KROKI I RYTMY AFRYKI

STUDIA Z ANTROPOLOGII I ESTETYKI TAŃCA AFRYKAŃSKIEGO

RYTHMS AND STEPS OF AFRICA
STUDIES ON ANTHROPOLOGY AESTHETICS OF THE AFRICAN DANCE
The spirit of Africa lives in its rhythm. In my many travels, living and working with a variety of ethnic groups throughout the sub Sahara from Zululand to Dar es Salaam to Ougagugu – rhythm has always been the most apparent, pervasive, and ever present elements of African life. African rhythm, rooted in its traditional, ritual and ceremonial expressions, and made more tangible through popular music heard at on the streets, in social clubs, on the radio, blaring from taxis or a roadside stands, is more than a musical expression. It is an ineffable, immersive, awareness of life, a connective tissue that somehow binds and charges all of African culture and life.

A study of African rhythm cannot be separated from African music and dance and African music and dance cannot be separated from what it means, “to live” in Africa and “to be” African. The African rhythm expressed in music and dance is only and entry way into the African experience and aesthetic. It is a communication between humans and the world, both material and spiritual worlds, facilitating identity, interaction and community. I once asked a Zambian actor and performer if he understood a certain type of music from another ethnic group, and he responded, “If I understand the dance I will understand the music and how they live. In their dance and music I can see where they are from like looking at a picture book. Africans have a different kind of camera, it is called rhythm, that is how we see – that is what makes us family and why we are all like brother and sisters” (Issa).

What is beneath African music and dance? What really is rhythm that inspires and organizes such a powerfully distinct expression? Why and how does rhythm organize and structure human existence? Why is rhythm Africa such a social and cultural deep structure?

It can be argued that rhythm is the very core of being human, that which coheres, organizes, and gives meaning to the human existence, with
each unique rhythmic expression being a celebration and communication with living on another part of the earth. Each part of the earth has its own rhythm, created by its own unique weather, geography, animals, migrations, and relation to the cosmos. But it is African rhythm that holds a central and enduring place in the world’s cultures, and is nothing less than a well spring from which an overwhelming number of musical genres, styles, patterns, instruments, dances, and expressions are derived. What would modern culture be like if not for the inspiration and far reaching influences of African rhythms: jazz, hip hop, rap, rhythm and blues, rock, gospel, reggae, techno, Motown, and the countless dance styles from modern, to jazz, to the rumba (among so many others)? The rhythm of Africa (and all of its derivations and exportations), once culturally denigrated and marginalized, has become, in a sense, a resource for our emerging world culture. The touchstone for what has become known as the “world beat” whereby rhythm is once again becoming the organizational motif, the sound track if you will, of an our globalizing planet.

Why rhythm? Simply, because rhythm constructs, regulates, and maintains life on Earth. Rhythm surrounds us, runs through us, emanates from us, and is at the origin, the very core of what it is to be a human on Earth.

We are all familiar with our heartbeat, a steady two beat rhythm. And the inhale exhale of our breathing, each rhythm is fundamental, obvious, reassuring, and a matter of life or death. Our heart beats; our breath operates in an ever changing complexity of rhythms that are in direct response to our surroundings, activities, interactions and emotions. Our collective breaths are what fill the Earth’s atmosphere, our heartbeats perpetuating our collective actions making the rhythm of human life on our planet.

Humans connect and respond to daily rhythm which are called circadian rhythms which are the basic human “clock” and is slightly longer than one day (24 hours), and closer to one lunar day (24 hours 50 minutes) – from the Latin Circa “around” + dies “day”.

Planetary rhythm determines the amount of light we are exposed to which in turn sets our circadian body rhythms which in turn influences sleep, mental alertness, pain sensitivity, and temperature and hormone levels such as our pineal gland melatonin secretion, and cell, protein, and molecular activity and repair. But our heartbeat, breath, and circadian rhythm are only a small part of a symphony, a complex interaction of rhythms, biological, geo physical, and atmospheric.
In our accelerating, rapidly evolving and globalizing world, how is that African rhythm has retained an integrity of origin?

