

Africa, Agency and the Anthropocene

Thomas Riccio

Professor of Performance and Aesthetic Studies
University of Texas at Dallas

WELCOME TO THE ANTHROPOCENE, OUR EPOCH, one characterized by human activities that have become so dominant they are now a planetary force. The Anthropocene is the “great acceleration,” a way to mark the sharp rise in destructive environmental effects of humans since the second half of the twentieth century. It is a human-centric, planet-wide social and cultural phenomenon in which we are increasingly self-aware participatory actors in an unprecedented emerging reality. The Anthropocene has incited apprehension, instability, and reevaluation. It has affected every aspect of human endeavor: the social, cultural, economic, political, and personal. It has re-drawn boundaries and definitions of ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, religious belief, time, space, fiction and reality. We are acutely aware of the biological-technological-geological co-evolution that is swirling around us. We pay closer, better attention to the interdependence of human and nonhuman landscapes and beings, aware and attuned to multi-species entanglements and complexity that pulsates around us. We are awake and anxious to the fragility of our moment which sits on a precipice poised to slip into a cascade of unimaginable ruination.

Moving into the ever deepening and complex terra incognita in which we find ourselves is a cause for skepticism, apprehension, and opportunity. Some wholeheartedly insist on hope and the promise of a glowing world of egalitarian, political, economic, and technological wonders. Others see this as the last moments of our species slipping into extinction. Others still are in denial, and seek the certainty of traditional forms of religion, politics, and ethnicity for solace. Some resort to momentary and sensual comforts, consumerism, medications, religious fundamentalism, sports, entertainments, reactionary politics—escapism of every form and variety. Others respond as best they can to the overwhelming environmental devastation, animal extinctions, overpopulation, refugee crisis, food, water and resource shortages. Larger, accumulating currents move around us, and we are

helpless disconnected witnesses to the slow steady disintegration of liberal democracy, the rise of a global oligarchy, the corporatization and monetization of the world, and the standardization, dehumanization, and reclassification of humanity as a datafied technological entity in service of a larger algorithmic system.

Our species at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century is facing a global-wide predicament. We are in an overwhelming, complex, and incomprehensible situation sifting through like archeologist amidst the fragments trying to figure out what happened and why. Like ghosts among ghosts, we consider how and what we can do to shape an emerging, new kind of consciousness.

Past is prelude. Like our ancient hunting-gathering forebears, we adapt or perish. Limits are being met and adjustments, out of stark necessity, are taking place accordingly. In the world we are moving into, everything must be reconsidered and reevaluated in terms of how best to survive. The systems of the past—political, economic, social, and cultural—are the resource for the reimaging of an interconnected life on and with our planet. Humans do not own or control the planet, for they are only a part of and responsible to a larger system of being.

Humans are the earth's most enabled creatures, its greatest beneficiaries, who, in the name of progress, have taken so much without giving back. Our kind do not own or control the planet, we are not especially privileged, but rather reckless barbaric rapist exploiters, willfully negligent, abusive, and ignorant of the larger system of cyclical life and death of which we are a part. We have convinced ourselves of our mastery by removing ourselves from existing cycles of the planet, postponing and using every device and strategy to immune ourselves from an inevitable outcome from which we cannot be exempted. For we, too, are food in a life cycle beyond our imagining.

The urgent task, then, is not in deciding, which is deepest, spirituality of politics, religion or theater, but learning how to nurture such an attitude of interconnectedness that we are no longer the aliens on the earth. We human creatures have always tended to levitate off the planet. By thinking, emoting, imaging, calculating, and inventing, we rarify ourselves into the ether, fancying that we are not food. But if we cannot learn to be food, our species will become a dead-end branch on the evolutionary tree. So, the question is how to ground ourselves, admit that we are food, and become the animals we are.¹

That the juggernaut of Western cultural influence has shaped our historical moment and the world, for better and worse, is a given. A litany of western cultural exploitations, manipulations and innumerable social, cultural, and psychic traumas haunt our world and the consciousness of the non-Western world and its people. What affects the individual affects the whole culture, demanding a

¹ Ronald Grimes, *Rite Out of Place: Ritual, Media, and the Arts* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 154.



Manfred, a Khwe Bushman healer, conducts a necessary 'cooling down' ritual to release the energy created by a night-long healing ceremony. Hours of release through social dancing shares the healing with the community. Schmidtsdift Refugee Camp, Lower Kalahari, South Africa. Photo: Thomas Riccio

culture-wide response. What affects the individual affects, increasingly, the planet. This is elegantly expressed in the Vedas: "As is the atom, so is the universe; as is the microcosm, so is the macrocosm; as is the human body, so is the cosmic body; as is the human mind, so is the cosmic mind."

