

The Kilumi Rain Dance in Modern Kenya

by

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Abstract: Black dance is a fluid, vibrant, colorful, and changing form that is situational, temporal, and spatial. It does not, and will not fit into a neat category or box. Black dance is used in different ways and for different reasons. In Kenya, *Kilumi* dance rituals are used by the Wakamba to formally “pray for rain” to manage drought. The sacred dance, *Kilumi*, can mean life or death for communities, depending on the outcome of the performance. This work offers insight into the ceremonies along with providing a methodology and approach to analyzing complex Black dance expressions. This study argues that Black dance treatment is enhanced when it is examined based on a specific people, place, time, and purpose.

Keywords: Kenya, Drought, Rainmaking Ceremonies, *Kilumi* Dance

“... *Wakamba or Kenyans must have traditions as old as any area and perhaps older than most. They must have mastered their environment; otherwise they would be extinct.*”¹

Introduction

Dance is a source of power for Africans and African descendants worldwide; their dance expressions are often generalized as “black dance”.² For centuries, Africans in Africa and the Diaspora have used dance ritual traditions to manage their ever-changing environment. Specifically, as described in the opening quote, traditions serve as the foundation for environmental management for Kenyans. These traditional environmental management skills have become more important over the last several decades because of unpredictable rain patterns throughout Kenya. The application of dance as a ritual and source of power is the focus of this study.

Across many miles in South Central Kenya, in particular, one can see cracked red earth, wilted mango trees, dry rivers, and airborne dust as a result of drought.³ Without question, predictable rain is highly desired and needed. For many, this is accomplished through very specific dance rituals designed to formally request rain from the Gods. Rain dances are often regarded as outdated, backward, unused, and irrelevant practices. This position is logical for some who feel that in the modern era, the current application, need, use, and influence of dancing and drumming to summon rains are ludicrous. However, in Kenya these rites are a rational and relevant way to spiritually intervene and pray for rain. This study explores the historically, culturally, and socially complex topic of rain making in Kenya as a model for understanding the complexity of the Black dance experience.

In order to untangle the dynamics of rain making dance rituals and its importance to rain management, it is necessary to first explore the important relationship between modern rain making dances and droughts. The Kenyan drought in 2008-2009 impacted nearly 10 million people.⁴ Yet, the unpredictable rainfall was not isolated to this particular moment in time. Kenya has endured a long relationship with drought and unpredictable rain for many decades. Despite the fragile conditions, as Kivuto Ndeti points out in the opening quote, Kenyans have deep-rooted and tried survival traditions. Through rain making dance traditions, this study examines how dance rituals are used at specific moments in time, by specific people, at a specific place, and for a specific purpose. The detailed treatment of rain dances provides insight into the multifaceted nature of black dance expression.

There is often the impression that rain dance practices have completely disappeared from Kenyan life. However, the dance rite is still embedded into the life of some Kenyans in the rural areas. Due to the persistent issues of rain unpredictability and lack of modern/Western solutions to prevent drought, Kenyans had to discover their own methods of managing the environment by invoking traditional customs. Rain dancing continues in modern Kenya because of the reoccurring drought; therefore, historically there has been a space for people to retain and memorialize the practice.

In December 2008, Ukambani, located in South Central Kenya, experienced one of the worst droughts recorded. But what is clear, even based on the 2011 drought in Kenya, is that the conditions are more frequent and longer with poor rainfall levels severely affecting the livelihood of Kenyans. In an article covering the 2008 drought in Kenya, Obadiah Ayoti states, "...despite the recurrence of droughts and their devastating effects on communities and the economy, Kenya lacks a comprehensive drought management policy."⁵ The 2008 drought in particular forced community members to pull out drums, rattles, whistles, and special dance garbs to invoke the blessings of water spirits and deities. It is, in the essence of this particular moment, that this study is situated. As a result of the environmental conditions in 2008, research activities were stalled. Consequently, responses to research questions aimed at another project turned to rites that addressed the problem of rain.

In times of distress and hardship, the Wakamba, the ethnic group of the region, did not wait on policy makers and governmental officials; instead, it was clear that the poor were left on their own to address issues related to rain unpredictability and instability. Therefore, they turned to ritualistic customs to invoke power used by their ancestors. As reported in a Kenyan survey in the rural areas of Machakos, Kangundo, and Makweni, 95% of all participants attested that rituals were important to Akamba life.⁶ This illustrates the importance of rituals to Kenyans.⁷ It appears that when societal problems are not explained and handled through Western systems, Africans turn to traditional customs that offer interpretations, explanations, and, more importantly, solutions.

