

The Dance of Transformation: exploring embodied space, sacredness and possession in Brekete

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Abstract: Using ethnographic methods with insights gleaned from open-ended interviews and participant observation, this paper interrogates possession rituals in Brekete as a special modality of human behavior and examines the notion of sacred space and how the construct of sacred space shapes the perception of materiality, agency and territorialism. It further explores transformative encounters to determine the meaning of the physicality of dance in the creation of “communitas” (Turner, [1967] 1969) and wellbeing. Religious ritual practices are understood as expressive behavior that communicates meaning, notably about social structure, and the conscious vis-à-vis unconscious processes underlying perception, representation and performance of diverse types of actions coded in symbolic forms. In this perspective, ritual is simply not a set of distinct acts, but rather, ritual is a way of acting (Bell, 1990) and, consequently, the job of the ethnographer is to acquire the interpretational knowledge necessary to analyze the network of languages inherent in this apparently ‘irrational’ action.

Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of human and possession experience, the notion of transformation holds a pivotal place, especially as it intertwines with concepts of sacredness and embodied space. The interplay between the fluidity of physical movement, the profound spiritual significance, and the experiences inhabited creates a rich field of exploration, particularly when examined through the vibrant lens of dance, anthropology and phenomenology.

Dance transcends the boundaries of ordinary physical activity; it emerges as a visceral expression which invites participants to delve deep into a connection that animates the body, breathes life into the environment, and awakens the religious experience. This dynamic interplay invited my curiosity to interrogate how sacred space, embodiment and agency are brought to life through ritual actions as well as how it is constituted in and through lived experiences in the various ritual contexts.

This anecdote is a first-hand account gathered personally from ‘*Midawo*’ Anane Gatsi in an open-ended interview about Brekete in 2014. Brekete is a traditional religious practice performed to honour seven pantheon of shrine gods (Friedson, 2019). There are major (mother and father) and minor gods, each having their own identity in order of kinship hierarchy. These gods came in material forms as god-things to which sacrifices are made and thus manifest themselves through spirit possession. Brekete worship has not only survived but also flourished, becoming one of the dominant traditional worships in the Southern and Mid-region of Ghana.

Midawo Anane Gatsi’s father - Kormi Michael Fiwoshi Gatsi in the nineties met a Muslim stranger who had travelled from Dargarti, in the Upper West Region of Ghana to the South, and through this travel acquaintance led to *Midawo* Anane’s father owning a personal deity. *Midawo* Anane Gatsi subsequently inherited the deities, marking the historical genesis of the Brekete religion and informing how this encounter has influenced both the participant’s personal, family and community.

Sacredness and Transformation

At the section of this discussion, I implore your understanding of embodied space, sacredness and agency. Embodied space transcends the confines of ordinary physical structures; they are dynamic realms infused with meaning, shaped by ritual experiences, memories, and actions. The possessed body and its association to shrine space and altar serves as a key component to how the body moves through its hallowed space. Including all those other participants or actors contributing to more details on how ritual structures negotiate spatial differences. As well as subject positions in relation to corporeality that are constituted as ‘extraordinary’ to ‘ordinary’, and the privileges that are attached to this relationship.

First, within the Brekete worship, the sacred shrine evokes a profound sense of reverence and becomes a site of ritualistic practices that bridge participants earthly existence with the divine. When devotees engage in the art of ritual manipulation within these hallowed spaces, intimate transformations arise - not only transforming the possessed dancer but also breathing new life into the very essence of the space itself. Within this sacred shrine environment, dance becomes a powerful conduit for expressing spirituality and connecting with transcendent forces. Each movement is not merely a gesture; it embodies propitiation and invokes the presence of the divine.

The body of the possessed dancer transforms to become a physical representation of the material altar, where separation between the physical and spiritual realm becomes apparent. Aside the metaphysical space that these non-human subjects supposedly occupy, in the natural world they are noted to live in non-human objects

like the shrine alter as well as things in the natural environment. By way of extending this territorial and spatial presence these non-human subjects embody their unpossessed subjects.

Arguably, the characteristics of the 'natural' untamed body is therefore always given a symbolic loading by the community of practitioners and, members treat those in turn as extraordinary. As Csordas (1994, 1999, 2008, 2015), Douglas (1966a), Merleau-Ponty (2012) and many other writers have pointed out, the body is a fundamental resource for the creation of rituals. For the provision of context, the liminal body becomes understood as the material shrine object (altar) with all its historical function as carrier of supernatural identity marker (Vedel et. al., 2018).

Spiritual expression through movement

The agency of the liminal body perceived as the representation of the sacred altar in the Brekete ritual arguably becomes a microcosm of both the sacred and secular world upon which authority, power and symbolic values are imposed and in turn accorded the privileged presence. Every swirl of the arm, every grounded step, every leap into the air narrates a story - a prayer woven into the fabric of the moment, resonating through sacred movements. In this hallowed space, each possession moment becomes a powerful conduit to display extraordinariness, where every gesture resonates with symbolic intention and the invocation of transcendent forces. Correspondingly, Wehrle & Doyon (2020), have maintained that,

The body as subject incorporates all our practical capabilities, skills, and habits; it is the mobile centre or "zero-point of orientation" (Husserl 1993: 166), about which all other spatial objects are oriented as either left or right, above, or beneath, near or far, etc. If, however, we take a look at the body from an exterior viewpoint, it appears as material, extended and embedded in the causal relations of nature; it is a visible, touchable and measurable object (Wehrle & Doyon, 2020, p.124).

On close inspection, it turns out then, that the sacred shrine in Brekete possession that encloses everything within, where a myriad of devotees, participants, and ritual prayers takes place, is nothing more than a contested geo-spatial and political space. Transformative encounters through the sonic soundscape and possession experience establish the physicality of dance as a physiological and spiritual transformation that binds participants together in an immersive collective encounter.