Indigenous African performance

Indigenous African performance is an under-appreciated and under-utilized expression that facilitates a response, change and adaptation to this dire situation. Amidst the maelstrom of contemporary events, an alternative perspective is sorely needed. Indigenous African performance, and all of its incumbent traditions, holds within it the germinating values of sub-Saharan Africa's identity and place-based worldview. And it has the potential to become a catalyst for the reimagining of an earth-centric way of being in the Anthropocene.

'Indigenous' and 'traditional' are often problematic, overlapping, and fluid terms. When using the term 'indigenous' in reference to performance, I mean a performance language (actions, regalia, rhythm, song, and structure) that implicates and expresses a specifically indigenous worldview. Within the indigenous worldview, humans are only one part of the community, the conveners of an event that brings together other members of the community of that place: namely, the animals, spirits, ancestors, and elemental forces of nature. Performance within this context has the implied objective of celebrating, remediating, and balancing a community of place. Performance in many ways is a limiting term, unable to capture the unique, complexly integrative, and multi-vocal expression of agency. Indigenous performance is at once a sensorial, mythic, spiritual, psychological, biophysical, participatory, communal, and most significantly a functional interaction to effect real and practical change. The full impact is most vividly exemplified by the ritual and shamanistic practices of Africa's few remaining hunting-gathering groups. The elements of the indigenous performance are shaped by and expressive of this comprehensive, effective intent.

When using the word 'traditional' I mean those actions, regalia, sounds, music, and structures that have been codified by a culture, and have become mnemonics and containers of cultural memory. Traditional expressions may very well have indigenous origins, and indigenous performance manifestations serve a similar mnemonic function; however, the fundamental difference between the two is that traditional performance expressions (traditional social dancing, for instance) are not focused on the objective of expressing and/or remediating place. Traditional performances expressions can be atomized, travel, and be reconfigured. Indigenous expressions have currency only relationally to a larger community of place context, functionality and objective. Indigenous performance expressions out of context become something else. They may become traditional, but their function changes.²

Today there is an uneasy relationship between forced historical and cultural imposition and Africa's multiple and varied indigenous, place-based worldviews and traditions. This usurpation of African indigeneity, forcibly replaced by a human-centric, material-objectivist world order has been the cause of underlying individual, social, cultural and environmental trauma wrought by the Anthropocene. Today, lurking at the core, beneath and around every atrocity of Boko Haram fundamentalism, ethnic and political act of violence, corruption, multi-national resource exploitation, World Bank manipulations, pervasive and often insidious Chinese, European and American influences is the rending of cultures from their indigenous identity and way of being in the world.

² Thomas Riccio, "Shadows in the Sun: Context, Process, and Performance in Ethiopia," *New Theatre Quarterly*, 28, No. 3 (2012), 294.

Africa in Context

In Africa, as with the world at large, today there are more and more people and fewer and fewer resources, with many of the resources that remain being corrupted. Systems are becoming increasingly stressed, creating anxiety, as they fitfully adapt and become more homogenous. In Africa, with every act of modernization, every new dam or drilling for oil, mining or pipeline, every forest clear-cut, every waterway fouled by a faceless international corporation, comes a Mephistophelean bargain and an implicit promise of a better life in the short term, in human-centric terms. Such a promise is an illusion, unattainable in reality, a carnival mirror distortion reflecting a distant backdrop of paradisiacal opulence. In the foreground are an increasing homelessness, disease, and hunger, compounded by economic, political, religious, and ethnic refugees searching desperately for higher ground. The Anthropocene is fueled by base greed and fear and is little more than self-perpetuating, short-term salesmanship served up by those hoarding power and wealth, in order to clutch as much as they can to withstand an inevitable systemic collapse they themselves have enabled.

