

# (Re) Mixing Place, Culture, and Performance

Thomas Riccio

## From: *Performing Africa*

Listen more often  
To Things than to Beings  
The Voice of the Fire is to be heard,  
Hear the Voice of the Water.  
Listen in the Wind  
The bushes are sobbing:  
It's the breath of the ancestors.

Those who are dead have never left:  
They're in the Shade that illuminates  
And in the shade that becomes thick.  
The Dead aren't under the Earth:  
They're in the quivering Tree,  
They're in the groaning Wood,  
They're in the running Water,  
They're in the standing Water,  
They're in the Hut, they're in the Crowd.

Listen more often  
To Things than to Beings.  
The Voice of the Fire is to be heard,  
Hear the Voice of the Water.  
Listen in the Wind  
The Bushes are sobbing:  
it's the breath of the dead Ancestors,  
Who haven't parted  
Who aren't under the Earth  
Who aren't dead...

Okot p'Bitek from *Sarzan*  
From: *Oral Literature and Total Theatre*

Several years ago, after driving for six hours on mud contorted, organ-bruising roads, I arrived at a small Evenk village in northern Sakha, central Siberia. I was taken to a low wooden building built during the last part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; there was no running water, but there was a loud, smoke spewing, diesel generator, which provided electricity. As a guest of the Ministry of Culture, I was in the Sakha Republic to develop a performance based on their traditional performance expressions, and my travel was part of my month long research in preparation for a production at the National

Theatre in Yakutsk. I had, the day before, spent hours with an elderly shaman reputed to have been the most powerful shaman in the region. But that day, in the low building, I was to be a judge of a fashion show. My only qualification was that I was a Westerner, and better yet, an American; and so, it was assumed I knew about popular culture and fashion shows.

I was handed paper and pencil and seated in the front row, the rest of the village sat quietly behind me. Suddenly there was a blast of loud, sometimes screeching, synthesized music, heavy with pop melodies and the relentless two-beats per second of techno dance music. The audience and I sat motionless, stunned by the detonation of activity and stimuli. Lights flashed, then an announcer introduced heavily made-up teenaged girls who strutted, spun, turned, and pouted on a makeshift catwalk. Their attitudes were befitting a Paris or New York fashion show. Their clothing, like their behavior, was cut from patterns established from far away. If it were not for their earnestness, I would have thought the show a cartoon-like parody. The fashion parade of the young women was followed by a presentation of traditional Sakha music and clothing. Many of the same women were joined by their parents and presented traditional clothing, replete with furs, horse leather, and hand embroidered patterns. The evening concluded with several young Evenk men taking the stage in contemporary clothing inspired by rap and hip-hop culture. Their defiant gestures and swagger accompanied the lip-synching of the American rap group, Run DMC. Later, the traditionally attired adults, along with the young women, who had changed back into their home sewn fashions, joined the young men in a surreal tableau finale and the singing of the recently minted Sakha National anthem.

A few years ago, I watched a puppet presentation, which was part of an International Puppetry Festival in Nairobi and as a consequence had attracted several camera crews and photographers who were on hand to get their photo opportunities and CNN stories. Western trained Kenyans presented the Muppet-like performance in a park adjacent to downtown Nairobi, their subject: HIV/AIDS awareness. The introduction of grassroots puppetry in Kenya has been a highly successful means of disseminating life and death information about AIDS, Female Genital Mutilation, Corruption, Diabetes, and sexual abuse. Traditional indigenous applications puppetry in Africa has, with few exceptions, been associated with traditional medicine and fetishes. Western puppetry, being non-indigenous, was part of its effectiveness, for it carried no traditional baggage or connotations. The soft, loveably expressive puppet creatures were able to communicate sensitive issues across sometimes contentious, political and ethnic boundaries.

In front of the puppet booth was an audience of about thirty street children—AIDS orphans who lived (if that is what it can be called) in the park. Aged between six to their mid-to-late teens, these children had lost their parents to AIDS and Kenya (like most of Africa), lacking a social safety net, had failed to care for them. Some of the children, sons and daughters of prostitutes, were themselves HIV or AIDS infected. A few of the young girls were nursing their infants whose birthplace was the park. Abandoned by society these children had created a society of their own, sustained by begging, stealing, and foraging the garbage of a larger, desperate and corrupt society. The majority of the children held plastic juice bottles, next to their noses or gripped in their teeth. In the bottles, however, was upholstery and industrial glue. Glue sniffing was how the children survived life on the streets; in a semi-sedated state they dealt with the pains of hunger and abandonment.

After the play, still consumed with the thought of the children I began to leave the park. It was then I saw two of the orphaned boys, no older than eight or nine years old, glue bottles at their noses, standing shock still, their shoulders hunched up in fear. Something was very wrong. From the bushes two policemen were carrying the body of another small boy, which they deposited into a plastic bag. The sounds of bustling Nairobi shrouded the moment as office workers passed by giving the scene no more than a glancing notice.

Where and how does my work—as an artist and scholar coming from, and working within, a Western context—fit in? Are my preparations, perspectives, and tools of expression, up to the

challenge of addressing the tremendous social, political, and cultural convulsions occurring in the world around me? As I write this, and as you read this, so many desperate realities in the world are being played out. What can those blessed with privilege do in response?

