

University of Zululand

**Circular Orientation in Performance: A study of the cycle of living and its application in the cultural expression like dance**

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**Circular Orientation in Performance: A Study of the cycle of living and its application in the cultural expression like dance**

By

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Promoter : Prof LZM Khumalo

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## **DECLARATION**

Except where specifically indicated to the contrary, this thesis is entirely my own. All the sources that I have used or quoted from have been listed and acknowledged.

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**Vusabantu Ngema**

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my father: Phendukani Ngema and my late mother: Sarafina Ngema, who nurtured in me the virtue of endurance, the love to learn and respect for myself and other fellow human beings. The sacrifice of everything they had in order to lay a foundation of what I and other siblings are today is highly appreciated.

I also dedicate this work to my wife: Xoliswa Ngema and my children: Siyanda, S'thembiso, Vuyiswa and little Amanda. You are all the reason for the never ending desire to learn.

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My thanks also go to the members of the Centre for Arts and Culture: Prof C Ndlovu, Dr E Pewa, Mrs. NH Seleke, Mr. LEN Zulu, Mr. TD Zulu and Ms NR Mthembu. Your words of encouragement and the support have helped me find strength to carry on to the finish.

To Ntando Mhlongo, you have always inspired me to work hard and you have made me understand the word 'dedication' much better. ***Ukhule wena ka Bhebhe.***

## **ABSTRACT**

Early European travelers and writers in Africa had one mission, that was, to portray Africa as a dark continent. Africa was a continent with no civilization, peopled by savages and barbarians. They justified the invasion of Africa by perpetuating the idea that Africans had no concept of a God except the worship of ancestral spirits.

Exclusive terminology for usage towards describing Africans was established. Africans were always referred to as savages capable of eating their own flesh and blood. African troops were often referred to as warriors with undisciplined military antics. African medical doctors being the witchdoctors not interested in curing ailments except practicing witchcraft and magical spells. Kings' residences were not referred to as palaces, instead kraals same as cattle byres.

To Europeans, Africans were human species closest to animals particularly, apes. Africans were incapable of conceptualization of scientific, cosmologic, and theosophical knowledge. African rituals were either interpreted as mere ancestral worship or a celebration of a good meal, harvest or hunt.

Whether this perception was a result of a genuine ignorance or a deliberate distortion of facts, is not clear. But I will argue that it was a bit of

both. History teaches us that most of the early explorers of the African continent were warmly treated by the Africans and they were even taken into and exposed to some of the well guarded secrets of the people. They knew about the scientific and mathematical formulas used to build the pyramids. They knew about great civilizations such as **Maphungubwe**, **Zimbabwe**, **Tulamela** and **Ntusi**.

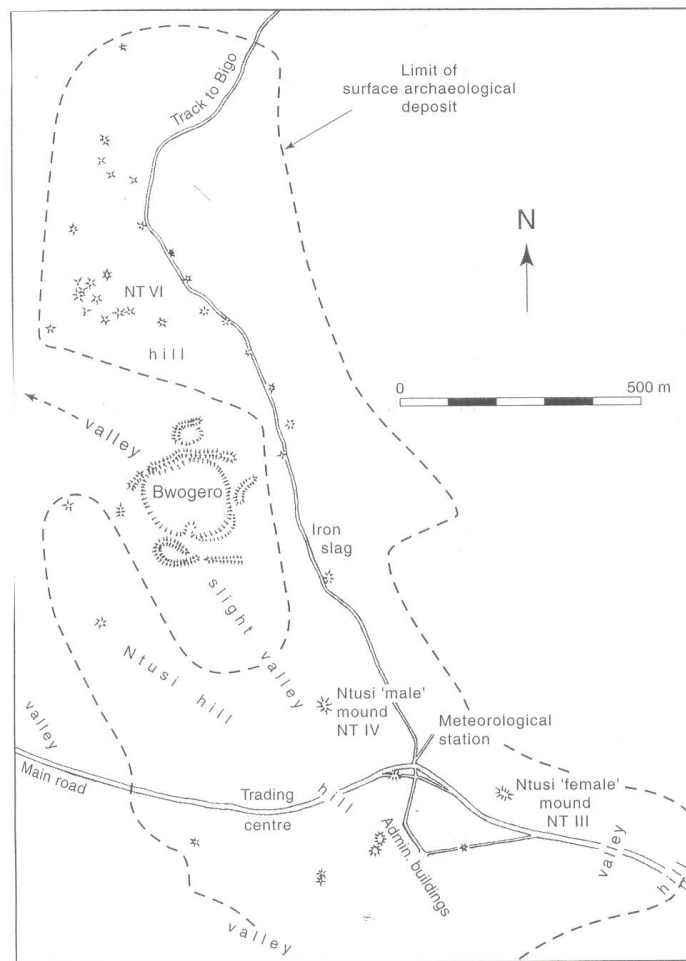


Fig. 8.7 Plan of Ntusi, Uganda. After Sutton (1993; Fig. 4) based on a survey by Andrew Reid in 1987-9.