This study argues that the study of black dance - especially dance rituals - is enhanced when the form is based on specific people, places, times, and objectives so that the dance is analyzed against all complex structures and processes that make up the dance experience. This study also shows that Kenyans continue to use rain dance traditions as a drought management strategy in the absence of modern governmental solutions because the dance offers community agency, unity, and power during precarious periods. This ritual application serves as a cultural reminder of the importance and need of traditional knowledge and education. Additionally, the rain dance ritual satisfies other socio-cultural functions important for the sustainability of the community such as the need to collectively unite during a time of hardship, to socialize, to pray/worship, and to heal.

What is a Ritual?

It is difficult to define rituals. However, most survey participants and scholars appear to agree that a ritual is something enacted for a specific purpose. The term can also be explained by nuancing some of its varied interpretations and flushing out the religious aspects of the ritual acts.⁸ For example, Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, attributes ritual or religious activities as being "associated with the sacred as distinct from the profane."⁹

Ronald Grimes provides a refreshing and non-sociological perspective on rituals in his 1982 study, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*.¹⁰ In his work, he explains rituals through the act of ritualizing in stating, “Ritualizing transpires an animated person to enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places.”¹¹ He outlines six different dimensions of ritual behavior: ritualization, decorum, ceremony, liturgy, magic, and celebration. However, Grimes is criticized for over emphasizing the role of the individual in creating rituals and failing to understand them as a product of collective society.¹²

There are still other characterizations of rituals. Theodore Jennings defines rituals in his essay, “On Ritual Knowledge”, as “one of many ways in which human beings construe and construct their world”.¹³ Jennings provides a theoretical framework on rituals by examining the poetic functions of the ritual that contain three structures. First, he views all rituals as having a property of “gaining knowledge”, meaning they serve as a mode of discovery. Secondly, rituals are used to educate and transmit knowledge to participants and observers. And, thirdly, rituals are an actual performance by the participants to showcase their knowledge and understanding of the ritual.¹⁴ This definition highlights the connection between rituals and knowledge. Finally, in a 1998 study of rituals, Robin Tribuwan defines rituals as:

[A] set of voluntary, conscious and stylized bodily actions (which include iconic symbols such as acts, words, gestures, prayers, chants....) performed in a defined place, situation or context by particular actor/s only, encompassing basic rules to accomplish given task or goal in any social sphere within a particular cultural frame of reference.¹⁵

All of these perspectives offer valuable insight into the ritual experience and explain aspects of rituals that are useful in this research on rain dance rituals. However, the best way to fully understand the complexity of various African rituals is to understand the ritual based on its specific purpose, meaning, history, and symbolism within the cultural context of ethnicity. For many Kenyans, ethnicity is the basis of culture.

Different rituals are used for various life changes and events. For example, like many other cultures, there are special ceremonies and practices for birth, naming, initiation, and death. There is also the need to practice rites for specific events that threaten the village or community, like war, disease, and impurities. The lack of rain is considered an event requiring ritual intervention. In the case of the Wakamba, the rain making dance called *Kilumi* is a healing rite designed to restore environmental balance through spiritual blessings, movement, offering, and prayers. According to one Akamba, *Kilumi* has been present since the very beginning of Kamba existence.¹⁶ This ritual emphasizes symbolic dance movements as a key force in achieving the goal of the ceremony. The heart of the dance ritual is its spiritual essence; in fact, it is the spiritual aspect that distinguishes the dances of Africans and their descendants worldwide. For this reason, it is important to understand the nature of rituals. Dance rituals take participants on a journey; they are designed to foster a transformation moving them to different states, with the ultimate goal of invoking spiritual intervention to resolve the problem at hand.