In essence, Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 2012), Mauss (1934), Douglas (1966a), Crossley (2004), and latterly Wehrle & Doyon (2020), have noted that the ways in which the body is viewed and treated in society reflect the rules and values inscribed in that social order. This dynamic interplay between spaces, material object and body connections being described in Brekete, ignites a power-driven atmosphere, where movement not only transforms the devotees, community members and onlookers, but also revitalises the very essence of the ritual space itself.

Concluding Remarks

Rituals thrive within communal settings, where shared soundscapes create a palpable experience that binds participants together, celebrating a common belief and collective memory. Considering, that social ethos structures the body and thus constructs social beings via the internalization of basic schemes and values, my paper has discussed possession rituals as a form of a special modality of human behaviour and examined how the concepts of sacred space in Brekete worship are constructed.

The paper has shown that dances are not only "visual, acoustic, and kinetic reflections of a culture, but they are culture" (Morrison, 2005 cited in Phillips 2013, p.418). The ethnography and anthropological perspective^{viii} used have served as a medium for commenting on external factors and revealed the potential of dance to reflect and respond to the world around us, engaging with, and commenting on the broader societal and cultural experience.

I cannot agree less with Phillips (2013, p. 419) when she compels that "to me, a 'reflection' indicates a two-part relationship: an object and a reflection of said object. I prefer to think of [possession] dance and culture as one. Simply put, [possession] dance is culture, embodied." The theme of possession interwoven with dance added further layers of meaning to this investigation. In many African traditions, dance serves as a sacred channel for divinity; through movement, individuals invoke healing channels, seek communion, or discover profound revelation. This mutual connection between liminality and space emphasizes a profound reality, where the dancer's embodiment of spirit aligns harmoniously with the surrounding space and altar. Yet the embodiment of sacredness through liminality extended beyond individual expression and flourished within a communal worship.

While possession dance can seem to be a solitary practice, its physical symbolism often unfolds in the embrace of community, reinforcing social bonds, shared beliefs and identities, and celebrating collective religious stories that bind members across generations. Ultimately, the dance of transformation invites us into a broader

contemplation of how we engage with the sacred in our lives. It urges us to consider how our movements within embodied spaces shape our relationships with community, culture, and spirituality.

In a world often marked by fragmentation, dance emerges as a powerful reminder of the profound interconnectedness of existence. It is an invitation to celebrate the sacredness inherent in both our bodies and the spaces we inhabit. It highlights the transformative power of movement - an affirmation that through dance, we can reclaim our wellbeing, connect with the essence of our spaces, and nurture a sense of belonging. Through this ritual journey, individuals find themselves interconnected not only with their own histories and the collective memory of their bodies, experiencing both personal and communal transformation as they immerse themselves in collective worship.

ⁱ Sense of unity and shared experience that can arise within a group of people, often during times of ritual. It's a feeling of deep connection, solidarity, and equality among individuals that transcends social structures and hierarchies.

ⁱⁱ Fon-Ewe title equivalent in meaning to modern day Bishop in the Christian church.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this sense, Husserl sees our own bodily experience as a necessary condition for intersubjectivity. The foreign lived body is the "first intersubjective datum, and my apprehension of it as a lived body is the first step on the way toward the constitution of an intersubjective world in common" (Husserl 1989, p.110; Husserl 2001, p.18, p.572).

^{iv} The body is man's first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man's first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body (Mauss 1979, p. 104).

^v Victor Turner (1969, 1967) and Arnold Van Gennep (1909).

^{vi} The study of dance through the application of several disciplines such as anthropology, musicology, ethnography (Blacking (1984), László (2015), Giurchescu (2001, 2016)).

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Acknowledgments

I wish to express my profound appreciation to *Midawo* Anane Gatsi, Paa William Gasti and the entire Brekete family for granting me access to their way of life and playing a significant role in the successful completion of this research paper. This work would not have been achievable without their collaboration.

My deepest gratitude goes to my Erasmus Mundus Choreomundus convenors, Emeritus Professor Egil Bakka, Professor Andrée Grau (late), Emerita Professor Georgiana Wierre-Gore and Professor László Felföldi whose expert guidance and unwavering support have been instrumental throughout this research journey. Their commitment to fostering my academic growth and their extensive knowledge in the field of dance studies, anthropology of dance, ethnochoreology and heritage studies greatly contributed to the refinement of my ideas and the overall quality of the paper.

I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable collaboration of the Graduate Student Association, University of Calgary, Peer Beyond Conference Group 2025, University of Calgary, and the Department of Anthropology, University of Calgary, whose intellectual engagement enriched this paper. Additionally, I am grateful to Professor Saulesh Yessenova, Professor Rowland Caesar Apentiik and Professor Motilola Akinfemisoye-Adejare for the diverse perspectives and constructive critiques which added depth to my work and encouraged rigorous analysis.

I would also like to thank Erica Van Vugt, UofC, Zoe Cascadden, UofC, Kyle Farquharson, UofC, and Eric Baffour Awuah, UofA, for their commitment with proofreading the manuscript which was crucial in advancing this publication.

I wish to convey my heartfelt appreciation to my family, Joycelyn N.A Okyere, J.V.S. Okyere, J.X.A. Okyere and J.E.A. Okyere for their unwavering support and understanding throughout the research process. Their encouragement and patience during challenging times were vital in helping me maintain focus and motivation.

Finally, I extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Abigail A. Quaye, Dr. Solomon Y. Dartey, Dr. Kofi Antonio, Dr. Faakor L. Nutakor, Kafui M. Tay and everyone involved for their contributions, which have made this achievement possible. Your support has been integral to this endeavor.