The plan shows aspects of an advanced civilization such as iron slag, trading centre and admin buildings

They knew that these civilizations were great trading centers between Africans and the outside world. Africans were already trading in gold, copper and iron with the countries from the east. Ethiopia and Egypt were among the earliest religious centers of the world. Timbuktu and Alexandria were among the ancient learning centers where most of early scholars from Europe and Asia converged for studying and research.

Those Europeans who displayed signs of greed and thugery were met with uncompromising anger of the Africans and they used that to instigate their mother lands to view Africans as dangerous and barbaric human specie. Africans had to be Christianized, 'Educated', Colonized, Enslaved and those remaining had to be oppressed. This is the time when Africa was 're-invented' or rather the time Africa ceased to exist.

Indoctrinated by the Hobbesian picture of a pre-European Africa, in which there was no account of time: no Arts; no Letters; no society; but only continued fear and danger of violent death; colonizers of Africa all intended to transform Africa into European construct (Mudimbe, 1988)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, three complementary hypothesis and actions emerge: the domination of physical space, the reformation of *natives'* minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the western perspective.



This study is an attempt to zoom into the heart of Africans' world view through the performances by Abantu and the Khoisan speaking communities. The study shall reveal what most Europeans and other invaders of Africa such as Arabs have been trying to conceal for hundreds and hundreds of years. Amongst other things the study shall reveal that contained within the African ritual and recreational performances and other art forms such as painting, drawings, carving, weavings and sculpturing, were reflections of complex scientific, religious, cultural, cosmological and artistic awareness comparable to none.

**San** rock paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphs are some of the most ancient sacred form of writing studied the world over but still not fully understood by most scholars from the western world. Geometric designs contained in the construction of the Pyramids and great Zimbabwe ruins still mesmerize archeologists and historians alike.

But sometimes the lack of visible archeological sites made it impossible to validate some areas' status among other ordinary sites. Areas around tropical Africa where building material was always grass, wood and mud are difficult to retrace. The reason is that, tropical rains make it possible for the vegetation to re-grow once a site had been abandoned. For instance the city of **Loango** in the present Republic of Congo was once a major city around the seventeenth century and because of the climatic

conditions of the equatorial Africa, the conditions made it possible for vegetation to re-grow.

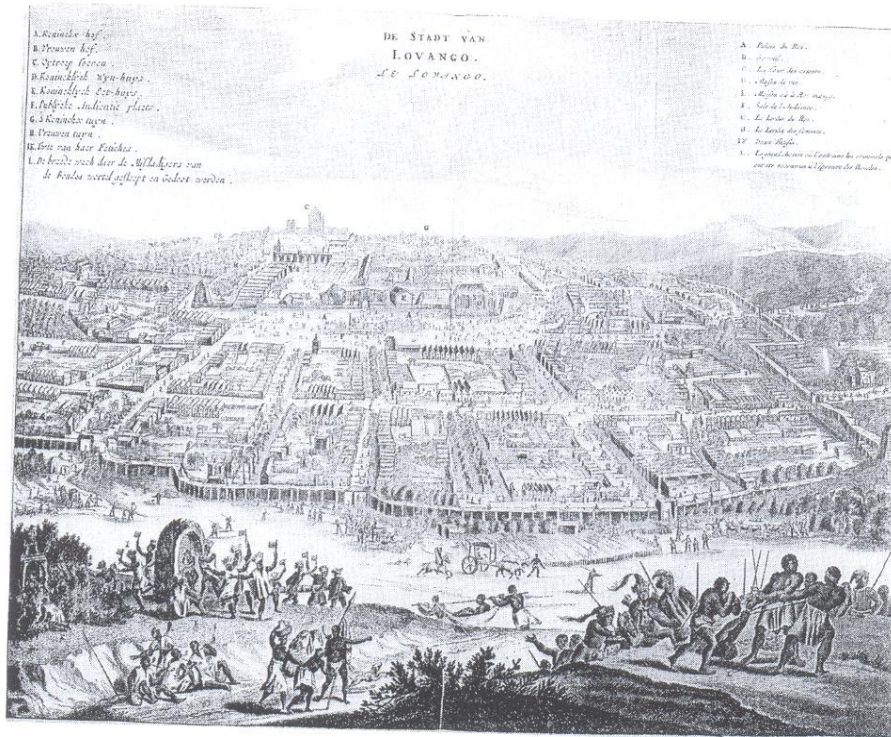


Fig. 8.1 The city of Loango (in what is now the Congo Republic) in the seventeenth century. From Dapper (1686: 320-1).