Rain Making Beliefs

Rain making dances in Kenya vary over time and place. Akamba rituals, like rituals of any group, change over time in that new elements are added and obsolete components are removed. The Akamba are known for their use, familiarity, and knowledge of ritual traditions¹⁷ that are interwoven into their society. Marilyn Silberfein provides a study of rain performances conducted to manage drought in the Kamba city of Machakos. Based on her study, the performances were directed to N'gai, the Creator and Supreme Being, and Aimu, the spirits of the departed.¹⁸ These spirits were invoked because of their powers to control and predict rainfall levels. The rainfall ceremonies centered on knowing *when* to expect rain. In other cases, this relationship comes from old myths. Paul Kavyu shares his research on rain prophets prior to the widespread redirection of rain forecasting to the Ministry of Health.¹⁹ In Kavyu's study, participants communicated with the power of "Mwathani" and higher spirits, but they never really knew if the prayers would be answered.²⁰ For this reason, rain prophets, called "Athani",²¹ were sought to conduct rain ceremonies and sacrifices.

Two sacrifices are made for rain...When Mutitu Hill is heard roaring late at night, or early morning hours, the already dead prophets are asking for a sacrifice for their friends who give them the prophet's power. This request is made to the living Mwathani or the person concerned. After weeks after the roaring, the person living who is concerned has to give someone alive for the request.... The second sacrifice is made in all Mathembo in the country, to the spirit who lives in two pools in Mutiti Hill...²²

These accounts are presented primarily to show some of the older oral narratives and myths associated with rain in Ukambani. These stories and rites, although not all directly practiced, are memorialized and embedded into the culture of the people.

Droughts are viewed as catastrophic moments that require ritual intervention. The ritual process for handling poor rainfall is evident in historical records. These records indicate that the first task when faced with the threat of drought is for the community to assemble to understand the root cause of the problem. Gerhard Lindblom, in his ethnographical study, *The Akamba*, reported that medicine men in Ukambani were often consulted to help predict rain due to the importance of agriculture in society, which was cultivated primarily by women. Lindblom notes the following actions of female planters when there was a problem with rainfall:

At the occurrence of a drought which threatens the harvest, the women gather together...beating their drums they march from village to village. Each woman who has land, must join them...'the wives have a meeting the Akamba say.²³

This public and collective nature of addressing the problem of rain is very important, as it allows for community strengthening and healing. Lindblom describes a drought intervention ceremony as an evening of dancing and singing, while the medicine man consults with the rain spirits to determine the proper actions to take.²⁴ The immediate action of the community speaks to the historical practice of villagers to understand the root causes of rain instability. The lack of rain is a sign of a spiritual imbalance that the rites and interventions of the ritual dance and magic practiced by medicine men is designed to correct.

All life crises are the result of the individual or group being out of harmony with man, nature, the spirits, deities, or the ancestors; thus, a key aspect of rituals is restoring balance in a variety of situations.²⁵ All rituals are conducted through the spiritual leaders, ritual specialists, or medicine workers. The highest spiritual being of the Akamba is called Mulunga, “a power of abstract conception...the creator of all things.”²⁶

Over the years, rain making dance rituals have persisted in Ukambani; however, the rituals continue to adapt. Some of the older practices of women in the community, such as gathering from house to house, are no longer widespread. Instead, many of the traditional rites, like rain making, are conducted by select community members who engage in specific ritual performances. Despite this and many other modifications of the execution of rain dance rituals, what has been retained is the clear objective of the ceremony: to seek spiritual intervention that produces rain.

Rain Dance Ritual Process

There is no single rain dance ritual process since each ceremony is different and dependent on the participants, available resources, moment in time, and environmental circumstances. However, there is sufficient data on ritual structure, rain ceremonies, and field analysis to paint a narrative of the dance experience. For this study, rain dances were observed during 2008-2009 field research in Kenya. The dances were performed by a local Akamba group, *Wendo Wa Kavete*, from the Kibwezi District, and a local dance company in Talla, in the Kangundo District.²⁷ *Wendo Wa Kavete*, like many others in Ukambani, are responsible for remembering and performing traditional dance ceremonies in the community. The ceremonies recorded in Kibwezi were authentic and a direct reaction to the ongoing drought there.

The rain dance transformed the community from an “unhealed” state to a “healed” state. Jean Comaroff, in her 1985 study, *Body of Power*, identifies several distinct ritual processes that are useful and have been modified for this analysis of rain making: summoning the spirits, strengthening, and healing.²⁸ In addition to the phases outlined by Comaroff, based on observation of other ritual forms, there is a need for an additional phase, “celebration”. All of these phases will be analyzed in the following sections to understand the rain making dance ritual.