Responses and adjustments to the human-centric way of being have so far been superficial, limited, and self-serving. Some are ignorant to the liability of continuing in a human-centric way, while others remain hopeful that technology will somehow solve all of our problems. The human ability to communicate and share instantaneously, splitting atoms, mapping the genome, ever expanding computational power, and the datafication of reality will not somehow better enable survival and the quality of life. It cannot, because it is only a projection of a human-centric reality with the implicit objective of extending a human-centric way of being in the world. Malidoma Patrice Somé, a Dagara elder from Burkina Faso, speaks to the implications and effect of technology on the human spirit:

The role of technology must be to attend to the lower part of human existence, since a thing devoid of the spiritual cannot help reach out to the spirit. The spirit liberates the person to work with the things of the soul [...] Machine has overthrown the spirit and, as it sits in its place, is being worshipped as spiritual. This is simply an error of human judgment. Anyone who worships his own creation, something of his own making, is someone in a state of confusion.³

Humans are not the only living things on the planet but we are fundamentally convinced, through the self-affirming promulgations of language, politics, laws, religions, economics, popular culture and media, of our unquestioned rightfulness. We have been shaped by this unsustainable and false premise.

³ Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* (London: Arkana Books, Penguin, 1993), 59.

The western cultural imperative, which has been propagated and sustained by an ever-refining cycle of conquest, colonization, capitalization, industrialization and urbanization, has been predicated on a human-centric expansion. Now, in a reality exhausted and without terrestrial expansion, every place on the planet has been “discovered,” mapped, and exploited. We have moved into the final phase one way of being and now live an enfeebled reality consisting of remix, simulacrum and simulation of what once was. The global village marks not an apotheosis but rather the ending of one cycle in human evolution and the forecasting of another, one that draws from all of the earth’s knowledge. Indigenous African performance, as an expression of holistic agency, holds within it the deep structures of an earth-centric way of being in the Anthropocene.

A fundamental and profound re-formatting of how humans conceptualize their relationship with a place is necessary. The reappraisal of indigenous African performance is a viable response to a world that continues to adhere to exhausted and self-destructive ways of being in the world.

African Performance

Indigenous African performance—its ceremonies, rituals, dances, songs, and regalia—is an expression of another way of being in and with the world. It is, in its multiple and varied expressions and to a greater and lesser degree throughout sub-Sahara Africa, an expression of a place-based way of being in the world. Its cosmological worldview that evolved from, and is coherent and organic to, its system of place. The use of “performance” is deliberate, so as to distinguish it from drama or theatre. As Osita Okagbue asserts, “The indiscriminate interchanging of the word ‘drama’ with ‘theatre’ and ‘performance’ has been responsible for the confusion surrounding most discussions of performance in Africa.”⁴ The term performance serves here as an overarching term to include indigenous and traditional expressions specific to Sub-Saharan Africa, as distinguished from the dramaturgical, procedural, and production expectations, relationships, and objectives of “drama” and “theatre,” which are western cultural artifacts.

From the microcosmic comes the macrocosmic: “A cosmos in not merely an empty everywhere, it is an everywhere as perceived room somewhere, a universe as construed from a locale.”⁵ This enacted essence of African performance is an offering to the world that lives on through varied and fragmentary indigenous forms and traditions to this day in African theatre. In essence, the function of place-based indigenous performance is to provide a venue by making the boundaries between the constituent parts of a given geographical place—the humans, animals, climate, flora, spirits and ancestors—porous and permeable. Performance evolved and is shaped as an expression as a functional interaction with a specific geographical

4 Osita Okagbue, *African Theatres and Performances* (London: Routledge, 2012), 174.

5 Grimes, *Rite Out of Place*, 146.

locale. Performance in this context is where the invisible is made visible, a venue that reveals the system of a place where the actions and varied voices of the constituent parts of place manifest, cohabitate, celebrate and dialogue.

Indigenous African performance is a practical technology, a means by which to recognize and enable the participation of the constituent parts that made an indigenous holism. Witnessing, recognition, and participation made animated and intimate the mythological outlines that encode social and cultural identity, behavior and community. By realizing, reiterating, and reaffirming other presences, human performance enables participation in a holism. In indigenous performance, the roles, rights, and responsibilities, along with the patterns of social and cultural identity of humans are reasserted, creating an organic and profound interconnected presence, a biological-psychological-physical bonding extending beyond the performance event. Victor Turner illustrates the reciprocal resonance of co-existence imbedded in the performance of the Ndembu of Zambia:

As we became increasingly a part of the village scene, we discovered that very often decisions to perform ritual were connected with crises in the social life of villages. There is a close connection between social conflicts and ritual at the levels of the village and a multiplicity of conflict situations is correlated with a high frequency of ritual performance. In an Ndembu ritual context, almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, every unit of space and time, by convention stands for something other than itself. It is more than it seems, and often a good deal more [...] Its ritual use is already metaphorical: it connects the known world of sensorily perceptible phenomenon with the unknown and invisible realm of the shades...⁶

African indigenous performance—and similarly the performance of other indigenous people—is a profound and vital legacy long discredited and marginalized. In a time of environmental stress that moves towards collapse, this function and means of performance merits an appreciation and reexamination as a viable alternative to the prevailing worldview of the human-centric western cultural tradition.