Theatre, in word, conceptualization, objective, and execution, is a performance expression specific and unique to Western culture. Theatre is at the core of my skill set and central to what I can offer the world. And, I am cognizant and sensitive that I am part of a continuum, a long and diverse tradition, which includes Mamet, Shakespeare, Beckett, and Sophocles. From the ancient Greeks to this day, theatre has been a dutiful carrier, encoder, reflector, reactor, and reference point of Western thought, society, and cultural values. Surely theatre, an ancient and venerable expression of Western culture's progression through history is reflecting and responding to the challenges of our momentous era? At this time of change and redefinition one would think theater to be the locus, a facilitator of change and evolution. Is it up to the task? I think not. Not the way it functions now. Western theatre, and by this I mean the text based, cause-effect, objective-materialist expression that takes place primarily in special facilities that separate audience from performer by placing the audience in the passive darkness, while placing the performer in the metaphoric position of the illuminated mind; the mind/body split diagramed. By Western theatre I mean a set of rules, expectations, and conventions, a text-based canon, a dramaturgy that has been institutionalized and propagated since the Renaissance, by state and regional theatres, and universities, which implies and perpetuates, in turn, a hegemonic encoding of the Western worldview.

The events of our globalized, connected, and technologically accelerating world are passing (or have already passed) Western theatre by because of its institutional, if not arrogant mind-set, which has limited its perspective, and made it unable to transform itself in response to the evolution of the human species and the planet it inhabits. Theatre is, at its core, a human technology and communal form created to address the very practical social and cultural needs and adjustments, which can and should have an immediate and significant impact. Theatre in the West, and its exported (i.e., forced or commercial colonization) sensibility, tradition, and dramaturgy, is outdated, if not irrelevant. There is, and I suspect will always be, an audience for Western theatre; its adherents and subscribers, for its institutions have become, in the main, moneyed and safe conservators of tradition, reiterating a dated value system and worldview. However, in terms of social and cultural significance, theatre has been marginalized, its attributes and elements (e.g., theatricality and social remediation) mined and bettered by other media. Audiences vote with their feet, and are spending more time, money, and effort, and finding more drama, participation and satisfaction, and sense of community in sports, Las Vegas, shopping, restaurant dining, clubbing, in computer games and/or surfing the web; finding more relevance in CNN, web casts, their iPod or reality TV; and being better entertained and informed by the Hollywood, an on-line community, YouTube or My Space. People would rather see a movie than take a chance on seeing a play, partly because Western theater and its performance cousins have become the domain for the increasingly diminishing, solipsistic, educationally and economically privileged class. That said there is still value in the elements of theatre—its original function and intent. Like corporate take over, maybe theatre should be broken into pieces, its parts sold off for greater use and profit, and its non-productive parts scraped, making the way for the new, a fresh start, providing an opportunity for taking stock and responding to where we are and what we need.

The world has become far more dramatic than anything we can possibly express on stage. The concerns and content of theatre, with so few exceptions, have become inconsequential in the highly competitive, hypertext instant dialog of our era. The events of the world swarm and whoosh around us, yet theatre limps to find its place, trotting out old or re-worked formulas when everything we do in theatre—not only its methods, function, and expression, but its purpose, and most importantly, its responsibility to the greater whole—needs to be called into question.

### **A White Man**

I am a white man of European descent, whose skin is a symbol of power, wealth, privilege, and, for the non-white world, often arrogance, and whose history is littered with atrocities and so called greatness. I was educated and trained in Western theatre, aspiring at one time to be a Broadway director, but then something happened. I found myself working with the indigenous people of Alaska—the Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo, the Tlingit, Athabaskan, and Haida Indians—directing an Alaskan native theatre group, *Tuma Theatre*, for nearly ten years. Tuma means pathway in Yup'ik. My journey led to work with the Greenland Inuit, the Sakha National Theater in central Siberia, two projects with the Zulu of South Africa, work with the !Xuu Bushmen of the lower Kalahari, with Sri Lankan Tamils, with several different groups in Zambia, with the Korean National University of the Arts, and a group in St. Petersburg devoted to pre-Christian Slavic rituals.

My workshops, research, and teaching over the last ten years took place in Kenya, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, the Miao people of Hunan, China, and the H'mong people of Vietnam. The first-day-of-class faces of my African Theatre class at the University of Dar es Salaam stared at me in shock. I had to assure them they had the right room; the globalized world has become a strange place indeed.

I've visited many remote places, and no place I've been to has been untouched by Western culture and its performance manifestations—be it film, television, rap music, fashion shows, or the Muppets. Bootlegged DVD's of Hollywood movies can be found in a street market anywhere in the world, often days after release. I have watched *Friends* and/or *Baywatch* in twenty-five different countries. The influence of Western theatre dramaturgy prevails and is implicit internationally. Western performance culture and expression has won the day—it has not only won, it has taken possession, becoming the defacto form and frame of reference for global performance expression. It is the precursor of a global mythology. What remains of indigenous performance expressions and mythology has, in the main, been documented by Western scholars like myself or by Western trained locals. Of course, implicit is the imposition of the Western perspective grid: inherently rational, materialist, linear, and written rather than oral. Their performance documentation is not received through the body, alive with rhythm, cognizant and fully and bodily aware of place, context and its community of origin, but rather removed in time and space, organized and frozen and betrayed by a foreign syntax of written language, or captured on magnetic tape or film disconnected from its place origin—its spirits, elements, climate, and animals. The academy, the Western institution of the university, has become the tradition bearers—the elder, gathering, printing, and distributing the culture of others. I used to be uncomfortable being called upon by Alaskan natives to detail a certain aspect of a traditional ritual or ceremony, but now it is just part of the job.

