

## THE RESTLESS ANTHROPOLOGY OF VICTOR TURNER

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DOSSIER WORLDS IN PERFORMANCE: 20 YEARS  
NAPEDRA

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### ABSTRACT

Based on an overview on Victor Witter Turner's theoretical background and production and a brief discussion on its reception by Brazilian anthropologists since the 1970s, this paper focuses on Turner's first book *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*. Published in 1957, it resulted from research carried out by Victor and Edith Turner in the first half of the 1950s among the Ndembu, inhabitants of the northwest of present-day Zambia. The text argues that the driving creative restlessness characteristic of Turner's work can be understood by an ethnographic reading of the concept of social drama, from which the notion of ritual emerges as a powerful narrative countercurrent. The focus on this notion allows this analysis to provide a glimpse into the author's future conceptual developments, when the ethnography of the Ndembu dialogues with themes such as the whiteness of the whale in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the Nordic sagas, the pilgrimages Catholic Churches, Franciscan Orders, the Hippie Movement and Theater Performances.

### KEYWORDS

Victor Turner;  
drama; ritual;  
performance;  
ethnography.

Victor Witter Turner (1920-1983) authored a vast and multifaceted body of work that accompanied a substantial portion of anthropology's history over the twentieth century and has achieved a worldwide influence since then. His books cover a broad time span. From 1950s at the epicentre of mid-century British social anthropology, his intellectual trajectory later continued in the countercultural setting of the 1960s United States. Between the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s, Turner switched his attention to experimental theatre in the context of the postmodern interest in performance, of which he saw himself as a precursor.

Between these starting and end points, the innovative formulations and flows between Europe, Africa, and the Americas are many. The impact of his ideas reached the anthropology being produced in Brazil at the start of the 1970s thanks to Roberto DaMatta, presented with Turner's thinking on the advanced training course in Social Anthropology in 1963/1964 at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA). DaMatta was keenly interested in the idea of ritual as a decisive aspect of social life and his contact with Turner further deepened on his master's degree and PhD completed between 1967 and 1971 at the same university. At the invitation of DaMatta, by then professor at PPGAS/Museu Nacional/UFRJ, Victor Turner came to Rio de Janeiro in 1981. This close contact would result in the articles "Carnival in Rio" (V. Turner 1987a) (in dialogue with Roberto DaMatta 1973; 1979) and "Social dramas in Brazilian umbanda" (V. Turner 1987b) (in dialogue with Yvonne Maggie 1975). In all its distinct phases and facets, Victor Turner's work has continued to exert an influence on Brazilian anthropology ever since.<sup>1</sup>

In this text, far from attempting any exhaustive appraisal of such a vast body of work, I schematically resume the thread of the arguments detailed and deepened in my book *Drama, ritual e performance. A antropologia da Victor Turner* (Cavalcanti 2020).<sup>2</sup> As a baseline, I take the oral presentations given on two particularly welcome occasions during the tough challenges of the pandemic. The first was the lecture "The anthropology of Victor Turner," presented in April 2021 on the online course Theories and Histories of Anthropology on the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at Campinas University. The second was the lecture "Kavula! Drama, ritual e

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1. The remarkable impact of the author's thought in Brazil can be testified not only in the exemplary cases of DaMatta (1979; 2000) and Maggie (1975), but also in the subsequent work of many anthropologists, including Leopoldi (1978), Vogel, Mello and Barros (1998), Cavalcanti (2006; 2022), Silva (2005), Dawsey (2005a; 2005b), Steil (1996) among so many others. I learnt about Victor Turner's work on courses given by Roberto DaMatta in 1978.