Africa has historically been isolated and impenetrable by outsiders. Africa was the last continent to gain independence from its colonial oppressors, the last to gain nationhood, the last to benefit from industrialization, modernization and globalization. Economically today, Africa remains the world’s poorest and most underdeveloped continent. In general, nations in Africa are among the most corrupt and unstable – socially, politically, economically, environmentally, and medically. Economic and political migrations, motivated by war, ethnic violence, poverty, and drought have severely stressed sub-Sahara Africa causing a major reshaping of its demography and cultures. Although still predominantly rural, Africa is undergoing rapid transfiguration provoked by urbanization, an explosion of population combined with high unemployment, all of which has intensified internal and external political pressures of globalization, which increasingly seeks cheap labor, resources, and investment opportunities. Also shaping the transformation has been the advent of affordable technology, which has enabled young Africans to (Africa is the world’s largest market for cell phones) to have a greater perspective and access to the world.

In a sense, Africa is just now beginning to express itself on its own terms. Films, novels, and music produced by Africans have just begun to find their way to the global marketplace and begin to participate in the dialogue that is shaping our global culture. In many ways, Africa’s isolation and late boom has been to its advantage. Tribalism and ethnic cultural identity, which has stunted Africa’s development and modernization (in relative terms to other nations around the world), has also enabled the preservation of African culture and its rhythm reality. Long after modernized nations have been mediated by cultural, social, intellectual, economic, and political homogeneity (which in many ways is “modernization”) the many and varied cultures of Africa have persevered to arrive in the 21st century relatively intact with an integrity still connecting them to their originating and shaping sources, namely there indigenous place. In an increasingly homogenizing modern world, where efficiency and control are guiding principles, African rhythm remains authentic, earthy, genuine, connected to the body and place, and consequently attractive to non Africans (an indeed many urban and culturally displaced Africans) who have lost their connection to their culture and a way of bodily being and participating with the world. In many ways, African rhythm is the world’s
keeper and mnemonic of a way of being that is attuned to being of and with the earth. The global pervasiveness, attraction, and influences of African rhythm are not happenstance, but rather an instinctual yearning educating and shaping our emerging global world – a new indigenous culture – called earthlings.

African rhythm is, at its core, expressive of and sensitive to the interaction and interdependency of the multiple rhythms of the earth and in this way is an exemplar for the rest of the world. African rhythm – in its multiple and varied manifestations – is not only an expression but, just as importantly, a systemic example of an integrating way of being in and of the world. Unlike the rhythm and the music of other cultures, African rhythm is a focus for collective values as it mediates the life of a community – not just a human community, but also one that still be-speaks the animals, geography, spirits, ancestors, and climate. A rhythm that integrates, celebrates, and participates in a greater whole as to make the world tactile, sensual, and comprehensible, that magically, simultaneously enables a deeper and greater sense of self and being. African rhythm expresses a concept very from the European musical model. All humans have, share, and are a part of an individual and collective rhythm reality, however, the African use rhythm is a means of integrating music, individual, and community that are indistinct from their social and cultural contexts, history, and identity. The African concept of rhythm concerns the nature of character and individuality, understanding, communication, participation, and group involvement (Chernoff, 37). Rhythm offers freedom to participate in a greater understanding of self, culture and place; it also is a reassurance and reiteration of a cosmological order and requires an articulation, participation, and personal discipline to maintain that order. Rhythm is a coded vessel holding and conveying a culture’s spirit and consciousness.

African artists and musicians are manipulating power in the form of mood altering sonics and information coded in iconic form – colors, patterns of line and movement, garments and images – there is a consciousness, a spiritual awareness that must be adhered to. Women and Men have observed and studied for thousands of years to learn just what it takes to alter their own or another’s state of consciousness. Let us learn from them, the traditional world’s masters of sound and movement (Wilson xiv).
We are all part of the Earth, which is part of rhythmic movement extending, relating to planets, stars and galaxies beyond our comprehension. The Earth's two main rhythms are rotation and revolution. Rotation is the earth turning on its imaginary axis like a top. Revolution is the earth's orbit around the sun.