The sculptures carved from soap stones by the **Shona** and the making of cloths from the tree bark by the **Baganda** and the **Chokwe** are evident to a well and advanced civilized human societies long before the Europeans and Arabs set their feet in Africa.

## SUMMARY

This study focuses on the circular orientation in performances by **Abathwa** and **Abantu** speaking people of central and southern Africa. This notion is explored through close examination of space, movements, time and objects used during ritual and recreational performances.

The study is informed by the meaning contained in symbolism rooted in Africans' perception of culture, religion, language, cosmos, science and artistic aesthetics. **The first chapter** is the general introduction to the study covering aspects such as statement of the problem and hypothesis, rationale, methodology and literature review. It also attempts to give an in depth explanation of the African conception of the circle, the centre and the cycle. It explains how these three concepts are applied in social structure, architecture and ritual performances. The chapter also explains the African cyclical perception of time and life.

**The second chapter** looks at the historical perspective of dance performances by indigenous peoples of southern Africa. The histories and the cultural backgrounds of the **Khoisan** and the **Bantu** speaking people, form the bases for the interpretation and understanding of dance performances during rituals, recreation and children games.

**The third chapter** investigates the thematic approach towards the interpretation of dance performances by the **Bantu** and the **Khoisan** speaking people of Africa. The emphasis is on the theme of gender and sexuality since it is the theme that plays a central role in most of the ritualistic performances among the Africans. While the emphasis on relationship between genders in the performances, the attention is also paid towards the metaphoric, symbolic and paradoxical representations of African world view through the juxtaposition of gender and sexuality during performances.

**The fourth chapter** examines the use of elements of dance performances in relation to themes of fertility (human and soil) and curing. These themes are discussed because they are the themes that apply to all the people being studied where as themes such as animal (hunting) and acrobatic (masks) can only apply to certain peoples not to the other for one reason or the other.

**The fifth chapter** deals with the aesthetic principles as they apply to African dance forms and performances. It focuses on the application of the elements of space and symbolism contained in other elements of performance such as timing, costume, crafts and objects.

**The sixth chapter** is an investigation of the circular orientation in modern performances and children games. It also examines the continuation of the circular orientation in religious worship-performances.

**The seventh/the last chapter** is about the findings, recommendations and the general conclusion of the study.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure Number	Caption	Page Number
Pr 1	Plan of Ntusi. Uganda	v
Pr 2	City of Lango. Republic of Congo	viii
1	A modernized Zulu hut	6
2	Iziko (the hearth) inside the hut	12
3	First sefirot formed out of the fire (cabbala)	14
4	Mind-Time-Space triad	16
5	Planets revolving around the sun	22
6	Layers of the planet-earth	22
7	Earth layers compared to the Zulu homestead layout	31
8	Zulu homestead layout	32
9	King Dingane's palace layout	36
10	Indlunkulu-Ikhohlo-Iqadi triune	37
11	The centre and the diameter of the circle illustrating the principle of Duality	38
12	Hermitic sign of the principle illustrating the principle of Compliments	40
13	The first three sefirot of the cabbala	41
14	Juxtaposition of the first sefirot to the inside of the Zulu hut	41
15	Ilawu of King Dingane	58
16	Tshikona dance	67