Africanist scholar Johannes Fabian advocates moving “from informative to performative ethnography.” This reorientation, he suggests, gives access in a new way to the constitution of cultural knowledge, because certain kinds of cultural knowledge are produced in and by means of performance.⁷ The encyclopedic knowledge held within African performance traditions offers timely alternatives to the pervasive influence of western dramaturgical models, indicating deep structure templates by which an emerging global culture can apply performance as a means by which to reimagine an inclusive and holistically mindful way of being in and with the world.

6 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Hawthorne, New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995), 15.

7 Karin Barber, John Collins and Alain Ricard, *West African Popular Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), xi.



N'Cwala, an annual ritual conducted by the N'goni people of eastern Zambia. After being forbidden by British colonization, the ritual was revived in 1990 and now combines two annual rituals, a 'first fruits' harvest and a 'purgation' ritual that identifies and releases the social ills that have accumulated over the past year. Depicted is the presentation of the first fruits by the N'goni poet and tradition bearer to the paramount chief which marks the opening of the ritual. Photo: Thomas Riccio.

Community of Place

African performance expressions, once exclusively the means of local communities to make visible the invisible holism of their place, have been colonized, reconstituted and encoded as "theatre": an imported form from the vocabulary of an alien worldview. Theatre, formed and shaped serving a human-centric worldview, is narrowly devoted to human and social remediation. Its prominent playing space is the elevated stage and/or frame of the proscenium, which symbolically portrays the perspective of an aestheticized mind-body split. Whereby the illuminated mind of the stage speaks to the passive body seated in the audience, a disembodied and fragmented reality emblematic of human removal from the body of the earth.

As long as performance is confined to performance halls, performance is no answer to the problem of saving the planet from toxicity and species evacuation. The best that aesthetic art can do is mine the problem.⁸

⁸ Grimes, *Rite Out Of Place*, 149.

In contrast, indigenous African performance reveals a mind/body/spirit holism without rigid demarcations of space and time and a hierarchal consciousness and being.

The African indigenous worldview is a 'community of place'. Within this eco-cosmological worldview, each participant has a unique role and contribution. The world is alive, animated, and interconnected, with humans obliged to serve as responsible mediators. The noted Zambian theatre scholar Mapopa Mtonga illustrates the performance of this worldview in the opening of the Gulu Wamkulu, the "great dance" of the Chewa people of eastern Zambia.

These groups of vinyau performers who do not come into the village but hide in the nearby bushes making all sorts of falsetto sounds and various animal calls, They may make the call of the jackal (nkhandwe), the laugh of the hyena (fisi), the cry of a wild cat (bvumbwe) or the roar of the lion (mkango) using all sorts of devices.⁹

Humans perform for the world out of respect for a wise elder and as a way to momentarily transcend, to glimpse and touch a totality of being. These actions are embodied, passed on and repeated anew for each generation as a legacy and obligation. The mountains tell of the beginning of the world to an Australian Aborigine on a walk about; the wind imparts a message to a !Xuu Bushman; a waterfall teaches a Korean mudang how to harmonize, and spirits assist a Chinese Miao shaman in healing. To perform within the context of the indigenous world is to have direct agency with a community that inhabits and maintains a place. It is an expansive place beyond social and material boundaries. This performance is an act of agency that applies performance as a communicative vocabulary.

We owe to the cosmic order because we are individually and communally responsible for its maintenance. Every person is sent to his outpost called earth to work on a project that is intended to keep the cosmic order healthy. Any person that fails to do what he or she must do energetically stains the cosmic order.¹⁰

Body interactions within the indigenous worldview are the primary way of "knowing" and dialoging with the community of place, and in turn, the human body is shaped by the sensuous world. To see the world means to be seen by the world. To see an eagle flap its wings and lifting itself into sky is to vicariously experience the eagle through one's own body.¹¹ To dance an animal's movement, chant its call, wear its feathers or skin, is to vicariously understand, celebrate and cohabit with that being. Is it any wonder indigenous masks of anthropomorphic beings, regalia festooned with animals, plant, and earth elements, and dances, chants and instruments, honor, emulate and express a community of place? The interactions of thought, feeling, dream, and

9 Mapopa Mtonga, *The Drama of Gulu Wamkulu* (Unpublished master's thesis, Legon: University of Ghana, Institute of African Studies, 1980), 58.