Western culture and technology has found its way to the last remaining, once isolated, parts of the world. However, with this advance we are confronted with a crisis of loss. The earth's resources

are finite. The earth, air, oceans, animals, and forest are shifting from the status of raw material to be exploited, fueling expansion and consumption, to limited resources in need of regulation and protection; so too, the west has begun to take stock in the limited and fragile performance resources and the knowledge they encode that are now vanishing. Each day a Bushmen elder dies, a library burns.

### **Defined by Circumstances**

My personal response has been to work with groups, developing performance exchanges, documentation and archival projects. The most important part has been the facilitation of performance projects. Such projects identify, explore and extrapolate traditional performance expressions, taking them from their original context to be applied in a modern (often urban) context. The question that instigates the work: Why should indigenous people adopt Western, theatrical expression, its dramaturgy, methods, and implied perspective, in order to talk about and to themselves? The form of and expression shapes the perspective, encodes a cosmological worldview, propagates, informs, and reaffirms a tradition. As bio-diversity is important, so too, is cultural diversity. Any given culture is bundled and encoded in no more precise, immediate, and complex way than by performance.

These performance projects—several of which are documented in this volume—aspire to re-assess and re-invigorate indigenous (and its derivatives, traditional and folk performance) as a viable expression. The belief in and result of the projects has been the reassertion and validation of a traditional perspective within the form of a Western dominated reality. Taking stock in one's own tradition performance resources (which I view as a practical technology) also has the attributes of personal, social, and culture therapy. The confusing, disrupting, disconnecting and traumatizing effects of colonization—Christianization, money economies, urbanization, apartheid, and Sovietism—have and will deeply affect the indigenous people of Africa, Alaska, South America, Asia, and the former Soviet republics for countless generations. The corrupt and impoverished battlefield of Africa, the high rates of suicide, and substance and sexual abuse among Alaska natives, are direct results of this trauma. All indigenous people are wounded people—performance can reveal and heal a community. Performance has power, for it encodes and carries a community and culture through time and space, offering a psychophysical reassurance and embrace. The world is ordered once again by performance as the wisdom of the past speaks to the present, which in turn generates hope for the future.

The indigenous performance projects documented by the first four essays in this volume identify, explore, and apply traditional performance expressions, structures, and method of working to address contemporary issues. Implicit in the work is the jumping frames (from the modern to traditional and back), an unbundling of performance actions and symbols, and the desire to revitalize and ultimately reimagine traditional performance in a contemporary context.

And yes, I am acutely aware of my precarious position and the pitfalls of “feel good do-gooder white guy.” Such projects can be yet another form (though more subtle and insidious) of cultural colonialism. But at the same time, “What is a person to do?” I feel responsible to do what I can as I can, for I have been graced with economic and educational opportunity with which comes responsibility to my community. And in a globalized world, my community has expanded to include all of the human race, for we are now all vitally aware that our fate is interconnected and depends on one another, be it economically, politically, or environmentally. All I can do is recognize the history my very being encodes and proceed with sensitivity and consciousness,

somewhat comforted by the knowledge that I am a part of a larger cultural continuum and evolution.

I am a believer in the “power of one” and that all the important actions in life are personal and achieved most effectively when person-to-person. When touring Zambian villages with our production of *Imipashi* (documented in the essay, *In Zambia, Performing the Spirits*) I would often stoop for curious, playful children, inviting them to touch my hair and skin—for many I was the first white man they had seen. Embracing who you are is a person’s greatest strength and is what I teach and practice. Embody the change you envision. Being a European white man implies authority, inspires envy, and sometimes fear, and for that reason I put myself in our production of *Makanda Mathalu*, which toured throughout Zululand just prior to South Africa’s first post-apartheid election. We devised the performance, based on a Zulu legend and using traditional performance expression, as a means to educate the Zulu on participatory democracy and the concept of voting, two ideas that were new and abstract to them. There were many points in the performance when the audience had to take a vote and make a decision; otherwise the performance would have come to a standstill. The role I played was buffoonish because it was important the Zulu laugh and know whites—from whom they formerly cringed—could be human, and could be fools. The details of that performance experience are documented in the second essay in this volume, *Politics, Zulus and Slapstick on Tour*.

Often, while working in Africa, I found myself explaining Western and American culture to others—the dominant culture assumes everyone else knows and understands. Often times in African I would find myself in conversation with a table full of eager and bright university students, explaining foreign policy, music, fashion, or daily life and American values. While on tour with a *Makanda Mahlanu* in rural Zululand, I found myself in a thatched roofed, dirt floor hut, with no electricity or running water. There, with a roomful of fascinated locals, I watched the African-American actor, Will Smith jive and dance on the television sit-com, the “Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.” The television was connected to a car battery with the group of Zulus excitedly gathered around the flashing images. “Tom, what tribe is this man from and what does their dance mean?”