Summoning the Spirits

Based on 2008 ritual re-enactments, the rain making rite begins with libations and prayers.²⁹ At this stage, it is clear that there are different participant roles. Unlike many rituals, the rain making ritual does not have one orchestrator. Instead, the elders, dancers, musicians, and observers all make up the ritual experience collectively, which could continue for several days. The elders serve as the initial point of contact to the rain making spirits. Other key participants are the musicians who are trained in the precise rain making rhythms. The dancers' bodies are the dominant symbol, and the power associated with the dancers' movements provide the necessary energy to help invoke the spirits and healing. The community, in this ritual, is the victim; therefore, other observers in the ritual serve as the symbolic representation of the community that needs healing, while simultaneously serving as witnesses to the ceremony. Furthermore, their presence transmits vital energy that assists the ritual. The final role is that of the unseen rain spirit, which may or may not attend, but, as mentioned earlier, is a key force in whether or not the community can expect future rain.

The libation acts call the spirits to receive the forthcoming rites and reveal the circumstances of the drought. This initial call varies in length and can take on many forms. Figure 1.0 is an image of the elders pouring milk libations to the ancestors to invoke the spiritual world. This commences the rain making dance ceremony. The duration of the libation is dependent upon the elder's satisfaction that a suitable prayer and call has been initiated. As witnesses, the elders initiated libations, poured milk for the ancestors, and then drank from the calabash. They use milk, in particular, in these ceremonies because the Wakamba view milk as having the properties necessary for more blessings.³⁰ During the ceremony, only men were allowed to drink the milk, showing the continuity of traditional gender roles. Despite modern pressures for the Akamba, men are still regarded as authorities and therefore leaders in important community matters.

Figure 1.0 – Elders Pouring Libations during a Rain Dance Ritual, Kangundo District in 2008³¹



After this opening prayer and libation, musicians began to play the drums and other instruments, creating a slow and synchronized rhythm at the same slow tempo and cycle length. The elderly female dancers are positioned in opposite areas, and they slowly move into the dance ritual space in unison. The spiritual seriousness of the ritual is seen on the faces of participants as they blow whistles and shake rattles. Figure 2.0 captures dancers with their whistles and rattles during the phase in which spirits are summoned. This formation continues until a certain energy level is achieved and a spiritual line is opened.

Figure 2.0 – Dancers Summoning the Rain Making Spirits³²



Strengthening

Strengthening is the process in which participants reach a climatic state.³³ During this process, specific dance movements are used and referred to as kusunga or kwina, depending on the specific Ukamba territory. In addition, rain making dances utilize many symbols. In fact, the rain making *Kilumi* rite is full of symbolic structure and meaning. Symbolic structure and use is the focus of Victor Turner in his book, *The Forest of Symbols*:

The symbol is the smallest unity of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is the ultimate unity of specific structure in a ritual context...a symbol is a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought...the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity field. The symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior.³⁴

Consistent with Turner's description, symbols in rain making rituals are representative of an object, person, place, or thing and can be categorized as "dominant symbols" or "instrumental symbols".³⁵ The dominant symbols, according to Turner, refer to the value of the ritual or representation of non-empirical beings and powers.³⁶

The dominant symbol of the rain making ritual is the rolling of the shoulders and head locking movements through gestures of the shoulders and arms. This represents unity and the pouring down of rain.³⁷ This body movement involves women bending over, locking heads with other dancers, and shaking their shoulders and arms, which, in many ways, mimics the pouring of rain. The head connections are symbolic of the interconnected nature of the environment, community, and the spirits. The locking process is also associated with an increased drum tempo that serves as the peak of this strengthening phase. The dancers and musicians are all in a transcended state, giving them power, and eventually leading to the healing of the community. Judith Hanna attempts to describe this "transcended" state in the following:

Intense, vigorous dancing can lead to an altered state of consciousness through brain wave frequency, adrenalin, and blood sugar changes...dance-induced altered states of consciousness may be perceived as numinous...because motion attracts attention and dance is cognitive and multi-sensory, dance has the unique potential of going beyond other arts and audio-visual media in framing, prolonging, or discontinuing communication and in creating moods, and divine manifestations.³⁸

However, it is the dancers and musicians that best articulate their experience which is more effectively communicated in their expressions. In live observations, the energy reverberates and can be felt in the resonance of the drums. Figure 3.0 captures the dancers locking heads and doing rain falling shoulder movements.