The earth rotates west to east on its axis once a solar day. This rhythm produces a set of physical consequences such as the daily rhythm of light and heat, the motion of tides, and human activity on earth. Geographical and Political measurement – the poles, equator, and parallels of latitude and meridians of longitude – are extrapolated from the rotational rhythm of the earth. Places on the earth's surface are located using a network of lines called a geographic grid based on the Earth's primary rhythms. The Earth's rotational and revolutionary rhythms cause differences in time and date dividing the world into 24 time zones. The earth's seasons and different lengths of day and night are caused by the rhythm of revolution.

Our moon travels affecting the ebb and flows of the Earth's oceans; there are solar sunspot cycles and subtle variations in the orbit of the Earth around the sun, affecting climatic change and life on earth. Recent research has revealed data from ice cores and ocean sediments supporting the existence of additional cycles, which represent the rhythm of air currents, weather and the ice ages. Variations in internal rhythms of the earth's core can result in the re direction of energy flows and atmospheric change that have been linked to volcanic activity, changes to the earth's surface, mountain building which leads to a change of wind circulations, water vapor in the atmosphere, the snow and ice cover clouds and ocean currents.

Our planet is one large rhythmically inter linked feedback mechanism in which human activity contributes, with our emotions and physiology a part of the dance setting the pace of development and the rhythm of being on Earth. Everything is affected by longer or shorter rhythms: Women's menses, sexuality maturity, accelerated growth during puberty, the slowing down of growth and metabolism during old age.

Among the earth’s rhythmic manifestations is the migration of birds, which is regulated by the adjusted illumination of the earth, the intensity of which is regulated by the changes in the position of the sun. The light acts upon the eye, then the nerves, then the pituitary gland, which secretes and promotes organic
changes of various sorts, for example the gonads and the “pitch” of the central nervous system. These combined influences create in the bird a general condition resulting in migration (Portman 315)

Everything affects everything else, life cycles, biorhythms, sleeping habits; weeks, months, years and seasons define, maintain, and also contribute to our complex rhythm reality. Civilizations are defined by their ability to measure and control the Earth's rhythms. Human measurement ultimately is a abstracting of the Earth's rhythms. Philosopher David Abram in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, talks about the rise of measurement and humanity's removal from a sense of place awareness.

With the end of the last ice age and with the acceleration of the agricultural revolution writing came to play an important role in stabilizing the spread of new, sedentary economies. This gave rise to the need to control and measure (which includes time), taking inventory and enabling societies to trade, deal with climatic inconsistencies and ultimately the rise of nation states. However, with the rise of writing and measurement – the rise of literacy – an older sense of participating in the world, an interaction between the human senses and the earthly terrain, was displaced. This displacement enabled humanity to free itself from the direct dictates of the land, but began a long retreat from the human immediacy of being in and of the world. These abstract conceptualizations of place have become accepted, and possibly more real than the earthly place to which they refer (Abram: 184-85).

Humans invented seconds and minutes and hours, thereby, asserting, defining and extending control over the rhythm of the modern world. To mark the human invention of time, from simple understandings of celestial movements, to the successive inventions of the sundial, clock, watch, and the one hundredth of a second stopwatch to the nano second, is to understand the journey of humanity and reveal the evolution of human consciousness and the Earth's cultures.

To understand where we are rhythmically, we need to examine the larger rhythmic context in which we all exist, deciphering as best we can the complexity of interacting rhythms that construct our rhythm reality.
Scientists have identified the Earth’s rhythmic pulse as 7.83 hertz. This 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 homoeostasis (the ability of an organism or cell to maintain internal equilibrium by adjusting its physiological processes), REM (during dreaming), and healing.

For a decade researcher Robert Beck documented the brain wave activity of healers from all cultures and religious backgrounds – psychics, shamans, Christian faith healers, Santeria, Wicca parishioners and others, who, independent of their belief systems, all exhibited “nearly identical EEG wave signatures” during their “healing” moments. The brain wave signatures were at 7.8 to 8 Hz – identical to that of the Earth’s rhythmic pulse brain wave activity. The rhythmic pulses lasted from one to several seconds and were “phase and frequency synchronized with the Earth’s geomagnetic pulsations – the Schumann resonance.”