### **The Trickster**

I have, at times, been a link, sharing not only my own culture with others, but also connecting cultures to one another. My interviews with the Mudangs in South Korea, the Bushmen healers in the Kalahari, a Santeria practicing in Cleveland, or a Shaman in Siberia, for example, included my telling them how others practice their own spiritual craft. Somehow, through it all, without my knowing, and surprising myself, I evolved a role and identity. In the work exemplified in this volume, and later for my work and life, I became an inhabitant of the “in between” space, the place of change; I became a catalyst, an instigator, an enabler, a facilitator, a trickster. Without consciously planning or aspiring, I became an archetype. A trickster is someone that knows and doesn’t, who may be right or may be wrong, who may be a fool or a hero. I may be tricking you now.

Being a trickster can be and mean a lot of things. More than a few times it meant being a convenient scapegoat. At the Sakha National Theatre, after three months of workshops and rehearsals, the play was about to open. The play was expressing everything the ensemble wanted it to about the corruption of the former Soviet system and the demise of their Sakha culture; but as we neared opening night, the actors started changing the script, softening the barb, taking the edge

off the images, actions, and language they had taken so much care and joy in developing. When I asked why they were adjusting, their response was, “Because we are afraid of what the audience will think and feel. Many people will be offended.” It was then I realized that, unlike me (a “duh” moment for me) they lived there and would have to face the members of their community—I had nothing long-term at stake and would leave shortly. “Offended good or bad?” I asked. “Good. What we are saying needs to be said for Sakha to change.” “Then blame me.” I responded. “Tell them the American director told you to do it and you had no choice.” They laughed with delight and the performance went on as we had rehearsed it. Opening night there were some dour faces and upset dignitaries, but throughout the performance there was also much spontaneous clapping and shouts of support.

Sometimes my trickster presence was folded into the cultures I worked. For this is the way of all cultures, to adapt and incorporate, to re-imagine an event or person within its own cultural context as to make sense, take possession, and find a “place” for a stranger or strange events. This is how all cultures grow, evolve, and survive. While working with the !Xuu Bushmen (detailed in the essay, *People Come Out of Here* in this volume) I experienced this phenomenon first hand. In their final performance, a retelling of their origin myth, a new character was interpolated. A performer had covered him self with white chalk, becoming a white man, and crossed the river into the “unknown” place. Once on the other side of the river the performer pulled out some newspapers folded to represent a book. I thought this odd, for none of the performers in the workshop could read. Then the performer joined me, standing nearby and mimicking my stance and attitude. It was then I realized the performer was playing me—both the specific and symbolic me. I had been folded into their performance and was an erstwhile participant in their creation myth. Though we had worked together on the performance for nearly two months, they had never discussed nor rehearsed the character with the “book.” For the Bushmen I worked with—a people who have no concept of metaphor, and for whom everything is what it simply is and yet, for whom, time and space existed in one eternal moment. Myth, dream, and reality are all a part of the same for the Bushmen. I was told by Machai, a Bushman healer, “The man on the other side of the river has our knowledge now. The Bushmen are dying.” The trickster is a paradox—a vector of change as it is of conservation.

In preparation for a performance project, I do much reading, interviewing, and when practicable, performing of the traditional dances, songs, and performances enactments as to understand a culture in my body. Ideally, a good portion of the research is done in the field, talking with elders, healers and their patients, musicians, dancers, observing performances, and asking questions. Because I have worked in so many different cultures, I have developed a way of moving and being with a culture, apprehending outlines quickly. Show me a dance and I can decode it, identifying the influences, interests, and objectives that shaped it. Though each indigenous culture is unique in expression, there is a shared diagram of how a culture relates and evolves from place.

Because of research and experience my questions are informed and that goes far. My genuine and sincere interest and curiosity has initiated many of friendships, which have developed and filled my life and heart. The more you give the more you get, it is a wonderful feedback loop, a foundational premise common to most indigenous cultures—what Lewis Hyde terms “Gift Cultures”—whereby your wealth is marked not by what you can obtain and horde, but rather by

what you give. A fine example of this was my experience with the Sakha Shaman mentioned at the beginning of this introduction.