Figure 3.0 – The “Rain Making Dancers ‘Locking Heads’”³⁹



This movement is the climax of the dance, a connection with the rain spirit. The arrival of the rain spirit in the ritual is symbolic on several levels: 1) the community can expect rain and fertile crop production; 2) the eventual healing and revitalization of the community which has been afflicted; and 3) the Akamba ritual was successful and the community will be blessed. The absence of the spirit during the ritual means that the Akamba can expect hard times; this usually means the short term and symbolic death of the community.

According to Tribhuwan, “As a symbolic instrument, a person may use his body as a means of communication.”⁴⁰ The body, through dance, represents structure and balance in the composition and positioning of the participants, and harmony, as depicted with its relationship to the drums, the singing, and unity with the other dancers. “Dance both encodes and decodes myth and ritual.”⁴¹ For example, before and shortly after the presence of the rain spirit, dancers mimic a state of possession that is symbolic of the coming of the spirit and the presence of the spirit. Evan Zuesse, in his study of dance rituals, claims that “...the body gesture becomes a vehicle for conveying and embodying the highest symbolic truths.”⁴² Music, song, and movement allow the body, as a symbolic structure, to change and take on different meanings throughout the ritual.

Symbols are embedded throughout the rain dance ritual and have to be understood in the context of the people during a specific time because meaning can also change over time. “A symbol by definition is not what it represents...The function of symbols is to act as a rallying point for meaning and through this, the mind connects several meanings.”⁴³

During the strengthening phase, various instruments play different aspects of the rhythm, providing a complete fullness. Drums and other processional instruments are key aspects of all divination, not just rain making. Paul Kavyu, in his treatment of Akamba music, describes it as less melodic and more idiophonic⁴⁴. The dancers complement this music by responding with more intense dancing. Movements are then lodged within intricate details of the rhythm. The harmony of all activities associated with this aspect of the ritual is profound. The dancers engage in all sorts of gestures that also imply order. The symbolic movements of the arms going up and down represent balance. Likewise, the musicians represent a balance in their melodies. The unison and intensity of the phase continues until the rhythm completely drops and moves into a healing phase.⁴⁵

Healing

The healing phase marks the slowdown and recovery period. Additional symbols are present during this phase. Turner labels certain symbols as instrumental symbols because they are connected to the overall goal of the ritual. The instrumental symbols used in Akamba rain making rites vary. For example, color is symbolic, and the dancers wear black, white, and red during these ceremonies.⁴⁶ Turner views the therapeutic nature of the color white as “strength, life, health, making visible, sweeping clean, and washing impurities from oneself.”⁴⁷ The dancers and musicians wear white to symbolize the desired state of good health. Red is associated with power and life. According to Turner, the color black symbolizes impurities, suffering, and misfortune.⁴⁸ Black is symbolic of the initial problematic state of the community, which aims to transition into a pure, healed, and prosperous state. Thus, the colors symbolically represent the therapeutic conversion taking place during this ritual phase.

During the healing aspect of the ritual, musicians and dancers continue to harmonize and wait for the healing power of the spirit.⁴⁹ True healing can only be achieved by the arrival of the rain spirit which may arrive in the form of a possessed dancer or other participant. At this point in the ritual, a new atmosphere arises, one of anticipation. This is followed by slow chanting and singing with the dancers also internalizing the slow rhythm through their body and arm use. Stillness is also present, and, in some cases, there is prayer. However, the ultimate goal is spiritual presence and healing. Hanna states, “In manifesting divinity, dance may be both a means and an end...Dance may be a medium to reach such a goal as inviting a deity to possess the performer, detaching the individual from the earth to become united with God.”⁵⁰

The bodies of the dancers become vessels symbolizing the forthcoming presence of the rain dance spirit. Within minutes, spirits arrive in the ritual space dancing and assessing the situation. In the case of favor, the community is healed, moved from the former state to one of balance. The rain spirit allows the healing of the entire community with the ultimate goal of generating rain.⁵¹

Celebration

The celebration phase was added to represent the closure of a positive rain dance ritual ceremony.⁵² With the eventual revitalization of the environment with rain, no matter when it arrives, the entire community celebrates. Turner describes this final phase as one where the passage is complete, “The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations...he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards.”⁵³ The celebration phase represents the end of the ritual and appreciation of favorable results. Again, it is important to note that the rain dance ritual is symbolic on two levels. It represents the healing of the individual and the community, and it represents future fertility in crop production. At this point, the community usually sings, dances, and celebrates the arrival or the coming of the rain. Many may question the relationship between the rain making dance ceremonies and the arrival of rain, but the point is too fluid to prove and irrelevant. What matters is what the Akamba think they accomplished and their faith in their prayers, songs, movements, and drums to bring forth rain.