10 Somé, *Ritual*, 14.

11 David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 61.



A scene from the performance of *Emandulo*, devised and directed by Thomas Riccio, produced by the Kwasa Group and the Natal Performing Arts Council, Durban. Applying traditional Zulu performance vocabularies and mythologies in a contemporary context, the work served as a communal healing for post-apartheid South Africa. Photo: Shelly Kjonstad.

action have equal credence. To think of someone or something means you are speaking or they are speaking to you. A word, thought, gesture, and expression, has a power and spirit, once enacted that will live forever. The porousness between dream, thought, myth and reality is at the core of the indigenous worldview and in turn, its performance. Performance is a reference for the everyday perceptions and events of the world. The performance of a ritual initiation becomes a marker witnessed by the entire human and non-human community. Performance becomes a community venue of agency, recognition, balance and transcendence, where all constituents express their power on equal terms. Speaking of the performative agency of the Igbo masquerade in eastern Nigeria, Osita Okagbue observes,

Conceptually, Igbo masquerade characters are ancestors of spirit forces that have taken on material form and returned to the human plane at the initiation of the living.... The ancestors and spirits constitute a community of souls and entities whose beneficial contact is constantly needed and sought by the living. The ancestors and spirits and gods are ideas born of the Igbo collective imagination but which need to be made flesh periodically in order for immediate physical contact and interaction to be effected. This physical manifestation of the spiritual on the material plane ensues that the continuities between the different worlds of the Igbo universe are kept alive through the masking theatre, with its explicit symbolism and performative dynamism. Igbo ancestors and spirits are able to participate physically in human affairs as masquerades.¹²

12 Okagbue, *African Theatres and Performances*, 19.

Indigenous African performance is a medium by which the sights, sounds, and rhythms of a specific place are brought into dialogue. Songs and drumbeats are not random, but rather specific to place. Science only now understands that each part of the world gives off a specific electromagnetic pulse. To drum a specific beat is to align with that part of the earth.¹³

13 Thomas Riccio, "Rhythm Reality." In Wiesna Mond-Kozłowska, ed., *Rhythms and Steps of Africa, Studies on Comparative Aesthetics: Studies on Anthropology and Aesthetics of The African Dance 2* (2012): 123.

An awareness of the evolution of community, cultural, and environmental rhythms involves basic bodily rhythms, which in turn beget movement, dance, song and chant. Rhythm is the ephemeral catalyst, conduit, and conductor of place and culture. For Eliade rhythm is the revelation of the world, cosmology and mythology incarnate:

Rhythms have their model outside of the profane life of man; whether they reproduce the movements of the totemic or emblematic animal, or the motions of the stars; whether they themselves constitute rituals (labyrinthine steps, leaps, gestures performed with ceremonial instruments) a dance always imitates an archetypal gesture or commemorates a mythical moment. In a word, it is a repetition, and consequently a reactualization, of *illud tempus*, "those days."¹⁴

14 Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of The Eternal Return* (New York: The Bollinger Library, Harper and Row, 1959), 28-29.

Every indigenous culture I have worked with has, at its core, simple rhythmic beat(s)—many cultures have several. I call these primary beats. These beats, their origins and inspirations being wide and varied, but always tactile, from a heartbeat to geology, the cycles of seasons, climate and migrations, are the basis of dance and performance. According to American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, "In most musical styles, the performer or performers employ a single, over-all rhythmical scheme, or 'ground plan,' which serves as a point of reference for the infinite variety of rhythmic detail possible within the scheme."¹⁵

15 Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1978), 49.