Abnormalities in the resonance have been determined to induce some forms of anomalous cognition, such as auditory and visual hallucination or even small seizures. One of the objectives of meditation is to “quieten the mind” as a method of allowing the mind to become aligned with the Schumann Resonance. When there have been sudden decreases in the rhythm of the resonance, there appears to be an enhancement of processes that facilitate telepathy and clairvoyance.

But the Schumann Resonance is not the only Earth rhythm. Within the generalized Schumann resonance there exists local rhythmic variations; meaning various parts of the Earth give off different rhythms; accumulated, they create a generalized Schumann resonance.

The Earth has a rhythm and which is comprised of the slight variances of each local rhythm. The Schumann Resonance and brain waves alike, fluctuate due to geographical location (longitude/latitude), lightning, solar flares, and daily planetary rotations and cycles, amplifying and re radiating coherent waveforms derived from the environment, simulating and
propagating, in turn a rhythmical wave pattern or “signature” of the Earth specific to a local environment.

African rhythm, unlike European conceptions and approaches to rhythm, recognizes an undercurrent which requires musicians to keep their time steady by perceiving multiple rhythms or rhythmic relationships rather than by following a stressed beat. Africans say the “Drum beats himself” and you can listen to the whole music. In this sense, an analogy for the multiplicity of rhythms in the world that are played apart but unified by the way separate parts fit together into a cross rhythmic fabric.

Only through the combined rhythms does the music emerge, and the only way to hear the music properly, to find the beat, and to develop and exercise “metronome sense,” is to listen to at least two rhythms at once. You should attempt to hear as many rhythms as possible working together yet remaining distinct, and you can judge or train yourself by counting how many rhythms you can hear while holding on perhaps a bit more closely to one in particular (Cherno 51).

Where does the Earth’s rhythm come from? There is much argument as to the details but most physicists would agree that the Earth’s electromagnetic power comes from the Earth’s hot outer shell of molten iron sloshing around a solid inner core. As this subterranean ocean of liquid metal slowly whirls around, it behaves like a dynamo generating electrical currents and magnetic fields. Just like the flickering light on a bicycle powered by a dynamo, the Earth’s currents are a little erratic, and so the magnetic field at the surface of the Earth fluctuates.

Numerous studies speculate that DNA, brain ventricles and cellular structure in the human body may operate as antennae for detecting and decoding such global and local signals from the earth. There is also a strong correlation between behavioral disturbances in humans and periods of solar and geomagnetic turbulence. Conversely, subjects living in isolation from geomagnetic rhythms over long periods of time developed irregularities and chaotic physiological rhythms, which were dramatically restored after the introduction of a very weak simulation of Earth’s electromagnetic field. Early astronauts suffered from this condition of rhythmic disequilibrium until Schumann Resonance generators were installed in their spacecrafts.

Bio – physicists suggest that the brain and nervous system are sensory organs for our extended electromagnetic self and work as a feedback loop
with the planet – functioning as a rhythmic biocomputer. The brain mirrors and synchronizes with the earth’s electromagnetic rhythms, communicating and becoming both receiver and sender – in dialog with the earth’s many and simultaneous rhythms.

The simultaneity of the earth’s rhythms is expresses in the interaction and multiple layering of rhythms (often counter punctual), which is typical of traditional African music and dance rhythms. It is almost as if each African cultural groups was hearing its specific location, its earth, environmental, animal, spiritual and human (social and cultural rhythms) and by creating music and dance bringing the disparate parts of their place together and into an expression of interaction and balance. The whole is inseparable form its parts. One cannot be understood without the other. African musicians and scholars Hewitt Pantaleoni and Moses Serwadda maintain that “The African learns the whole simultaneously with the parts, which is why he has never depended on stress for rhythmical precision, He is not ‘thrown off’ by hearing misaccentuation, but by the failure of some other part of the ensemble not occur at the right time” (…)

