics of the symbolic materials in the spirit of reflexive holism **through investigating the systems** whose communicative vehicle symbols are, instead of examining the symbols and their supposed reference to transcendental realities. By this, he points to both psychological and cognitive foundation of the experience of the sacred. In fact, Anttonen proposes a cognitive research into the sacred where instead of describing the ways; the sacred is present in lives of the human beings. Accordingly, one questions how ontologies of cultural systems become possible and how members of these systems as the realities to be lived on comprehend them. This statement is particularly significant while we approach the dance culture of the Africans, who have been cultivating their ethnic dances both in their homeland and in the slavery environment.

<sup>3</sup> The outcome of his research there was his book *Les forms élémentaire de la vie religieuse*, 1912.

<sup>4</sup> Churinga. It is an object carved from wood or stone by Aboriginal tribes in central Australia and held by them to be sacred.

<sup>5</sup> The aftermath of her fieldwork in Africa was her book *Lele of Kasai*, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> For more see: Rappaport, R.A. (1999) *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>7</sup> As presented in their now classic book *Metaphors we live by*, University of Chicago Press 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Another two researchers cooperation that resulted in insightful discourse on cognitive approach to mind and ritual as included in their *Rethinking Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, followed by their *Bringing Ritual to Mind. Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.



Figure 4 - Sacredness according to Chokwe people, Africa: a Phwo mask, an ancestral image of ideal femininity, Museu de Ciencia, Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal.

Using data of methodology applied in religious studies, which deal with the sacred, we focus on cognitive processes by which the conceptual structures known as ‘the sacred’ are firstly, acquired, secondly, represented in a specific way and thirdly, transmitted. In case of each ritual dance we might parallel this triad relatively with firstly, the experience of the sacred on both communal or personal level, secondly, with the experience presented through the dancer’s bodily performance to music or without, and thirdly, with transmission of the message through a set of gestures and movements in relation to one’s body and to the space, all, evidently, imbued with symbolical meaning.

It is not surprising at all that the re-thought theory of the sacred is a heuristic one. Such a semantic approach aiming at unraveling cognitive structures within symbolic-cultural systems employs three fold methodology; the one is ethnographical and

collects linguistic and ethnographic evidences of the terms denoting the sacred in different language traditions, the other interprets cultural meanings that the context-specific usages of these terms convey (on the emic level of analysis) **with the view** to conceptual changes of the term after they have been turned into theological concepts, and finally there is deduction of conceptual structures and explanation of the logics of the sacred making behavior within linguistic and religious context under scrutiny. This step makes emic-category into etic category. (Despite the fact that the participant of the system might use not the very term)

The body and the territory/society are two fundamental conceptual structures, which the cultural and religious discourses are linked to<sup>9</sup>. The human body as a source of information is a major stage for people to express in image schemata of the conceptual division of ‘internal’ and ‘external’, following the distinction used by Mary Douglas. She investigated how the society creates its ontological (meant in sociology as economic, political, religious) universe by the symbolic relation between internal and external of the human body and the society. Moreover, human bodies are perceived in sociology as both socially and territorially bounded organisms and the body social presence takes place through continuous discourse of the space.

The Africans dancing in their homeland organically relate the body to the native space, and their ontology, as in case of authentic ethnic dance, can be inferred by direct data. On the contrary, the Africans dancing in their slavery diaspora relate their African experience of the sacred in an alien space, what rearranges *qualia* of their body in space-time reality. Nevertheless, by inducing the working presence of their mythological images and symbolical representations of the lived sacred reality they still could experience the healing and saving potential of dances they brought in them and with them in spite the fact they lost their innate orientation in the homeland space.

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<sup>9</sup> *Territory* at Antonnen and society at Douglas denote the same social/cultural phenomenon



2. **The body attitude in African dance.** In my further discussion, I will refer to Douglas/Antonnen distinction between the human body and society or territory as they are accordingly scholarly linked in the religious studies with the notion of the sacred. It should be realized that body and space are inseparable in dance. In the African dance, the very verticality of the human posture points up and down in one breath, creating apparently contradictory directional tensions, that seemingly reconcile or balance somewhere in the middle, at the center of gravity, as indicated by yogis to be three fingers width below the navel. In addition, three-dimensional shape of the human bodily structure implies width and depth, thereby plotting all corners of the world. Dancers transmit meaning through their body moving in space, or space-time, as temporality is organically implied in the concept of space. However, the body comes first, as evidenced by enslaved humans brought from the Black Continent to Americas. They encapsulated within their body memory of their ancestral faith, traditional customs and values inculcated in them, or putting it differently, culture and lore knowledge about powerful workings of nature. This contributed with time to cultural syncretism of the Americas.