Rhythm serves as a reference point, a grid, infrastructure and "programmed code" emanating out through and permeating individuals participating and contributing to collectively agreed-upon



A performance of Community Health Awareness Puppets, an initiative that combined traditional performance vernaculars with western style puppetry to educate local populations. The author conducted workshops and research with the performers. The introduction of non-traditional puppets served to circumvent tribal and ethnic differences to bring awareness to critical issues such as AIDS awareness, female genital mutilation, deforestation, soil erosion, and corruption. Depicted is a performance in Nairobi's Uguru Park for street children, AIDS orphans, who live in the park. Photo: Gary Friedman.

perceptions and ways of operating. Rhythm is a way of communicating to the varied community members—each speaking in its own terms. The rhythm of place is also where play occurs and by which discoveries and relationships are made, reaffirmed, and cohabit. According to Johan Huizinga, “Play casts a spell over us; it is ‘enchanted’, ‘captivating’. It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things rhythm and harmony.”¹⁶ Likewise, Okagbue writes:

[...] religious/ritual undertones, the performances are underpinned by a sense of play. The Igbo, for instance, see themselves as “playing” with their ancestors and spirits through the masquerades; the Hausa are able to establish a playful relationship with their deities during Bori possession and trance performances.¹⁷

¹⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: The Study of The Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 10.

¹⁷ Okagbue, *African Theatres and Performances*, 179.

Rather than a materialist, cause-effect theatre dramaturgy imported from the west, indigenous African performance is an expression of complex playful movements not through a rational, human-centric sequence but rather a sensorial dramaturgy of Rhythm, Harmony, Change, Alternation, Contrast, and Climax. Indigenous African performance presents a unique understanding and awareness of the world offering an alternative to the human-centric dramaturgy now driving the emerging global narrative of the Anthropocene.

Kristofer Schipper writes in *The Taoist Body*:

Theatre is intended to cause the gods to manifest themselves in the festival. The community assembly and the liturgy thus aims at integration and order, and moreover to “pass” all beings to a higher life in one vast movement, so that the whole world may obtain the natural, spontaneous order of the heavens, and be at one with the cosmological system.¹⁸

The !Xuu Bushmen healers and diviners I worked with in the lower Kalahari similarly linked performance, spirituality and the regenerative healing of place, calling it *N!ngongiao (today we sing)*. By enacting an origin myth called *People Come Out of Here* they reaffirmed their agency with their place, returning to when all of creation emerged from two large stones and ordering the experience by way of sensorial dramaturgy.

Several sets of rattles combined with the polyrhythmic drumming and three levels of women clapping. Machai led the song with others singing chorus. A few women added high-pitched birdcalls. Machai was shaking his shoulders and head and soon others joined the dancing, shaking with a shuffle step across the floor. The dance and song cycled, weaving the room into another space, one outside my normal sense of time and reality. Soon most of those in the trailer were shaking at the shoulders and hips to create “heat.” Silenga, a small, older woman, also wore a beaded headpiece. Her eyes were closed and her face relaxed—she was entering an altered state of consciousness. The dance and song had many spontaneous swells of emotion and energy that pleased the group. The dance took them to some other place deep within their cultural identity.¹⁹

Each rhythm, be it traditional, pop or hip-hop, is in its origins derived from and responsive to, a specific place. Complexity of rhythms illustrates a complexity of participant voices resembling in many ways a conjuring or divination. The aliveness and mutability of structured yet flexible indigenous African performance is a living embodiment of a holistic dramaturgy seeking to sensorially harmonize with its constituent participants. The radical difference from Euro-American individualism is the communal orientation inherent in African systems—from the attribution of skill and insight to the ancestors to the goal of harmony for the group, not just the individual.²⁰

18 Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 65-66.

19 Thomas Riccio, “Making a New Story with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen,” *Theatre Forum* 10 (1997), 55.

20 Philip M. Peek, ed. *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 135.

The role of humans within this holistic/sensorial dramaturgy is that of facilitator. Because humans are the most enabled and the greatest beneficiary of place, they are held the most responsible for maintaining the order and its well-being. To perform within this context is to be responsible for the gathering all of the place-based community together (re) create wholeness.

Each one is the whole and the whole is each one [...] Each one is the whole and it is through it that the whole is formed. One is the whole and if each one did not contain the whole, the whole could not be formed. The whole, which is contained in everything, is the world. And we are sometimes told that the world is conceived as a unique animal, whose parts, however disparate they may seem, are inextricably associated.²¹

21 Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, 91.

Mapopa Mtonga describes how a Nyau ancestral spirit, performed by the Chewa people, enters a playing area (bwalo) portraying a mythic spirit creature and a man simultaneously. Other place-based animals are also portrayed, as are colonial police in a performance that vibrantly exemplifies indigenous African dramaturgy in action. The blending of spirit, ancestral, animal, and human interaction “plays” to evoke a moment of eternal presence into being. Participation is the necessary catalyst.