After traveling five hours over some very bad road to visit him, he refused to see me. I was told, and he was reputed to be the most powerful Shaman in all of Sakha. So powerful that I cannot mention his name—to say or write it would be to call him, which I rather not do right now. When we arrived at his compound, nestled deep in the woods near a clear water stream, he refused to see me, sending my confused government translator out of his house in tears with, “He is tired of anthropologist and he is not shaman!” We had traveled far and I was baffled by the turn of events. I asked my translator to try again. “Say I would only like to meet him and pay my respects.” My translator negotiated and the Shaman agreed to see me, “For only twenty minutes!” The terms I agreed to were simple: I could not ask any questions about shamanism because, as my translator emphatically underlined, “He was not a shaman.” I had no idea what was going on, but when we met I found out. He was a beautiful man in his eighties, his face was creased and weathered, yet he stood tall and proud, like an ancient and wise tree. I greeted him, asking how he was. He replied, “I am old, my soul is gone, I am waiting to die.” I understood then why he claimed he was not a shaman. He wasn’t, technically. In Sakha Shamanism a shaman has two souls, the human soul and the shaman soul. His shaman soul had left him, so in his eyes he was not a shaman, even though he had lived a long life and had the knowledge of a shaman. We spent three delightful hours together, his wife prepared us lunch and he even sang and drummed for us. I never asked a question about shamanism, but he answered every question I had about singing, dancing, drumming, and the significance of certain sacred objects and practices. Most importantly, I asked as a friend and we conversed; and I told him about how the people of other places in the world practiced traditional beliefs. Often I think the universe directs your journey through life for you, and you meet those whom you need to, doing what you must. The only requirement is that you remain open and responsive. Control is an illusion, the trickster embodies this; chance is how the spirits speak. There is much I do not understand, and I accept that. What I need to know will manifest itself.

Much of what is included in this volume came from asking questions and giving of myself. My questions have been to performers, elders, traditional performers, governmental and educational administrators, and, most importantly questioning, myself, my motives, objectives, and heart. Questions are how I find my way; for one question leads to another and to another, providing an answer sometimes, but just as often something totally unexpected.

It was mid-May and the village of Savoonga on the St. Lawrence Island was still buried under nearly ten feet of snow. Many houses were so buried that steps had to be carved into the snow to reach the entrance doors. St. Lawrence Island is in the middle of the Bering Sea, half way between North America and Asia, hugging the international dateline. The shorelines of Alaska and Siberia were easily seen on a clear day. St. Lawrence is also the home of some of the richest archeological digs in North America, that of the Punik and Old Bering Sea culture, among the first settlers of North America, ancestors to today’s Siberian Yup’ik people. I was in Savoonga, a village of 600, to gather oral histories and interview elders about their traditional dances, drumming, and singing. Because of an unseasonable snowstorm, the last gasp of an exceptionally long and hard winter, my three-day stay turned into a week. Unable to walrus or whale hunt, villagers occupied themselves with bingo and the NBA playoffs on satellite cable. It was there I asked questions and learned, from Jimmy Toolie an elder, a few simple, unexpected lessons—words that have guided me ever

since. “Just listen,” he said, “Everything you need to know you will know. The whole world is talking, but you have to be quiet to hear it.” After several days on St. Lawrence, the storm had cleared and I was about to leave. When I said my goodbyes to Jimmie, he said he felt a question in me, something that needed to be answered. “Whenever you don’t know what to say, say what’s in your heart, don’t matter how it sounds. What’s important is what it means.” I pass his wisdom on to you.

Instinctually, I have somehow adopted a casual, easygoing, yet at times trying personality. The trickster. The role of an artist is very much like that of the trickster, that contradictory and paradoxical character that has a role and necessity in every culture. My trickster is the simultaneous insider and outsider, someone highly individual yet deeply concerned with the group, playful and serious, modern yet concerned with the past and tradition, of another culture yet knowing the local culture, educated but a fool. The trickster persona is in-between, where the grinding takes place, in the midst of strife, inhabiting the liminal space of change. My trickster persona affords me relative objectivity and neutrality as well; with no political, racial, or ethnic ax to grind—I speak frankly and honestly. In many places in the world, such openness is difficult; it is something new, but, in turn, it is an example—it is the sowing and growing of a seed, which others see and learn. I have often put my foot in my mouth, and as I apologize I savor it, for we are all human. If the heart is pure, others will know it; there is such a thing as the power of one. Maybe the trickster is my fate, somehow my personality; maybe it is so because I was a middle child, I don’t know. But in working with indigenous people, I have become an “in between” person, neither here nor there, unexpected, unpredictable, living in the liminal space, the space that invites transformation. Beneath, betwixt and between all of the words in this collection lives the trickster. You are forewarned.

I always travel with a notebook, which somehow makes me a trickster’s secretary, asking, wanting to know, documenting, observing, organizing, recording, and caring. My interview subjects or performance groups often point to my notebook, exhorting me to “Write that down, that is important.” The presence of the notebook encourages and invites them, I believe, to show me dance movements, sing songs, and tell stories and realize that what they are doing is important and will be recorded. In addition to providing grist for a performance, my African notebooks resulted in research and/or documentation articles—the fruits of which you will find within the pages that follow. Field research for performance and academic documentation are generally intermixed if not simultaneous for me. Almost everything you will read in the following essays was derived from my scrawls, scribbles, or drawings, in ink or pencil. Hey, is this a scholarly book or that of some artist type? I’m sorry I do not have an answer. Does it really matter?

Though my research work is often with elders, many young indigenous performers I worked with on projects initially viewed their traditions with a shrug. Many had grown up with traditional dance and song, but many felt it irrelevant in a contemporary context, and inadequate to the task of dealing with day-to-day survival in the modern, urban and Western shaped world. “It is for the old people” I have often heard. Because of urbanization or forced migrations because of politics or economics, non-western performance is consequently being lost at an alarming rate. This book is but a modest attempt to offer an insight into a few African traditions and their process of transformation.