17	Myths, Legends and Folktales table	71
18	Egyptian Madonna and the Zulu-Inkehli	80
19	Map showing Qoi Qoi locations	83
20	Map showing San locations	84
21	Part of Zimbabwe ruins	87
22	The eland bull dance	93
23	The old San man at the eland bull dance	94
24	Ingungu (friction) drum	95
25	Females colourful dance costumes	99
26	Zulu maidens and their matrons at the Zulu reed dance	99
27	Initiates costume made out of the tree bark at Komandoga	100
28	Chokwe initiates ready to return to the village	101
29	Umkhwetha dancer	102
30	Sotho girls novices	102
31	Ndembu boys novices in white clay make-up	103
32	Sotho novices in white clay make-up	103
33	San rock painting (rain dance)	109
34	Ijiku daMukanda	118
35	Bagesu boys initiates coming out dance	119
36	Bagesu novices dance	120
37	Idaxo novices pole dance	122
38	Ikishi (chizaluki) at Ndembu boys circumcision	125
39	Mwana Pwevo at Chokwe and other related people's boys	126

	initiation	
40	Old face mask of the Boa people	126
41	Venda boys practicing Tshikona dance	130
42	Motion direction of the planets	131
43	Ukhwaxa dance by the Bhaca young men	132
44	Ibhodwe (pot) at the performance of Ukhwaxa	132
45	Ndawe dance by diviners from Mtubatuba	136
46	Old San man at the eland bull dance	139
47	San rock painting showing the first menses of the girl	139
48	U kamisa	144
49	Ndayo dance	145
50	Domba dance	146
51	Domba dance	147
52	Lwana Pwevo/Pwo with a flywhisk	150
53	First part of the Tshigombela dance	153
54	Melon ball game	154
55	Map showing areas where Mukanda is observed	165
56	Thonga novices sitting around the fire (elephant) at the initiation lodge	169
57	Kivata dance at Kiyambu	170
58	Zulu grass-dress for puberty and umshophi rituals	172
59	Umkhwetha dress for dancing	173
60	Idaxo novices in their grass masks	174



61	Muhwira at the Sungwi	174
62	Bogwera dancer	175
63	Mayiwayiwane mask dancer	176
64	Buhwira mask dancer	177
65	Sotho girls novices in their reed veils and grass hoops	177
66	Chokwe novices learning to dance with their hips	178
67	Chokwe novices showing how it is done	179
68	Women dancing at Intonjane	183
69	Men and women doing the Tyubula dance	183
70	Mbende jerusalema dance	185
71	Trance dance---Kalahari San	187
72	Spirits' afflicted patient---Vimbuza	190
73	Umqhuqhumbelo dance at Mtubatuba	194
74	Ndawe dance at Mtubatuba	194
75	Spirits' dance -----Vimbuza	197
76	Eland bull dance	198
77	Hour glass on body chakras	204
78	Grass dress for Umshophi ritual	210
79	Zulu maidens herding cattle at uNomdede ceremony	212
80	Eland bull dance and the Domba	217
81	Idaxo novices in grass masks	218
82	Rock painting (San girl's first menses)	219
83	Trance dance----Ju/ansi	220

84	Kiba dance	221
85	Venda children leap frog dance game	222
86	Wakamba boy leapfrog game dance	222
87	Coming out dance by Ndembu initiates	223
88	Chokwe novices dance	224
89	Domba dance	225
90	Tshigombela	225
91	Chizaluki mask dancer	226
92	Healed patient at Vimbuza	227
93	Trance dance	228
94	M'goiyu dance	229
95	Ndawe dance	230
96	Rock painting (trance dance)	231
97	Zulu Queens at the reed dance ceremony	232
98	The Zulu King and His traditional Prime minister at the reed dance ceremony	232
99	Venda girls novices initiates being carried on their mothers' backs	233
100	Ndembu novices	234
101	King Shaka	237
102	Egyptian princes royal crown	238
103	Soap stone sculpture showing an eagle perched on a monolith	243

104	Staff for the Chiefs staff of the BaKongo	245
105	Staff for the masters of the Domba	246
106	Staff for the Kings of the Zulus	247
107	Venda wooden door (the crocodile)	248
108	Shona headrest	248
109	Shona wooden bowl	249
110	Umkhukhu dance	254
111	The sketch for Idilesi and Isikhalanga	255
112	A starting point for the Isicathamiya performance	257
113	Melon ball game dance	259
114	Nyae Nyae children game dance	260
115	Kalahari children game dance	261
116	The circle and the centre	264
117	The geometric representation of the triune inside the Zulu hut	265
118	The construction of Ufindo of the Zulu hut	269
119	Boaz, Jachin and Shalom (entrance into the Jewish temple)	270
120	Cabbalist and Zulu hut triad compared	271
121	(Converted) Cabbalist and Zulu hut triad	271
122	Representation of the Hermetic sign of compliments inside the Zulu hut	272
123	The cross formation inside the Zulu hut	274