2. In this book, the interested reader will find an overview of Victor Turner's work and an analysis of some of his main contributions to anthropological thought: the concepts of social drama, ritual symbols, and performance. The appendices also contain interviews conducted with Roberto DaMatta and with Yvonne Maggie who discuss their interlocution with Victor Turner and how his work was received in the 1970s. The book has been reviewed by Everardo Rocha and William Corbo (2021) and by John Dawsey (2021).

performance na obra de Victor Turner,” given in December the same year at an event commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Nucleus of Anthropology, Performance and Drama of São Paulo University.<sup>3</sup>

After some brief remarks on Turner’s work and his early training, I resume the central thread of the argument presented at the time: namely that the impulse behind the creative restlessness of his body of work is contained in embryonic form in his debut book, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (V. Turner 1957/1996),<sup>4</sup> encapsulated in the umbrella concept of ritual, and can be captured by an ethnographic reading of the concept of social drama. Somewhat liminally, the notion of ritual emerges in this book as a powerful narrative counter-current, which enables the organic connection and reconnection of different concepts formulated in distinct stages of the author’s trajectory. *Schism and Continuity* announces innovations that, diverging from the better-known paths of the structural functionalism in vogue at the time, foreshadowed subsequent directions taken by his research. Victor Turner’s ethnography among the Ndembu, in the northwest of present-day Zambia, would later dialogue with western themes as distinct as the white whale in Herman Melville’s (1992) *Moby Dick*, the Nordic sagas, the Catholic pilgrimages, the Franciscan Orders, the hippie movement, and the theatrical performances.<sup>5</sup>

Four of Victor Turner’s books and an essay have been translated into Portuguese. In 1974, the Social Anthropology collection published by Editora Vozes and edited by Luiz de Castro Faria and Roberto DaMatta released *O processo ritual* (V. Turner 1969/1974). In 2005 and 2008, the Fluminense Federal University Publishing House (Editora UFF) issued *Floresta de símbolos: aspectos do ritual ndembu* (with a preface by Roberto DaMatta) and *Dramas, campos e metáforas: ação simbólica na sociedade humana*. The essay “Dewey, Dilthey e drama,” published posthumously in Turner and Bruner (V. Turner 1986), was translated in the journal *Cadernos de Campo*, issue n. 13, in 2005. In 2017, Editora UFRJ published *Do ritual ao teatro: a seriedade humana de brincar*. The work *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* from 1957 (V. Turner 1957/1996) has yet to be translated.

Victor Turner’s distancing from anthropology’s classical terrains was highly valued in the context of the anthropological postmodern turn (Engelke 2004). However, his initial formulations maintain an undeniable fertility even today. Revisiting the approach to ritual that directly emerges from Victor Turner’s lived experience among the Ndembu in the 1950s is worthwhile. Later dispersed and fragmented into many essays

3. My thanks respectively to Susana Durão and John Dawsey for their stimulating invitations.

4. For readability, in this article I abbreviate the book’s title to *Schism and Continuity*.

5. On this last aspect, see Schechener (1987; 2001). On Turner’s career and publications, see Manning (1990).

and articles that would compose his future body of work, this intense field research articulated and narrated in *Schism and Continuity* holds a special interest.

## THE STUDY OF RITUALS

The study of rituals and Victor Turner's interest in the force of action and attraction of symbols can be traced back to Émile Durkheim's ideas in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim 1912/1996): ritual is apprehended as an active, dynamic, and creative centre of social life, operating by symbolization.<sup>6</sup> Yet Turner's work has no systematic theory of ritual. Some of the definitions he proposes are highly restrictive and even conservative,<sup>7</sup> others are too broad or simply fail to do justice to his own thought, filled with conceptual insights. What Turner develops more systematically in the first chapters of *The Forest of Symbols* is a theory of the ritual symbol. However, the varied aspects of his work always reconnect in some form to the core theme of ritual, which functions as a driving force of his intellectual and existential paths (Grimes 1990).

The ritual crosses Turner's work like a kind of centrifugal axis around which fragmentary concepts spin, illuminating the strength of the action and attraction of symbols and the place of the subject in the experience of social processes. In his debut book (V. Turner 1957/1996), the author foregrounds the concept of social drama with its well-known phases expressing and organizing ruptures and/or reorganisations in social relations. As we shall see, performing rituals were a key element of the redressive phase. The processual nature of the unfolding of dramas in well-defined stages is, by the way, homologous to that of the rites of passage conceptualized by Van Gennep (1909/1969), whose liminal stage would especially interest Turner due to the power of the action of ritual symbols over the phase's duration (V. Turner 2005). The same move would continue with the extension and metamorphosis of liminality to the resonant themes of *communitas* – that extraordinary state of social life in which social hierarchies and distinctions characteristic of the social structure of different human societies are transcended by the experience

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6. See in particular Chapter VII of Book II of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim 1912/1996). Following Durkheim's argument, the social order and its symbolic representation show no duality: the social order is constructed and apprehended by consciousness via the symbolism of representations. In other words, Durkheim's concept of representation is not mimetic.