Although step patterns and dance figures of African dances vary greatly, there is some typical pre-dance body attitude, recognized as characteristic of the African dance; namely bare feet remain in close contact to the ground with the entire soles adhering to the earth, next, bent knees direct the center of gravity down to the kernel of the Earth, then rhythmical body movements going along the body axis in alternating rhythm down up, up down as if they pushed center of gravity in man's body towards bowels of the Earth, every second time alternatively with the head pointing up the sky, even though eyes are directed to the earth. It is strikingly conspicuous that such a body attitude celebrates man's organic belonging to nature, or the Universe. The rhythm of dance and music and the body movement enjoy man's bonds with physics in the most pronounced way. It is not only the rhythmical cyclicity of the year itself and its alternating season or rhythmical processes of the human body. It has been researched that

healing rhythms of the African drums have the same beat as planetary pulsation of the magnetic waves perceived from the outside of the Earth. The phenomenon itself is known as Schumann's resonance:

Scientists have identified the Earth's rhythmic pulse as 7.83 hertz. Rhythmic, electromagnetic standing wave circles the Earth between the Earth's surface and the ionosphere. These rhythmic waves are known as Schumann's Resonance and may be, what some scientist believe, the rhythmic brain substratum common to all living beings. The frequencies of Schumann's resonance are intimately linked with those of human brain waves. Any adjustments in the patterns and frequency of this Earth resonance would affect homeostasis (the ability of an organism or cell to maintain internal equilibrium by adjusting its physiological processes), REM, (during dreaming) and healing. (Thomas Riccio, 126: 2008)

3. **Dance aesthetics deals with external and internal aspect of dance.** By the external component of dance we understand a three dimensional image which is projected into space-time now of dancing. Indeed, it is a complex time - space entity that reaches our senses. The form of dance is determined both by movement tradition inculcated in dancers' bodies through movement and dance training and by dancer's self-awareness that allows individual changes and modifications in some inherited dance convention, according to the extent of artist's gifts. (This has been recently evidenced with the Chokwe muaknda rite dancers and discussed by Ana Guerra Marques, 2012). The wisdom encapsulated in the conventional movement, apparently immune to any substantial change, transmits directly the inherited tribal knowledge on man, which is some unique set of values, and their relationship to superhuman reality or Nature. Nevertheless, the form of dance, its dynamics, directional tension and flow across space-time can be described, interpreted and assessed with choreological research tools. Self-evidently, a mask and a costume play a vital part in African dance making, ritualistically hiding the identity of a dancer and protecting his or her

human fragility against superhuman powers, while creating aesthetically a colorful dynamic sculpture radiating with symbolical meaning centrifugally and centripetally. It is not surprising that its aesthetics is heuristic as well, as we can see it on the example of the Phwo mask, where sophisticated scarifications not only cause aesthetic delight, but also offer some deep insight into the tribal culture alike.

The internal aspect of dance includes the issue of dancer's aesthetic experience, which overlaps or fuses with the experience of sacred in majority of African dances. Thus reciprocal interrelation between sacred and aesthetics is to be examined extensively if one intends to approach the subject matter in a serious way. Accidently, doing my research into comparative aesthetics I found that the term **chorea** (adjective *choreutic*), which is an aesthetic notion coined in the ancient Greek art, seems to lend more understanding to the borderlines of the sacred and the aesthetics of the world dance, the African dance in the first place. In fact, I have discussed so far the complex and progressive semantics of the notion of "the sacred" to arrive at a conclusion that the experience of the sacred and the choreutic experience or the choreutic expression are interrelated.