In order to preserve a sense of self, many wealthier non-western cultures have embraced traditional performance as a matter of national identity. Countries like Japan and Korea preserve

traditional performance more out of cultural (i.e. national) identity rather than out of need for a practical, expressive outlet. The Japanese and Koreans, like the Zulu, Sakha of Siberia, and others with traditional performance cultures, freeze their performance as a way of holding them. Kabuki in Japan, Pansori and Kamunguk in Korea, essentially stopped—their costumes, staging, and stories seemingly flash frozen at the time of contact with outside cultures or forced colonization. Consequently performance becomes conservation, a museum of a bygone age of purity and glory, a bulwark against otherness, and a living historical idealization, often romanticized, but seldom charged with immediate relevance.

In Denpasar, Bali, there is a well-financed government school devoted to the training and preservation of traditional performance. Although some of the performers will serve local needs, most will perform for the lucrative tourist trade. Once sacred rituals are performed nightly at hotels not to satisfy the tourist's need for something spiritual and meaningful, but rather to provide something exotic. In the globalizing world full of Disney and Las Vegas replica realities, the tourist seeks something authentic, or at least something that looks and feels authentic.

What is the upshot? The world's performance diversity is dynamically transforming, with some traditions surviving by becoming tourist attractions or frozen as expression of nationalism, but the majority are fading fast into extinction. In any event, with this process (which is accelerating along with so many elements of our world), a part of humanity's heritage, its way of being of and with the earth, is being irrevocably lost.

### **The Hunter-Gatherer?**

It is thus crucial that we acknowledge that humans have spent approximately 99% of their time on earth as indigenous hunter-gatherers. It could be said our organism—in mind, body, and spirit evolved from and developed according to humans being indigenous to a place. According to anthropologist Richard Nelson, humans have versatility and endurance, and as a consequence have developed acute senses, color vision, tough skin, and ability to eat a variety of foods, which makes us the most flexible of the earth's species. We evolved as a species by being indigenous and developing a relationship with place. The deep structure of our physiology and psychology has its origins in our indigenous, hunter-gatherer self, shaping in turn our society, politics, economics, and culture. We are an indigenous, hunter-gatherer organism, and we are what we are today because of what we were. Arguably, the most successful and enduring mode of human living has been the indigenous, hunter and gatherer.

Indigenous people are those who live on and with a specific place. What we term traditional cultures evolved from this living place and the vestiges of this life are what have been subsequently coded, becoming in turn, "traditional." The values, morality, and cosmology of a culture, along with its aesthetics, and performance, evolved from a time when people lived with and on a specific place. Today the earth's few remaining indigenous people (and those that can still trace their lineage to an indigenous way of being) offer an insight into how, at one time, all people lived on and with the earth. Their performance, in form and function, are windows to an ancient and fundamental way of understanding the world. Are we that removed from our hunting and gathering origins? Or are we entering into a new era of hunting and gathering? Not necessarily for food, but rather for ideas, paradigms, and method to better enable our survival in an evolving world culture?

## Community of Place

What is indigenous performance—I am specifically inquiring about African performance—and how is it distinct from our Western notions of theatre and performance? What does it have to teach us and can it re-invigorate the Western theatrical perspective? What can it contribute to the earth's knowledge base? These are important questions that need to be answered satisfactorily if we are to understand the place indigenous performance occupies.

Indigenous performance is derived from a specific place. Indigenous performance is a technology, a practical and tactile event enabling the direct, psychological, emotional, and physical interaction with place. Indigenous people belong to a *community of place*. It is a place shared by people, animals, the earth's elements and climate; it is a place shared by the ancestors and the spirits that created and defined a culture. Everything has spirit—the wind, rocks, a word, and even a thought. The Yup'ik Eskimo of Alaska believe there is a spirit in all things. They call the spirit *yua* or *inua*. The Maori call it *mana*. Every indigenous group has a similar concept.

For the Yup'ik Eskimo and !Xuu Bushmen (two of very few remaining indigenous, hunter-gathering cultures in the world today), survival before the advent of Western culture was tenuous, necessitating the full utilization of mind, body, and spirit. The hunter-gatherer had to be efficient, resourceful, and effective. For the !Xuu, like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, performance is a technology that enables survival. The !Xuu, like our hunter-gatherer ancestors, were practical people with little need for excess baggage.

Daily, body interactions within the traditional !Xuu worldview are the primary way of “knowing” and relating to their part of the earth. As their body is shaped—inhaling, ingesting, and interacting with the external world—so too is their perception, perspective, and way of being in and of the world. The human body is an active part of a larger body, the earth. To see a bird flapping its wings and lifting itself into the sky, is to vicariously experience the bird through one's own body. To see means to be seen by the world. To perform a bird's movements in dance, to chant its call, or to wear its feathers, is to vicariously become the bird. The interactions of thought, feeling, dream, and action have equal credence. To think of someone or something means you are speaking or they are speaking to you. A thought and a word have a power and spirit, once thought, once uttered, 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. Beneath each of the African performance traditions explicated in this volume lives, to a greater or lesser degree, this community of place worldview.