7. A striking example of this theoretical incongruity, which tends to greatly confuse the reading of students, emerges right at the start of the same chapter in which Victor Turner brilliantly and audaciously elaborates his theory of the ritual symbol. Ritual is defined in an impoverished form as "formal behaviour prescribed for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical powers or beings" (V. Turner 2005, 19).

of the essential and generic human bonds of antistructure (V. Turner 2008, V. Turner and E. Turner 1978).<sup>8</sup> At this moment of Turner's career, we can also highlight the processual approach to ritual that organizes his analyses of cure and affliction rituals, where the tensions and conflicts of social life are symbolically expressed, as well as male and female rites of passage (V. Turner 1962; 1968; 1986; 2008) and Catholic pilgrimages (V. Turner and E. Turner 1978). His conceptualizations have been seen as central contributions to the anthropology of religions (De Boeck and Devisch 1994, Deflem 1991, Weber 1995).

Ritual is also associated with the notions of performance and experience (Dawsey 2005a; 2013, St. John 2008a; 2008b), outlined and articulated in his final and/or posthumous works (V. Turner 1982; 1985; 1986; 1987c, 1987d). These developments fed back into the dialogue between anthropology and the dramatic and narrative arts, configuring the interdisciplinary area of performance studies. Developed at the end of his life, this approximation between ritual performance/drama and theatrical performance/drama in some ways revisited the conceptual plethora of social drama that marked his debut on the stage of world anthropology.

Given so many interconnections, it is important to apprehend Victor Turner's ideas as they move between his texts, which sprawled across diverse topics and anthropology fields: religion; narratives and literature; festivals and rituals (in the ethnographic sense of extraordinary occasions, in sharp contrast to everyday activities); power and politics; expressive forms and performances; curing, health and embodiment; among many others. Historians, playwrights and scholars of arts and performances were interested in Turner's work, drawing from his ideas and elaborating them in their own ways.

The sheer magnitude of the impact of his work seems to derive from the fact that, despite being developed in fragmentary form, or maybe precisely due to this, the theme of ritual brought what makes his texts remarkably unique: the compassionate empathy that overflows into his narrative style and results from apprehending the meaning of the lived experience for the subjects of social action. From his first book, Victor Turner grasps better than anyone the experience socially shared as lived experience – and thus enables the emergence of the role of affectivity in social life, a topic in which current anthropology is so interested.<sup>9</sup> Affectivity understood as emotional life in a broad sense, that dimension of

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8. The concepts of liminality and *communitas* would also develop into the concept of *liminoid*, distinct from *liminal*. On this point, see Dawsey (2021).

9. This aspect of Turner's work was decisive to apprehending the ritual production of rivalry in the *Bumbá de Parintins*, Amazonas (Cavalcanti 2018; 2022). The vision of ritual as an organic process unfolding in time, for its part, provided the framework for my ethnography of carnival in Cavalcanti (2006).

the lived world situated beyond the social expression of emotions and feelings, which is simultaneously beneath and beyond more conscious verbal language (Green 1973).

The analyses of symbols in ritual action proposed by Turner provides space for the latent or unconscious dimensions of social experience, as lived by subjects themselves, and for the unsayable – that is, for what words cannot express. Perhaps for this reason, and for his considerable interest in Freud's, Jung's, and Bettelheim's psychoanalyses, he converted to Catholicism at the end of the 1960s and some of his later formulations are imbued with a degree of mysticism; perhaps for this reason he surrendered himself so passionately to the approximation between social dramas and rituals and theatrical dramas and performances. In some ways, his anthropology sought to contemplate the unsayable and stretch the limits of what could be said.