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	(i)
Dedication	(ii)
Acknowledgements	(iii)
Abstract	(iv)
Summary	(ix)
List of Illustrations	(xii)
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>0.1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Introduction	1
1.1.1. On the circle and the cycle	13
1.1.2. On the centre	19
1.1.3. On Hermitism	25
1.1.4. On Kabbalah/Cabbala	26
1.1.5. On the indigenous knowledge Systems	27
1.1.6. The Sacred language	28
1.1.7. The Indigenous family of southern Africa	28
1.1.8. Microcosm and Macrocosm expressions	43
1.1.9. Knowledge and Value Systems	44
1.2. Statement of the problem and hypothesis	46
1.3. The Rationale for the Research	48
1.4. The Aims of the Research	50
1.5. Research Methodology	52
1.6. The Scope for the Research	53
1.7. Definition of Terms	54
1.7.1. Uhlanga	54
1.7.2. Umuthi	55
1.7.3. Abantu	56
1.7.4. Abathwa	57
1.7.5. Amalawu	57
1.7.6. Fibanacci	58
1.8. Literature review	58
1.8.1. African Renaissance and Theosophical movement	59
1.8.2. Arts, Craft and Religion in Africa	65
1.8.3. Archeology and Civilization in Africa	69
1.8.4. Myths, Legends and Folktales in African societies	70
1.8.5. Science, Medicine and African perception of Celestial bodies	74

1.8.6. Conclusion	77
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>2.0. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE DANCE PERFORMANCE BY THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA</b>	<b>82</b>
2.1. Introduction	82
2.2. General historical background of Abantu and Abathwa	83
2.3. Livelihood of Abantu and Abathwa	87
2.3.1. Subsistence and Cultural expression	87
2.3.2. Houses, shelters and other spaces as performance venues	91
2.3.3. Properties and performance Iconographies	97
2.3.4. Costume for performance	98
2.3.5. Conclusion	104
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>3.0. THEMES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN DANCE PERFORMANCES BY ABANTU AND ABATHWA</b>	<b>106</b>
3.1. Introduction	106
3.2. Male dances	107
3.2.1. Agrarian Cult dance performances	108
3.2.2. Talisman Cult dance performances	112
3.2.3. Life Cycle dance performances	114
3.2.4. Social bonding dance performances	123
3.2.5. Spirits' dance performances	124
3.2.6. Animal-human relationships dance performances	127
3.2.7. Popular dances	129
3.2.7.1. Popular-national/communal dancing	129
3.2.7.2. Popular-recreational/sport dancing	133
3.3. Female dances	133
3.3.1. Agrarian Cult dance performances	134
3.3.2. Talisman Cult dance performances	134
3.3.3. Life Cycle dance performances	137
3.3.4. Social bonding dance performances	148
3.3.5. Spirits' dance performances	149
3.3.6. Animal-human relationships dance performances	151
3.3.7. Popular dances	152
3.3.7.1. Popular-national/communal dancing	152
3.3.7.2. Popular-recreational/sport dancing	153
3.4. Combined dances (men and women dancing together)	154
3.4.1. Males dancing-females supporting	156

3.4.2. Females dancing-males supporting	157
3.5. Homosexuality in dance performances	159
3.6. Conclusion	161
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>4.0. ELEMENTS OF DANCE PERFORMANCE OF ABANTU AND ABATHWA</b>	<b>162</b>
4.1. Introduction	162
4.2. Themes	162
4.2.1. Fertility (Puberty rites)	162
4.2.2. Fertility (Social relationships)	182
4.2.3. Spirits' Possession (Curing)	186
4.3. Purpose	196
4.4. Formations	198
4.5. Conclusion	202
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>214</b>
<b>5.0. AFRICAN AESTHETICS IN RITUAL DANCE PERFORMANCES</b>	<b>214</b>
5.1. Introduction	214
5.2. Spatial elements	217
5.2.1. Direction	217
5.2.2. Focus	223
5.2.3. Design	227
5.2.4. Planes	228
5.2.5. Density	231
5.3. Symbolism	234
5.4. Craft	239
5.5. Conclusion	250
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>6.0. CIRCULAR ORIENTATION IN MODERN PERFORMANCES</b>	<b>252</b>
6.1. Introduction	252
6.2. Liturgical performances	253
6.3. 'Nice-Time' and night clubs' performances	257
6.4. Children's games and educational exercises	258
6.5. Conclusion	262
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>7.0. FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND COCLUSION</b>	<b>263</b>
7.1. Findings	263

7.2. Recommendations	278
7.3. Conclusion	280
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>289</b>