Chorea, already well defined and conceptualized by the Polish scholar Edward Zwolski in his unique work entitled *Chorea, a Muse and Divinity in the Greek Religion* (Warsaw, 1979) has already been enjoining a full and exhaustive definition in the realm of the theory of performance. According to Zwolski, chorea is perceived and felt as an organic unity of the three: rhythmical movement or gesture, melody played or beaten rhythmically and a sung word on the ground of the communal experience of the sacred. Regardless the Greek etymology of the word "chorea" and its original belonging to the Ancient Hellenic culture, Zwolski himself claims that choreutic expression is universal and can be spotted in all world cultures at some particular stage of their development when "a group of people underwent a communal experience of the sacred and answered it with their total expressivity in music, dance and a word, emerging then in their semantics and aesthetics as a conspicuous triple unity." The co-occurrence of the similar or even identical forms of the communal expression in

some ritual like context cannot be just explained by ethnomusicological theory of the circles of cultures (so called Kulturkreis) that was developed in Austria in the beginning of the 20th century (Fritz Graebner, Bernard Ankerman and Wilhem Schmidt). As we remember, Kulturkries refers to **a complex of related cultural** traits having been assumed that they diffuse or radiate outward as a unit in concentric waves or circles. The diffusionist principles serve to find out similarities among cultures to show the result of cultural influence; thereby circles of interaction among various peoples could and should be delineated. I claim that co-occurrence of similar or identical cultural forms results more likely from universal features of the human nature. Indeed, the choreutic qualities of the performance which can be classified as a danced song or a sung dance, make one rather think of universal properties of the human nature, for people, regardless their local geographical conditions, answer at the same or at least similar manner to the metaphysical call. Being the organic unity of the three: rhythmical movement or gesture, melody played or beaten rhythmically and a sung word, the performance through its links binding communal, address the Sacred. As a ritualistic - artistic genre, chorea appears as a total aesthetic form born out of the sweeping experience of lived existence and it can be unquestionably called epiphany.

The semantics of the Sacred for the archaic Greeks in times when chorea was being born within a specific set of religious beliefs, to transform in time into theatre performance, evidently does not overlap tightly with the semantics of the sacred implied in the African and Latin-America choreutic performance, even if both of them had comparable context, such as a given community it is performed at, and it possesses as well some paralleling expressivity which is understood as a total response to the Absolute in dance, music and a spoken word. There is no doubt that the ontological phenomenon of chorea, although bearing specific semantics related to a particular culture and space - time coordinates, can be perceived first and foremost as a universal matrix of universal human experience. Additionally, it might contribute to better understanding of a changing paradigm of the sacred in the world cultures.



## Last but not least

Eventually I am coming up with research hypothesis about Brazilian syncretic ritual form called *candomblé* claiming that it falls entirely under the aesthetic of performative art called *chorea*. A conceptual corollary of my research is a generic term I am introducing now, via ***Chorea Latino-Americana, a Brazilian indigenous*** genre borne at cross roads of performative arts and related to it some complex spiritual experience. Pointing to its significant contribution to both African dance culture development and deeper understanding of the very nature of religious experience should not be found as a theoretical exaggeration of any kind. Conceived at the cross roads of the three great spiritual and communal experiences; pre-Columbian Indians, Christians comes to the continent and the Africans taken by force from their home land, it must be of syncretic character inevitably and par force, yet it it remains a dance that bears at the same time the individual features of its funding constituents. To put it differently, it is a melange of South American, African and European spiritual and aesthetic qualities. Facing this hybridization of primarily uniform structures, that sprang to life in the colonized South American lands, one poses a question about something intrinsically and unchangeably choreutic in it as distinguished from accidental, outer and variable. In consequence on the ground of the ontology of the piece of art that relates content to its form, I would like to raise another question “what kind of the human experience the ***chorea Latino-Americana*** contains, shapes and expresses”? Obviously, the research into aesthetic nature of *chorea Latino-Americana* spreads as well, if we recalled the examination of the sacred notion, on the borderlines between religious studies, anthropology of performative arts and comparative aesthetics. Its aim is to widen the Europe borne concept of the choreutic sensibility and expressivity with the examples of performative culture in the Latin America, assuming this stand is justified and supported by empirical data.

## Conclusion

**To conclude let me propose and launch two definitions, one of an African dancer**, the other of an African dance, stating that they are construable only in ontological relationship with the experience of the sacred. Now,

1. The African dancer, well trained and skilful is a person endowed by some striking and unique faculty for dancing. Due to some sensitive and responsive relationship with nature, it has been an individual that realizes his/her full kinetic and psychophysical potential by means of total response to numinous, or sacred aspects of existence, while
2. The African dance is a choreutic expression of the lived sacredness of nature through, in and by, no less sacred the human body whose movement performance manifests organic unity of man and nature in operation.

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