## **INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT AND TRAINING**

The notion of experience, particularly important in Turner's work, traces its roots back to the anthropological tradition consecrated by Bronislaw Malinowski. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922/1976), as we know, inextricably associated the ethnographic narrative with the lived experience of immersion in the 'field,' emphasizing the researcher's sharing of the flow of social life such as natives live it every day. Underlying this paradigm is the idea of Dilthey (2010) – who Turner would devote himself to study at the end of his life (V. Turner 1986) – that life can only be apprehended from within life itself.

In so-called British social anthropology, in whose context Turner was trained in the 1940s/1950s, the notion of experience resonated strongly in the works of Evans-Pritchard (1956; 2005; 2014) on the Nuer and the Azande, in those of Meyer Fortes (1945; 1949; 1987; 2014) on the Tallensi, in Godfrey Lienhardt's (1961) work on the Dinka (called, precisely, *Divinity and Experience*, 1961), in the works of Max Gluckman (1961; 1963; 1974), Audrey Richards (1956/1982), Monica Wilson (1954/2014; 1957) – to whom, as it happens, Turner dedicates *The Forest of Symbols* – and Hilda Kuper (1944/2014), among others.<sup>10</sup> Amid the dynamic of the social relations under study, rituals – with their physicality and symbolic materiality – blended

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10. In the course of my research on Victor Turner, noting the absence of classic texts on the study of rituals for undergraduate students to access, I organized the collection *Ritual e performance. 4 estudos clássicos* (Cavalcanti 2014) in which I translated texts by Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, Hilda Kuper, and Monica Wilson. For a recontextualization of the field researches being conducted on the African continent at the time, see Schumaker (2001).

with and shaped the field experiences of the researchers, imposing themselves like autonomous forces.

In Victor Turner's (1957/1996) first book, two elements associated with the notion of experience and with the central place occupied by ritual within it make his anthropology highly unique. The first is the openness to the ethnographic presence of the subjects of those actions that collectively transform lived experience into the experience of each individual subject: any study of social action has people who analyse, converse, and reflect, interfering in the course of the unfolding of social interactions. This approach, though not made conceptually explicit, emerges in the ethnographic narrative and seems to be informed by the important distinction made by Wilhelm Dilthey between lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and experience (*Erfahrung*) (Dilthey 2010). As we shall see, the anthropological analysis and narration of the dramas lived by the Ndembu in *Schism and Continuity* are filled with human vivacity and a density of characters who persist in our memory as though our acquaintances. The second is the pathos of Victor Turner's passionate narrative style that emerges in this book and later reappears in other texts. Reading his work seems to make anthropology a place where a kind of *communitas* can be experienced by elucidating the suffering, finitude, impossibilities, and tensions of life among different cultures and human societies.

## THE NDEMBU AND SOCIAL DRAMAS

The field research among the Ndembu was conducted by Victor Turner, always with the active participation of his wife Edith Turner (1987), between 1950 and 1954 in former Northern Rhodesia, present-day Zambia, under the auspices of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute and supervised by Max Gluckman.<sup>11</sup> The Lunda-Ndembu had migrated from the Congo when the kingdom of the great Congolese chief Mwantianvwa collapsed, around 200 years earlier, in the mid-eighteenth century. During their migration, they seem to have lost any central authority or military organisation, fragmenting into small and virtually independent kingdoms. When the Turners settled in the district of Mwinilunga (considered the most traditional), they soon noted the absence in practice of any organized central political power. The district had 18,000 inhabitants at the time. Edith and Victor Turner based their research in Mukanza village, a fictional name given by the author to the village of Kajima. They found the Ndembu organized in villages that contained 12 huts on average, spread across a 11,000 km<sup>2</sup> area of forest traversed by streams and rivers that

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11. The research took place between December 1950 and February 1952, and between May 1953 and June 1954.



eventually flowed into the great Zambezi River. They were hunters and growers of cassava and maize (for food and beer) in plantations located on the shores of the streams.<sup>12</sup>

The simplicity and monotony of economic and domestic life contrasted with the complex symbolism of an intense ritual life in which, as Turner argues, the sense of unity was forged among the Ndembu. This unity, according to the author, was moral rather than political, established with symbols deployed in the many rituals that punctuated social life. Turner situates this intense presence of rituals in Ndembu life within the social dynamic of the Ndembu villages, governed by the latent tension between values shared and made explicit by villagers and the social practice observed by the researcher. Always latent and sometimes manifest in the conduct of the everyday life of the villagers, the author apprehended this tension as a derivative of the conflicting structural principles organizing Ndembu social life. The concept of social drama that shines forth in the book emerges from this tension observed in the direct experience of conviviality and theoretically apprehended via the concept of social structure (Radcliffe-Brown 2013).