Rain Dance Socio-Cultural Implications

Rain dance rituals in Kenya reveal some very important socio-cultural functions that may be applied to rituals in general. There are also functions that are very specific to the rain ritual. The functions identified will be framed against the analysis of Tribhuwan who consolidated ritual functions from some of the top scholars on the topic.⁵⁴ (1) The rain making dance presents an excellent example of how dance fosters cohesion and community togetherness. The drought created a crisis in which the community needed to work together. (2) The rain making dance ritual was instrumental in the movement of the community from a state of affliction to a state of healing. The ritual symbolically represented the universal movement of the community from a state of sickness to one of good health and good standing. (3) The rain making dance ritual shows spiritual intervention.⁵⁵ Therefore, rituals can be applied to resolve conflict in the society. (4) The rain making dance ritual expresses Akamba socio-cultural beliefs and meanings of the society.

Symbolically, it is clear that the Akamba see a connection between the body, drumming, singing, prayer, and artifacts like the calabash used to pour the milk libations, and spirits. (5) The rain making dance ritual also serves as an educational tool that helps to enforce and retain socio-cultural practices. In the dance, participants help educate observers on traditions and the role of ancestors. The very act of ritual practice ensures a certain degree of continuity and memory. The overall ritual actions and structure highlight what is culturally valuable to the society.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The *Kilumi* rain dance, as presented in this work, shows the complexity of treating the multiple variables within Black dance. Rain dances represent a very conscious, current, and pertinent environmental management strategy that speaks to the vibrant and dynamic nature of African culture. Rain dance making is a ritual process designed to restore order to the natural world and community. The dance is conducted to acknowledge the presence of the community's unnatural state in the environment and, more importantly, to spiritually cleanse and restore. Rain dances are a part of a much larger societal order and relationship that connects rhythm, body movements, the individual, community, environment, spiritual world, and God. These relationships are interwoven and complex. The dance is an elaborate praise with prayer, libation, and communion with the spiritual world and God.⁵⁷ The reciprocal relationship between prayers, sacrifices, and blessings has been a long embedded practice for living in peace, and it is still relevant in managing limited resources.⁵⁸ The ceremonies and offerings to spirits resulted in the Aimu (Ancestors), Mulunga,⁵⁹ and other spirits blessing Kenyan societies with stability and gifts (i.e. food, fertility, prosperity). The ability to live in peace and in balance with the environment over long periods of time is evidence of a civilized and harmonious society.

The study of rain making dances opens new, powerful, and a much needed window to the existing culture and past, as traditional songs, prayers, rhythms, movement, symbols, and meanings work together to share how communities respond to life crises like drought. Rain dances are not static rituals of an ancient past, but are, instead, contemporary acts invoked to respond to very real modern problems like poor rainfall and threats of starvation. In this study, we have seen that rain making dances are still relevant and integral to Kenyan society. The presence of rain making dance rituals contradicts notions that Kenyans have completely disregarded the traditions of their ancestors, commonly attributed to colonized and enslaved African people. Although there are many rituals that have been abandoned, those that remain exist because they fill a void from Western structures. In these cases, rituals aim to address the spiritual dimension of problems and issues that are often neglected in Western approaches. In Kenya, this is most evident in areas associated with science and technology.