We all live in a complex matrix of oscillating fields and the tiniest fluctuation in one interlocked field can carry over into others. Many times per second, rhythmic pulses travel completely around the world. This alpha rhythm frequency is also found in humans. So we, meaning our brains, are phase locked in some way with body Earth and its atmosphere. The expression “phase-locked” means that everything in this merry electrical dance is in step and moves at the same frequency sending coordination signals to all organisms. These signals couple us to the global electrostatic field and to one another. We all march to the cadence of this cosmic drummer – our planetary heartbeat, which sets the tempo for the Earth, its health and the well being of all organisms the live on it. We are all part of a world brain. Some physicists have gone so far as to identify the upper atmosphere as essentially “alive”, transmitting a type of consciousness to all living things and rhythmic expression in music in dance is simply a reaction to that which surrounds us all. The expression “He marches to his own drummer” is more indicative of the highly individualized concept of rhythm typical of Europeans. Whereas rhythmic integration or rhythmic blend is more typical of African rhythm expression in which group members are willing to submerge their individuality in favor of a group sound, in which all the voice unite, forming a single, transcendent “voice.” (Lomax 43)
BRAIN, BODY AND EARTH’S RHYTHMS

The human heart beats uniformly (about 60 impacts in one minute in the rest state) serving as a rhythmic cylinder, a piston compressing then pushing, blood into the body and providing the foundation of human life. The rhythms of the heart, along with the inhalation and exhalation of our lungs are the constant rhythms, defining life from birth to death. Our respiratory and cardiac performances are part of timing cycles, which optimize our bodily capacity, and are a result of a long evolution of mammals in the direction of optimization structure and functions, providing life-activity at the minimum consumptions of energy.

However, with the advent of machinery, industrialization, urbanization and technology, many new rhythms are now part of the everyday lives of many people. These human created overlays of rhythms are typical of the western way of being in the world and, as African scholar Malidoma Somè states, obscure the reception of the earth’s natural rhythms.

The modern world vibrates in such a way that it is impossible to translate to transplant. Anything that enters the artificial space of Western culture is diminished, changed to fit into it. That which is indigenous can only live in a land that is indigenous. So in some ways, the shaman downtown is not the same as the boburo in the village because downtown does not emit the same energy as the village circle (Somè, 58).

The human brain and body, and the cultures it evolves, is however, represents a complicated, self adapting system. It is the regulator of the different human body organs and all human activity as it simultaneously monitors and communicates the surrounding environment, whether it is the African savanna or downtown Lagos.

The brain's neurons form a variety of networks interacting by way of constant, rhythmical electrical signals. The configurations of neuronal networks represent, by themselves, oscillating electrical networks. When oscillations are “off rhythm” Epilepsy or the development of seizures results; antiepileptic drugs essentially realign the brain's rhythms. An electroencephalogram or EEG can measure these frequencies.

Numerous researchers have shown that specific frequencies of electrical oscillations (“the brain rhythms”) correspond to various “brain states”. An EEG measures our brain waves, which alter in rhythm from the fast-
est – Beta rhythms (> 14 to 35 HZ) – which reflects alert states, to Alpha rhythms from (> 8-13 HZ) and is associated with quiet wakefulness. Theta rhythms of 4-7 Hz are found during some sleep states (in humans), while delta rhythms are extremely slow and reflect deep sleep. Low frequency, high amplitude rhythms are generally associated with sleep, while high frequency, low amplitude rhythms are found during alert periods and during REM sleep.

Humans have developed an ability to access, manage and participate with earth rhythms and their “body” rhythms to alter their states of consciousness. Rhythm is an energy found everywhere and in everything, each with its own unique expression which humans (being the greatest benefactors of the world) are responsible for articulating. In this way rhythm becomes a way of playing and making “alive” a world full of vibrations, rhythms and power. African drummer Sule Greg Wilson, in his book The Drummer’s Path, elaborates.

What is a drum made of? What is it that you are energizing into vibration, into song? Pieces of tree, parts of animal? The manipulation of wood or skin is different from the manipulation of air, reeds, strings, or gut. It commands more of you and each requires something different from you…It is about contact: skin is a body’s first line of defense, and wood is a tree’s skeleton and skin and we are talking…there’s something special about that “skin on skin” raw contact…Pulling that fundamental power up and down takes heat and that is what gives life (Wilson 99).