Turner observes that the ideal for a Ndembu village was to endure over time. To achieve this aim, ensuring transmission of the chieftom between the senior adults of the different active generations in a consensual form was necessary – a particularly difficult task since the vacancy left by a chief's death meant the emergence of a potential conflict between those elders wishing to acquire the chieftom. On the surface this would seem little different from other social contexts. For particular structural reasons, however, this conflict was lived by the Ndembu in an acute and irremediable way, which made it difficult to achieve the ideal of a village that persisted for a long time.

In 64 villages included in a quantitative sample undertaken by Turner, just one had lasted twelve generations. The average duration of a village was six generations and, in the 1950s, Mukanza village had been in existence for nine generations.

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12. In the 1980s and 1990s, James Pritchett (2001) researched the same region, comparatively valorising the data obtained by Turner. He focused on the question of social change in a region affected, centrally or peripherally, by the wars that preceded the independence of the former colonies and the innumerable conflicts and problems that followed and fundamentally transformed the nature of African societies' relationships in the world. Observing that the Lunda-Ndembu spoke of themselves as a people who had known how to maintain their traditions, his research reveals the processes of memory and management of choice that articulated the transformations with the construction of cultural continuities. "The Lunda have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for experimenting with and modifying all their systems in response to both external pressures and internal desires" (Pritchett 2001, 35).

The reasons for the conflict between ideal value and social reality that involved all the Ndembu were identified by Turner as the combination of the multilinearity rule and the virilocal marriage rule. The residential base of the villages was organized according to the principle of multilinearity: in other words, inheritance rights were transmitted to the new generation by the lineage's female ascendants.<sup>13</sup> However, the virilocal marriage rule meant that women after marrying would go to live in the village of the husband's matrilineage. As a result, matrilineally-related male kin wishing to stay together and ensure the cohesion of village life had to import women and export sisters. By moving to the husband's matrilineage's village and raising their children in it, women and their offspring were, however, permanently subject to their brothers' desire for them to return to the village in which they had been born and raised. This led to groups supporting one of their brothers, the senior man from the matrilineage of the village who aspired to the chieftom. For this reason, the group of uterine siblings was seen by Turner as the primary social unit to threaten a village with rupture. Not by chance, Turner tells us that the divorce rate was high among the Ndembu and that the circulation of individuals between villages was intense, based not only on kinship ties but also on the personal ties created in the networks woven by the constant ritual activities.

This latent tendency towards conflict that would lead to the potential rupture of the alliance between lineages and the breaking up of a village was counterbalanced by other mechanisms: if the virilocal marriage lasted, which was the case of Mukanza village, the children raised in the father's village would merge with the kin of the mother and father in a genealogical generation that traversed the matricentric family, uniting cross cousins and parallel cousins. The connection was thus assured by the marriages between cross cousins or by the marriages between alternate generations. The situation of Mukanza village was typical of this search for equilibrium since the principal wife of its chief Mukanza Kabinda – a man from the Nyachintang'a matrilineage dominant in the village – was Nyamukola, two generations below him and a member of the Malabu matrilineage. The marriage thus emblematically sealed the alliance between the two matrilineages who composed the unity of the village.