Since 2008, there have been persistent droughts in Kenya. In a 2011 *BBC News* article, the author, Muliro Telewa, describes the widespread famine and impact on Kenyans. The devastation is captured in Telewa's statement, "The Kenya Red Cross estimates more than two million people and 20 million head of livestock are currently in need of emergency food."⁶⁰ The drought recorded in 2008 was not an isolated occurrence, but is an ongoing issue in Kenya. The recurrent poor rainfall in Ukambani creates an opening for the practice of rain dance activities as a potential source of power. If there were spiritual holes left from Westernized structures, they were filled with traditional rites that provided healing, unity, and agency to the community. As long as there are shortcomings in governmental solutions and policies surrounding drought in Kenya, people will turn to their rattles, whistles, prayers, and body movements for solutions. This study of the rain dance merely scratches the surface of a very complex cultural and social system; it is a topic that can open up new perspectives on the diversity and richness of African people. Rain making dances will be a natural part of the Kenyan landscape for some time.

This study of *Kilumi* provides a way to treat the complexity of Black dance expressions. The study aims to provide a way to approach dance based on a specific time, place, people, and purpose. There are several findings that may be useful for the future study of Black dance. First, the study of Black dance is transnational, putting it in a position to be over generalized. Therefore, we miss its nuances and vibrant variations. To this I hold the need to examine African dance forms based on ethnicity or regions over time. For the most part, it is at this level that people hold the history, story, memories, and meaning of the dance. Second, it is necessary to have a methodology for analyzing the ritual dances. In this study, a customized version of Comaroff's model was used and enhanced by the insights of other writers like Turner. This is important because in order to increase our knowledge and understanding of black dance, it is necessary to have a way to describe, structure, and communicate it.

Third, for ritual dances, the spiritual component of the dance and the belief of the people serve as the foundation and power of the dance. The spiritualism in the dance must be addressed and embraced in order to analyze the ritual practice and the use of the body for the ritual objective. This dimension is key to most ritualized black dance expressions. Lastly, black dance is variable and changing, even if it is considered a traditional dance. Dance is not a static experience, but one that is very present and situational. For ritual dance forms this is especially the case because the traditional acts are done to accommodate modern needs.

For too long, Black dance expression has been minimized and ignored; the scarce publications on the topic are evidence. Yet, Black dance with all of its varieties, colors, and contours is a cultural experience and source of power that deserve much more scholarly attention. After all, Black dance, as we have seen with the *Kilumi* rain dance, is one of only a few raw expressions that offer insight into the often hidden inner beliefs, notions, and feelings of African people at specific moments in time.

APPENDIX

Research Field Notes

This rain making dance study is based primarily on oral interviews, surveys, and re-enactments that occurred between late 2008 and spring 2009, and field research from 2011 has been used in this study. During this fieldwork, information was collected through oral interviews that spanned the districts of Nairobi, Machakos, Kitui, Makweni, and Kangundo with most participants residing in the districts of Machakos, Kangundo, and Makweni. The resulting research sources consisted of more than thirty interviews, twenty-four detailed surveys, and numerous photographs and video images where permitted. The fieldwork included live ceremonies and re-enactments that were recorded on video. One included a rain making ceremony to address the drought in the Kangundo district. The other two were cleansing re-enactments. One was performed by the group, Wendo wa Kavete, in the Kibwezi District. The performances and actual ceremony provided a great deal of material and insight into the inner working of the complex dance ritual experience.

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Endnotes

¹ Ndeti, *Elements of Akamba Life*, viii. The Wakamba (plural) is an ethnic group in South Central Kenya also known as the Akamba (singular). The area they live in is often referred to as Ukambani.

² For this study, "black dance" is used broadly and is inclusive of all African people and descendants worldwide.

³ Statement based on July 2011 drought and 2011 Kenya fieldwork in the Ukamba area of Machakos and Kibwezi.

⁴ Lammert Zwaagstra, "An Assessment of the Response to the 2008 2009 drought in Kenya. A report to the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Kenya," http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kenya/documents/more_info/assessment_of_the_response_2008_en.pdf. Accessed May 18, 2011, 13.

⁵ Obadiah Ayoti, "Kenya has no policy on drought," *Desertification*. <http://desertification.wordpress.com/2008/05/29/kenya-has-no-policy-on-drought-google-africa-science-news-service/> Accessed May 23, 2011.

⁶ Based on 2008 survey, 23/24 individuals responded that rituals were important

⁷ Based on 2008 survey, 23/24 individuals responded that they care about rituals

⁸ For a more recent interpretation of Ritual and the Relationship to Religion, see Goody, "Myth, Ritual, and the Oral" p. 14-37.

⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, (D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).

¹¹ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 55.