Everything—bird calls, animal movements and personalities, the smell, feel and sound of a certain wind, foliage, snow, geography, ancestors and spirits—is alive and connected, having an inter-relationship with everything else. For the indigenous, performance is a medium by which the sights, sounds, and rhythms of a specific place are brought into dialog. 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. 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 Schuman'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.

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 pluses lasted from one to several seconds and were “phase and frequency synchronized with the Earth’s geo-electric micro pulsations—the Schumann resonance.”

Humans and all life on earth are a part of a greater symphony of rhythms moving from heartbeat, breath, and circadian rhythms to participate in a complex interaction of biological, geological, physical, oceanographic, climatic and atmospheric rhythmic movements. A movement that relates to the earths main rhythms of rotation and revolution, an orbit which extends and relates to the moon, the planets, stars and galaxies beyond our comprehension.

For the Yup’ik of Alaska that pulse is identical to their drum beat. To beat their drum is to align themselves, quite literally, with their place. The drum beats of every African culture is not arbitrary; sure, there was some adopting and sharing, but the origin of the beat comes from and is of a specific place. The iteration of the drumbeat is the performance of place.

Indigenous performance is sensual and intuited; it is a technology by which to dance, sing, and drum place and community into existence. To perform in this context is to mark, make incarnate, and in a sense become, the community of place. Each Zulu, or Chewa, or BaKuba or N’goni or Lozi, or !Xuu performance is a microcosm of a community of place and is performed (to a great or lesser degree) as much for a human audience as for the spirits, ancestors, elements, and animals. Performance—be it shamanic ritual, an initiation rite, a trade festival, or a dance for tourist—is a venue by which to organize, re-order, moderate, and celebrate the interaction between its community members, dissolving the boundaries and creating passages between the members of the community. Every member of a community has a place, a role, and responsibility to the greater whole. Humans, being conscious and most physically advantaged have the greatest responsibility to perform and maintain the community.

For an indigenous person, performance is the primary means of community of place maintenance and balance. As a necessary and practical tool by which to step outside of ordinary reality performance enables the indigenous to recognize, reaffirm, celebrate, and adjust relationships of its community. It is not a simply a metaphor but rather a revelation of a greater reality—simultaneously a microcosm, diagram, and mnemonic of place—a gathering point, where spirits, humans, animals, and elements converge, into a single body.

### **Community of Ideas**

The tradition of Western theatre—as initiated by the ancient Greeks and codified during the Renaissance—asserts humans are separate from place. Indeed, it can be argued that Western civilization’s ethos revolves around its impulse to describe humans as individuals who are independent, if not the masters, of their place.

The ancient Greeks established mental concepts, categories, classifications, and conditions on reality, effectively transforming an indigenous, place based, sensual reality into an idea based reality. A community of ideas evolved and, in turn, the body was split from the mind, which took responsibility and control over reality. That which could not be defined or function within the

community of idea-reality was devalued, termed “primitive” (because it was sensory and body centered) and in need of control, conversion, or derision. What existed outside of the frame and organizing grid of the “community of ideas” was deemed chaotic and ultimately a threat to the new, emerging order. History is littered with inquisitions, witch-hunts, colonization, religious missionaries, conquests and conversions that were, at their core, the conquest of community-of-ideas-people over a community-of-place-people.

Much of the instinct behind the ancient Greek’s need to create an idea-based system came from the necessity to establish control over a new sort of place phenomenon: the multi-cultural city, Athens. Unlike other ancient cities, the Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, evolved from homogeneous to heterogeneous trade and gathering point of many smaller indigenous cultures, becoming variously aligned with other city-states. The greatness of Athens, as can be said of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and the current ascent of American culture, is directly attributable to the confluence of cultures and ideas, which in turn force interaction, mutual objectives, and provoke innovation. With many different people from many different places gathering, a system based on objective and materially tangible ideas rather than place, needed to evolve. An idea based system, a community of ideas, could maintain and balance the new social, cultural, political and economic phenomenon. Migratory indigenous people, coming from place-based realities, were and continue to be to this day, transformed and re-organized under the rubric of the metropolis. Humans took control of the world and became, in the Renaissance, the measure and measurer of all things. The human perspective was firmly established and a material-based subject-object, cause-effect, linear (mechanical time, another grid) re-ordered the world.

When people from the community of ideas traveled and settled elsewhere, discovering “new worlds,” they carried their ideas in books, maps, charts, and treaties. The community of ideas was ideally suited to migration and mobility because it was, but a mind place not a physical place—a self-referencing mind place that became an effective way of shaping disparate and varied populations into a social, political, cultural, religious, and economic order. It is the mind place, the community of ideas that the emerging global culture shares today, and only secondarily, a physical place.

With the advent of community of ideas, interactions with animals, spirits, and ancestors (when allowed), became circumscribed by ideas. Similarly, direct and instinctual interactions and relationships with the elements, seasons, climate, and geographical place, became categorized and removed. As the gods and spirits became transfigured into humans, so too, did human reality take precedence over the multi-vocal reality (in which humans are only one of many perspectives) implicit in the community of place worldview.