All of this, however, was continually undermined. The conflict between the values guiding the ideal duration of the villages and the reality of their schism, much more frequent than desired, led to the fertile concept of social drama. It also instituted the dramatic nature organizing the

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13. Turner observes that structural amnesia would typically begin above the ancestors significant to the living members of the village's matrilineage.

narrative of *Schism and Continuity* itself. Latently or openly, the question on when and how Mukanza village will split is kept in suspense by Turner over the course of his book. In one of its key moments, he remarks:

On a number of occasions during my field-work I became aware of marked disturbance in the social life of the particular group I happened to be studying at the time. The whole group might be radically cloven into two conflicting factions; the quarrelling parties might comprise some but not all of its members; or disputes might be merely interpersonal in character. Disturbance in short had a variable range of social inclusiveness. After a while I began to detect a pattern in these eruptions of conflict: I noticed phases in their development which seemed to follow one another in a more or less regular sequence. These eruptions, which I call 'social dramas,' have 'processional form.' I have provisionally divided the social processes which constitute the social drama into four major phases: [...] (V. Turner 1957/1996, 91).

These phases were: (1) breach; (2) crisis; (3) redressive (regenerative) action; (4) re-integration or recognition of the schism. Based on this perception, Turner formulates the dramatic nature of the social process under way, taking classic tragedy as a reference point:

The situation in a Ndembu village closely parallels that found in Greek drama where one witnesses the helplessness of the human individual before the Fates: but in this case the Fates are the necessities of the social process (V. Turner 1957/1996, 94).

### **THE EMERGENCE OF RITUAL AMID THE SOCIAL DRAMA**

In a perceptive essay, Clifford Geertz (1997) indicated how the analogy between social life and drama/theatre has existed in the social sciences for a long time, both in the ritual theory of drama found in classical studies (Harrison 1908) and in the idea of life as a theatre with the relatively conscious performance of roles by social actors, as formulated in depth by Erving Goffman (1985). As Geertz (1997) emphasized, however, in Victor Turner's work the idea of drama emerges as a conceptual metaphor applied extensively and systematically, not incidentally, and in a genuinely dramaturgical form: what matters is doing, not pretending, exploring the possibilities for transforming experience into new directions.

Five of the dramas narrated by Turner are interlinked and emerging from them is the remarkable character Sandombu, one of the senior adults of the Nyachintang'a lineage, the same as the chief Mukanza Kabinda. From the first drama narrated, Sandombu appears to aspire to the chieftom, accusing others or being accused himself of witchcraft, alternately withdrawing from village life and then returning. Here I pick out social drama V (157-168), narrated and analysed in Chapter V, in which the senior elder Sandombu accuses his mother-in-law Nyamukola of witchcraft. She is a member of the Malabu lineage and wife to chief Mukanza Kabinda of the Nyachintang'a lineage. Note that the regeneration phase of this drama, focused on the Chihamba ritual, is explored in detail by Victor Turner (1957/1996) in Chapter X of his book. Organized by Sandombu himself, the main patient/adept of this ritual was his mother-in-law Nyamukola.

Before we turn to Chihamba, I focus on the conceptual richness of social drama. Max Gluckman (1957/1996; 1990) praised Turner's thesis and strongly welcomed the processual nature of drama, stressing the value of the idea that the social bond occurred not in spite of conflicts but through them. Other conceptual dimensions deserve mentioning, though, and make the concept of social drama a veritable plethora of new analytic pathways opened by Turner over his anthropological trajectory.

Here I highlight four other dimensions. The first is the tension between latent conflict and its manifest expression as feelings that, individually experienced, become collectively elaborated over the sequence of dramatic phases. The second is the expansion and increasingly public nature of the relational crisis that leads to the drama's eclosion. From this process gradually emerges the reflexive nature of the conduct of the main actors, indicating the subjectivation of Ndembu values enabled by making explicit and verbally elaborating the tensions in course. The third is the narrative nature of the drama: the sequence of actions is always directly or indirectly narrated by the research in an authentically dramaturgical strategy. Ultimately the dramas are not the direct apprehension of a reality. They are narrative transpositions of a fictional nature – as Susan Langer (1953/2003) apprehends, the *poesis* of drama. A social process observed and related in its different versions according to the viewpoints of the main social actors taking part in it, transformed into characters. Everything is then analysed by the researcher, who orders the sequence of actions in a dramaturgical form in the final authorial narrative. This authorial strategy becomes particularly clear when we, the readers, are surprised to learn, thanks to Turner's preface to the 1968 edition of *Schism and Continuity*, that the much-anticipated breakup of the Mukanza village never occurred. The author tells that, contrary to what he had supposed when writing his book, Mukanza Kabinda remained chief for a long time and his marriage to Nyamukola was enduring. He died in 1967 and was succeeded without