The Sajeni emerges on to the bwalo furiously. A fearful creature measuring the size of a fully-grown giraffe. And yet he is a man! A caricature of the colonial police in Rhodesia that terrorized the inhabitants of Harare. People fear his hippo hide whip called the sjambok and are thus running from him. But this Nyau spirit does not really mean to hurt anybody except to imitate some of the harsh realities of life experiences by the Black Africans. The spectators at first arrange themselves in such a way that they give the impression of a street scene. But when drums have resounded, Sajeni becomes crazy and begins to chase them about. He tries as much as possible to try and to get somebody with his much-dreaded sjambok but because of his immense height, he is unable to do so. It is then that the dance becomes much more of a satirical comedy about social life than a serious ritual in honor of the dead. The spectators scatter themselves all over the bwalo; laughing, jeering, cheering, and making all sorts of funny remarks as they chant in praise of him.²²

22 Mtonga, *The Drama of Gule Wamkulu*, 63-64.

The Lozi people of southern Zambia believe their ancestors live on an island in the sky called *Litooma*, which humans call to earth during performance. The songs, dances, and rhythms of performance are a call, serving to create a site that brings the many parts of the community together to perform as an expression of communality and continuity. All earthly and human issues are inter-related and only coherent in terms of the larger community. All sickness, human and non-human alike, is spirit sickness; weather, migrations, good and bad fortunes are related to the fragile balance of place.

When the Lozi performance is finished, the island of Litooma, the village of ancestors, returns to the sky to watch over the earthly community. Other community members return to their way of being in the world, boundaries separating them until they perform again.

Indigenous African performance is not a metaphor but rather a lived mnemonic and diagram of the world. The concept of metaphor is inadequate in this context because it implies an abstracting of the tangible and present. Indigenous performance is an evocation of the tangible presence of the eternal now, as my work with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen illustrates:

Our discussion about pretending and acting evolved into a discussion about metaphor. The concept of how something can mean something else was alien if not absurd to them [...] The need for metaphor and to "act" something or someone else is urged by the need to make a connection to another person, event, or thing. By virtue of how they perceived their reality, the Bushmen were already connected. In the Western context, metaphor, like acting, serves to bridge or reveal an idea or feeling so as to identify, emphasize, compare and contrast. The Bushmen have little interest in such things because everything is self-evident. Things are simply what they are. Everything is inherently a reference to that which is simultaneously itself and something greater. Mythology lives within them, not removed or differentiated as something outside self. What in Western perception we term internal and external to self, is for the Bushmen, one and the same.

Could it be that the need for metaphor and acting in Western and other cultures arose when they became removed from their hunter-gatherer interaction with their part of the earth? Did metaphor then become a device by which to bridge and hence reconnect with a lost wholeness? Did acting, like theatre, arise when once homogenous groups interacted with other groups? Did acting become a means by which to integrate (and thereby expand) a homogenous group's understanding of others? Acting allows one to become another and in this way understand another. Is the necessity of acting and theatre the attempt to connect with others and is it possibly an attempt to re-establish lost holism?²³

Indigenous African performance has the unique, and immediate, ability to address long repressed, individual, environmental, social, and cultural traumas and inequities. But first performance must be understood and appreciated for what it is and what it can do. A practical and function technology that reveals a holism, holds a spirit of a community, and can heal.

The following passage describes an aspect of developing a performance project in Zambia, an example of how indigenous African performance can be utilized to remediate contemporary issues.

23 Thomas Riccio, *Performing Africa: Re-Mixing Tradition, Theatre, and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 131.

To address the subtle inter-tribal antagonisms, some performers were deliberately assigned to perform the tribal dance of a traditional rival. Initially this caused some grumbling and some insensitive "correcting" by those from whose tribal dance was being attempted; eventually, however a sense of ensemble sharing and teaching evolved. In this instance, as in others, I took advantage of my being an outsider by asking them to do things no insider could nor would even think of asking. By dancing the dances of another tribe, boundaries were broken and performers expanded their performance vocabulary while gaining insight and appreciation for other tribal ways. Dance sharing established a paradigm and attitude that would guide the workshop and performance process: traditional performance was a language accessible to all and not something limited to tribal identity. This porous passing back-and-forth between tribal cultures and performers was seen as a source of strength.²⁴

24 Thomas Riccio, "In Zambia, Performing the Spirits," *Theatre Forum* 8 (1996), 61.

Where and What Now?