¹² William H. Norman, "Review of Beginnings in Ritual Studies," *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 44(3), (1983): 261.

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- ¹³ Theodore Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 62(2), (1982): 112.
- ¹⁴ Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 113.
- ¹⁵ Tribhuwan, *Medical World of the Tribals*, p. 16.
- ¹⁶ Personal communication. July 2011, Machakos, Kenya.
- ¹⁷ Based on Kenya field Survey Results in 2008 in Ukambani. For example, 100% of Akamba people surveyed in 2008 attested to familiarity with old ritual practices.
- ¹⁸ Marilyn Silberfein, *Rural Change in Machakos, Kenya: A Historical Geography Perspective*, (Lanham University Press of America: Temple University 1989), 33-34.
- ¹⁹ Paul Kavyu, "Rain Making and Prophecy in Kamba People" (Seminar Paper #52, Institute of African Studies, December, 1973), 2. The Ministry of Health representing the new society structure for predicting rain, but of course not all follow the "magic" of these predictions.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ According to Kavyu in 1973 the Athani were only practiced in the villages.
- ²² Ibid., 3.
- ²³ Gerhard Lindblom, *The Akamba, in British East Africa: an Ethnological Monograph*, (Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1920), 275-276.
- ²⁴ Lindblom, *The Akamba*, 276.
- ²⁵ Tribhuwan, *Medical World of the Tribals*, 300.
- ²⁶ Lindblom, *The Akamba*, 243-251.
- ²⁷ Field analysis from Wendo Wa Kavete. Kibwezi District. "Purification Ritual Performance." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes, and "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." Kangundo District. December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ²⁸ Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 207.
- ²⁹ Field analysis from Wendo Wa Kavete. Kibwezi District. "Purification Ritual Performance." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes, and "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." Kangundo District. December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ³⁰ Personal communication, August 2011. As the informant put it, "Milk has more blessings". The use of milk is also linked to resources available during the ceremony.
- ³¹ Talla. Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ³² Talla. Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ³³ Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*, 207
- ³⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19-20.

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- ³⁵ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 30-31.
- ³⁶ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 30-32.
- ³⁷ Talla. Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ³⁸ Judith Hanna, "The Representation and Reality of Religion in Dance," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 56 (2), (Summer, 1988), 285.
- ³⁹ Talla. Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes. This movement is also consistent with the dance movement recorded by Wendo Wa Kavete. Wendo Wa Kavete. Kibwezi District. "Purification Ritual Performance." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ⁴⁰ Tribhuwan, *Medical World of the Tribals*, 19.
- ⁴¹ Joann Kealiinohomoku, "Dance, Myth and Ritual in Time and Space," *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 29 (1), (1997), 70.
- ⁴² Evan Zuesse, "Meditation on Ritual," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 43 (3), (September, 1975), 518.
- ⁴³ Tribhuwan, *Medical World of the Tribals*, 17.
- ⁴⁴ Kavyu, *Drum Music of Akamba*, 50.
- ⁴⁵ Talla. Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ⁴⁶ Talla, Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ⁴⁷ Turner, *The Forest Of Symbols*, 303.
- ⁴⁸ Turner, *The Forest Of Symbols*, 303.
- ⁴⁹ Talla, Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.
- ⁵⁰ Hanna, "The Representation and Reality of Religion in Dance", 285.
- ⁵¹ Talla, Kangundo District. "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes and from Wendo Wa Kavete. Kibwezi District. "Purification Ritual Performance." December 2008.
- ⁵² This phase was not associated with Comaroff's ritual phases, but modified to fully capture the dance experience and positive outcome.
- ⁵³ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94-95.
- ⁵⁴ Tribhuwan, *Medical World of the Tribals*, 17.
- ⁵⁵ Tribhuwan, *Medical World of the Tribals*, 17.
- ⁵⁶ Tribhuwan, *Medical World of the Tribals*, 17.
- ⁵⁷ Field analysis from Wendo Wa Kavete. Kibwezi District. "Purification Ritual Performance." December 2008. Video tape recording and notes, and "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." Kangundo District. December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.

⁵⁸ Field analysis, "Purification and Rain making Ceremony." Kangundo District. December 2008. Video tape recording and notes.

⁵⁹ The High Spirit

⁶⁰ Muliro Telewa, "Kenya Drought Means No School Rations," BBC News Africa, Feb. 8 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12371130>, Accessed May 25, 2011.