THE TIME BEFORE TIME: RHYTHM AS PATHWAY

Nearly every culture in the world has identified a time before time. It was a place identified and referred to spatially and accessed through rhythm, dance, percussion, chant or other repeated, rhythmic action. Eliade said,

Every dance was created…in the mythical period, by an ancestor, totemic animal, a god, or a hero. Choreographic 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 instru-
ments) a dance always imitate an archetypal gesture or commemorates a mythical moment. In a word, it is a repetition, and consequently a reactualization, of “those days.” (Eliade 28-29)

This “time before time” was and remains in the minds and hearts of humans, a promised land of comfort and purity; for indigenous groups this place is the place of origins, where shamans and healers go to consult or negotiate with the spirits. This mythic time is accessed through rhythm, which in turn facilitates the reactivation of an older part of the brain and a rhythmical realignment with the earth itself.

Julian Jaynes, in his book *The Origin of Consciousness and the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, suggests that before our brains evolved our ancestors could “hear god” and that certain “older” parts of the human right brain were rhythmically attuned to this greater reality. For this reason the ancient poets and the oracles of Delphi rhythmically sang their prophecies, shamans chanted and sang to the spirits, and certain types of Christians go into rhythmic ‘tongues’ to speak to god to this day. Jaynes speculates that the original human consciousness was auditory rather than visual,

Today we do not hear with the mind’s ear as we see with the mind’s eye. Nor do we refer to intelligent minds as loud; in the same way we say they are bright. This is probably because hearing was the very essence of the bicameral mind, and as such has those differences from vision…the coming of consciousness can in a certain vague sense be construed as a shift from an auditory mind to a visual mind (Jaynes 269).

In a sense humans evolved or were socialized into visual beings. An auditory way of being in the world was our primary way of being in the world, rhythmic awareness our way of hearing and sensing reality.

African and other indigenous and traditional groups, performing a cultural specific rhythms – meaning Earth and location specific rhythms – enables an alignment and for the performer to breach time and space to actually become an ancestral being, an animal, an element, or a combination of several beings. In a sense “time travel”. This rhythmically inspired place of origins is formless and materialized by rhythm. The performer and community, participate, intermingle, rejuvenate, and order, through vibratory harmony, their world again.

Is it any wonder that the hunter gathers and early horticulturist developed and communicated with spirits and gods relating to natural phe-
nomenon? The language spoken evolved with human consciousness—it was a communication, much like a musical interaction, a concert or a jam, participating with the Earth's many rhythms. An expression that persists because it satisfies and feels good.

People today, whether a European urbanite or a rural Zulu, seek instinctually a return to a natural rhythm interaction as a respite from the human made rhythms of modern living. Rhythm is a way by which to return to one's most basic, primordial identify whether it is on a pulsating disco dance floor or doing a Greenland Inuit shaman's dance. A similar urging and function is served by the popularity of such ancient practices as Ti Chi, yoga, and meditation, or modern scientific inventions like biofeedback, sensory deprivation, and primal therapy; all focus on a return to one's own body rhythms by excluding the time inspired rhythms of contemporary mechanization, digitalization, and urbanization.

Whether collectively and within the context of a ritual or through yoga or meditation, the re-establish a connection with self, earth, and a greater being is central and rhythm assists in the return to a greater selfhood, expressing the desire to transcend the ego personality of the human condition, going beyond our ordinary in order to recover our original Identity, the transcendental Self (atman) or spirit (Fruerstein, 1). This deeply rooted impulse is as old as humanity which in turn enables one to return to universal selfhood as to regain a sense of wholeness and, in a way, to become healed. Transcendental and sensory pleasure are not incompatible, both are enabled by rhythm, which serves as the pathway and the connective tissue.

How the body and brain adjusts to rhythmical repetition is explained by Brian Hayden, a scientist who has done much work to explain why and how the repetitive expression that characterize African rhythm, dance and music function.

The rational mind thrives on stimulation and the analysis of incoming information of changes in the state of the environment, assessing possible dangers, opportunities, transgressions, and compliances...Without sufficient incoming information, the rational mind tends to shut down or go dormant and lets other parts of the brain assert themselves, such as when we dream. Monotonous and repetitious stimuli have the same effect. The rational brain perceived no interest in endlessly repeating unchanging phrases (mantras), sounds (chants), rhythms or
images. It lets everything go on automatic pilot and checks out in a more energy saving dormant stage… These are the reason why relaxation, monotonous repetition, drumming or a constant beat, sensory deprivation, mediation, and prayer are effective doors to ecstatic or altered states (Hayden 72)

LAYERING OF RHYTHMS

Where does all this lead us? How is rhythm is music created? And why is the expression of rhythm in music the way it is? In the context of African rhythm the main beat is the earth beat – the pulse of the land and of a way of being with and of the land. It is the base line and it is connected with Earth’s rhythm. The expression of main beat tells a story and in a sense realigns to a being in the world.