Ideas and mental constructs became the “body” of society taking precedence over the messy uncontrollable sensual reality of place. The Apollonian mind struggled and controlled the Dionysian body. The festival of Dionysus, unwieldy, visceral and emotional, gave way to state sponsored play competitions that championed ideas, words and the orderly observance, progression and rationally derived conclusion of great emotions and ideas. Words lost their place-based spirit and metaphor was born to carry meaning from one place to another; perceptions of reality expanded as they paradoxically narrowed. Words, bereft of place and spirit, became detached carriers of ideas, and ideas the new geography, the new homeland.

Rather than maintenance and balance of place as its function, the performance of the community of ideas came to function as a mediator of humans, balancing, integrating, reflecting,

remediation, and celebrating ideas and facilitating social adjustment. Hence, today our dramas relate to and revolve around a human-based problem or conflict, with little interplay with non-human participants. Performance in the Western cultural context is about resolving the conflict between humans, not about participating and balancing a community of place. Resolving the conflict between humans—individuals, social, cultural, political, and economic problems, or any variety of challenges to expansion—reflects the practical needs of a culture that is idea rather than place based. Human and conflict based performance is reflective of a migratory, colonizing, expansive, and conquest to control culture. Performance in the West was, and remains, a technology to better enable migration as to deal with the cross-germination of ideas, people, values, and any number of psychological, racial, physical frictions that inevitably arise from the process creating and sustaining an idea-based culture. In this context the elements, spirits, ancestors, and animals, if they do appear, are overwhelmingly considered adversarial, demonized, in need of control, romanticized, objectified, or made simplistic.

The structure and vocabulary of our evolving global place is being defined by Western culture, which is a rootless culture in dire need of place awareness. The community of ideas, our community, has served a useful function—it has shaped a disparate and varied population into a social, cultural, and political order. The modern world could not have happened otherwise. It has brought the world to where it is today but it has done so by removing humans from their interaction and responsibility to place, which in turn has let them destroy, pollute, and plunder with rational justification and detachment. Today, there is no place in the world that has not been identified, mapped, or somehow marked or touch by Western culture. Now, having no place to expand in the world, the community of ideas turns on itself; seeking a “foothold,” individuals seek place and reality in themselves, their concerns and performance becoming solipsistic, psychological and increasingly narrow. But I sense that this way of being is nearing its end and out of practical necessity, if not survival, must adjust. What, then, is the role of performance in this adjustment?

### **The New Indigenous**

Our culture’s technological ambition is beginning to scale itself down and we are allowing orientation to the distinct needs of specific bioregions. Our urban-based civilization is accepting the invitation of gravity and settling back into the geography, which means understanding we are part of a complex system that might just be beyond our comprehension. We are part of a greater whole environmentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Political and economic structures are diversifying into the varied contours and rhythms of a more-than-human earth. We are increasingly aware of each other’s concerns by communicating instantaneously and traveling easily. We are interconnected political, economic, and environmentally aware beings, increasingly cognizant of and sensitive to each other’s spiritual and religious practices, history and traditions. The working of earth’s animals, trees, elements, and the spirits/energy that inhabit this emerging consciousness are increasingly revealed. Collectively, we are gaining an increasing awareness of how we humans are of one place, earth, and everything and everyone is linked and responsible to this place, earth.

Having a connection with a specific place on the earth is, I believe, a necessary starting point for a dialog between individuals and cultures. When people grounded in place awareness meet, there will be broad and fundamental implications for the evolving culture of the planet. Demonstration of responsible interaction with one’s place, as conveyed through performance, is both ancient and new. We have long been becoming earthlings.

It is the challenge and responsibility of theatre and performance artist and scholars to recognize and help facilitate the re-emergence of a community of place. Dare to take a step into the wider field of community of place; educate yourself to consider the broader levels of reality, defy the narrowness and limits of the community of ideas. There is no recipe only awareness. I hope each person, in their own way, will acknowledge how best to become expressive, aware, and responsible to place.

Historical, social, political, and cultural circumstances have conspired to open a window of opportunity. An understanding of a community of place still exists, and has much to offer and teach. Beneath each of the African cultures examined in this volume, to a greater or lesser degree, lives a community of place. We all know a world culture is emerging, and with that a maturity and hopefully a patience to listen to and understand what other cultures can offer. From this we will discover what lives deeply within us, and the planet we collectively inhabit. The performance of Africa has much to offer our emerging world culture. African performance is a rich, overlooked resource, for looking at the world in an integrative way. Their performance is low tech, but a technology of survival on and with place, nonetheless. Theirs is an overlooked resource in the throes of turmoil and transformation, bespeaking wisdom to those who are patient and willing to listen.

When you read *Performing Africa*, read it with an understanding that it has a meaning beyond the expression of the obvious and immediate. Look more closely, look with your heart, and you will see and understand that it is also about a way of looking at, and being in, the world. Each of the essays is an expression of a specific moment in time. Each essay in this volume is also a mnemonic that describes a journey, revealing the scars, turmoil, and traumas of Africa's past and present. Ultimately, beneath each essay, is how performance—based on and extrapolated from community of place traditions—has been resilient, preserving as it re-invents itself to respond to the needs of the present. From this example may all learn and be humbled.