The question confronting African performance and theatre today is whether, and if so, how, to access the rich, expressive ritual, performance and dance tradition (and its implied worldview) for broader application. Indigenous African performance communicates well within its homogenous cultural context where the community understands, in a deeply ingrained way, the meaning and references encoded by it. But in order for these cultures to have a dialogue with other cultures in the age of the Anthropocene, some sort of expansion and adjustment of the performance language must occur. If not, the gulf between traditional African and Western realities will continue to expand and ultimately, I believe, relegate indigenous performance to obsolescent nostalgia. Respect, flexibility, and adaptation of performance language is necessary to meet the challenges of expression in a larger Anthropocene context.

As the effects of the Anthropocene broaden, humanity is forced to look inwards, take stock, and re-evaluate who and what we are, what we have gained, and what we have lost. All of human knowledge is a resource.

Africa has been historically traumatized in many ways, and continues to be challenged by rapid urbanization and displacement, which has brought economic, social and cultural hardships that have gone unanswered by ineffective, divisive, or corrupt nation states. The indigenous ordering systems of the past lay in waste and much of sub-Saharan Africa abandons its traditions, adapting to a new world out of the necessity of survival. The past may be in many and varied fragments, but they are vital and viable still, offering up an opportunity for the re-imagining of the indigenous African worldview. This will serve the specific needs of the continent itself, but also make a timely contribution to the emerging consciousness of planetary indigeneity in the age of the Anthropocene.

Place-oriented cultures have been overwhelmed and subsumed by non-indigenous cultures of the west: the Euro-American axis which transformed the world into meta-cultures, based on and propagated by modular, replicable, adaptive, and transportable ideas and values, which homogenize and flatten differences creating non-places serving the cultural-economic-technological-political nexus of capitalism-consumerism. The emerging global civilization has evolved into a place-less “community of ideas” removed from the contours, variance and vibrancy of the local and terrestrial. This community of ideas, shaped by colonialism, industrialization, urbanization, missionization, capitalism, technology, media, travel, economics, and politics, has created a new “virtual-real” place and way of being in the world. A reassertion of “community of place” is necessary to serve as a countervailing force and response. It is time to reconsider the impulse, mechanisms, forms, and vocabularies embedded within indigenous African performance.

Breaking African performance free from its self-imposed perceptions and marginalization will serve to identify a powerful and much-maligned performance vocabulary and tradition. Like extracting words from a foreign language to identify a basic meaning, the movements, once freed, will take on a malleable, recombinant life of their own. Appreciating, defining and engaging in indigenous African performance are the first steps towards its re-imagining and revival. The next steps include exploration and experimentation allowing for the active and playful interaction to create indigenous performance forms and expressions in a contemporary context.

We are all a part of something that is essential and vital, mythic, archetypal, and ritual. We are all projections that extend from the origins the human species. We are all from the earth and were once indigenous, protectors, articulators, and interlocutors of place. We have taken so much from the earth and now it is time let it speak and to give something back. Performance is that gift. ♪

References

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Pantheon, 1996.
- Barber, Karin, et al, ed. *West African Popular Theatre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Cosmos and History: the Myth of The Eternal Return*. New York: The Bollinger Library, Harper and Row, 1959.
- Grimes, Ronald. *Rite Out Of Place: Ritual, Media, and the Arts*. London: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: The Study of The Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

- Lomax, Alan. *Folk Song Style and Culture*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1978.
- Mauss, Marcel. *A General Theory of Magic*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Mtonga, Mapopa. *The Drama of Gule Wamkulu*. Unpublished master's thesis. Legon: University of Ghana, Institute of African Studies, 1980.
- Okagbue, Osita. *African Theatres and Performances*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Peek, Philip M., ed. *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991.
- Riccio, Thomas. *Performing Africa: Re-Mixing Tradition, Theatre, and Culture*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.
- . "Shadows in the Sun: Context, Process, and Performance in Ethiopia." *New Theatre Quarterly*, 28, No. 3 (2012): 1-18.
- . "Rhythm Reality." In Wiesna Mond-Kozłowska, ed., *Rhythms and Steps of Africa, Studies on Comparative Aesthetics: Studies on Anthropology and Aesthetics of The African Dance 2* (2012): 120-135. Krakow: Akademia Ignatianum.
- . "In Zambia, Performing the Spirits." *Theatre Forum* 8 (1996): 58-66.
- . "Making a New Story with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen." *Theatre Forum* 10 (1997): 45-59.
- Schipper, Kristofer. *The Taoist Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Somé, Malidoma Patrice. *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community*. London: Arkana Books, Penguin, 1993.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Hawthorne, New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1955.