This strong purpose or main beat is conceived as a living, physical phenomenon reminiscent of a moving body in downward motion directing the energy or weight with the pull of gravity. When the body achieves a good center of gravity, an accented pulsation occurs.

In a cultural framework, the technique of polyrhythm simply asserts the highly unpredictable occurrences of obstacles in human life. They occur without a warning. It reinforces the need for the development of a strong and productive purpose built on a foundation of adequate preparation for life.

In this African rhythm context, dance and music become an integral part of the life of everyone from the moment of birth. Training in dance drumming is an essential part of the larger comprehensive preparation of every child for a productive and fulfilled participation in adult life. In this community context, artistic elements are not abstract phenomena but visceral and vibratory, resonating and training the mind, body and consciousness into an awareness of place.

In a sense a child is trained to assume real life role and relationship to a main beat scheme. A secondary beat scheme represents an obstacle. Tension created by the customary ordering of these characters within this musical story conveys a number of ideas simultaneously. The rhythmic contrast is a mnemonic: to solve a problem, you must convert obstacles into stepping – stones.

According to American Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, “In most musical style, the performer or performer 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.” (Lomax 49)

This simple meter is double, triple, or compound: 4/4, 3/4, 6/8, 9/8, 12/8 or any other similar meter. Lomax goes on to say that, “Rhythmic relationships link a group together within one overall metrical patterns.” In Lomax’s understanding the complexity of the rhythmic relationships was a story of a particular group or locale. The contrasts and elements directly reflecting the animal, geographical, environmental and social conditions specific to a locale and the culture that evolved around that locale.

A culture’s rhythm is its continuing and evolving “story”, providing the operating design, linking events, time, people, and generations to underlying themes, archetypes, structures, values, expectations, and reoccurring motifs. In its origins each rhythm was grounded in, and responsive to, a specific place in interaction with a complexity of other rhythms.

In many cultural contexts the rhythms that are expressed musically today are evolutions of an earlier, primary rhythm carried forward and transformed in reflection of a culture’s social, political, and /or environmental evolution. In this way each rhythm is a code by which the metamorphosis of a cultural and environmental journey and can be experienced. The traditional rhythms of the Zulus bespeak the rough and rocky KwaZulu geography of the valley of a thousand hills as much as it does the highly disciplined, regimented, and aggressive military history that began with Chaka. Modern transformations of the traditional Zulu rhythm are vividly evident in Icsathemia, an a Capella dance and singing form that became the “rhythm of resistance.” Its form was shaped by political and culture conditions, which melded a militaristic Zulu rhythm with Gospel and Motown music. The form remains today as an uniquely ad hoc creation that preserved and reassured with a culturally traditional beat, as it spoke both conformity and salvation in Christian Gospel expression, while it expressed black selfhood, community identity, and aspiration. To experience the cacophonic, irregular and quick changing beat patterns of some modern jazz is to experience the landscape of a complex urban existence. And, as is the nature of the expression, modern jazz is an experience not dance but listened to passively, much like the helplessness or cerebral detachment one might feel in reaction to a complex urban existence.

Similarly, to experience the influences, layering and intertwining of rhythms in black urban rap music is to glimpse the journey of black, urban America from west Africa to the rural south to inter city ghetto. Within the
complexity of the rhythm is also the anger, defiance, defensiveness, pride, aspiration, and understanding gained from that journey. Appropriately the rhythm expression is angular, sharp edged, and physically aggressive. Rap music is, however, despite all of its layered complexity, driven by a simple and continuous beat, which drives the music forward as it simultaneously grounds itself in a rhythm more typical of so called “primitive” people. The recent widespread influence and appeal of a simple, grounding rhythm in rap and pop music seems to indicate just another instinctual urging to reconnect with our rhythm reality.