major conflicts by Kasonda, an elder from the Nyaghintan'ga sub-lineage and Mukanza's maternal nephew. A fourth dimension, which leads to the closure of the central argument of this text, is the strategic place occupied by ritual symbolization in the regenerative phase of drama, explored by the analysis of the Chihamba ritual in Chapter X, entitled "The politically integrative function of ritual." This critical chapter examines symbols in ritual action, displaying their unconscious dimensions and ambivalence, as well as the author's great interest in the body and in the dimensions of revelation, *communitas*, and performance present in the ritual.

### **CHIHAMBA AND KAVULA**

The "cults of affliction" are curing rituals designed to rebalance the physical and mental health of the patients/adepts since, as in psychoanalysis, among the Ndembu all patients are potential healers. The aim is to transform disturbance into a curative power. Participation in the cult to effect the desired cure inevitably turns an adept gradually into an expert in the ritual's secrets. Everything takes place within the worldview of the Ndembu, which associates misfortunes, diseases, and afflictions with the action of spirits of dead ancestors.

Turner considered these rituals key to understanding the Ndembu feeling of belonging to a single people, distinct from the other neighbours with whom they maintained numerous contacts. Encapsulating this idea, he writes: "The ultimate unity of all Ndembu is expressed in the composition of ritual assemblies" (V. Turner 1957/1996, 290). As Gluckman would observe in his eulogistic preface to the 1956 edition, it amounts to constituting a "community of suffering" (M. Gluckman 1957/1996, XIX).

The principle of the curative cults is to "bring [the offended ancestor] back to memory" (V. Turner 1957/1996, 295). Chihamba, the main cult of affliction of the Ndembu, was considered "very heavy;" "a spirit that has 'come out in Chihamba' can kill the person it afflicts;" "a sort of compendium of all the misfortunes that can happen to a person" (V. Turner 1957/1996, 303 and 304).

The Turners witnessed 31 performances of 15 types of affliction cults and the author describes in detail the Chihamba that he saw during his second stay among the Ndembu, in 1953/1954. This ritual process involved various phases. Its main sponsor was Sandombu while its main patient was Nyamukola, the sick wife of Mukanza Kabinda, accused of witchcraft in drama V by her son-in-law, Sandombu, and made ill by the pressure she had felt as a result. In this ritual, Turner recorded 71 adepts/candidates

originating from 20 different villages, belonging to seven different regions. The spectators in the public phases numbered as high as 400 one night.

The ritual's hierarchy distinguished the senior adepts who conducted the sequence of stages in their proper order from the patients-initiates to be cured. The desired cure was set in motion by the remembering and naming of the ancestral spirit afflicting each patient.<sup>14</sup> The divinatory mechanisms was not what drew Turner's attention in Chapter X, but the strange figure-artifact Kavula, a spirit with an independent existence. His name derives from an ancient term used both for destructive lightning and the rain fertilizing cassava and other crops. Kavula articulated the themes of destruction and death with those of renewal and cure, transiting between one semantic domain and the other.

In the redressive phase of Chihamba, performed by one of the senior adepts in disguise, Kavula acted like a clown. In a "throaty voice," he mocked and insulted the candidates/patients in the house of the main patient/relative being cured in the ritual. He spoke in profanities and, with strange questions, attributed an exclusive ritual name to each of the patients/initiates. The following night, Kavula, now treated as the original ancestor of the Ndembu (Mwantiyanvwa), humiliated the neophytes, who crawled towards him in worship. Next, though, each of the neophytes, as instructed by one of the senior adepts, would on reaching Kavula – now a white image on a leaf-covered altar – stand up and "kill Kavula," that is, strike his head with a rattle especially made for the purpose. Kavula's 'death' finally removed the sickness and, by instigating health and fertility (V. Turner 1957/1996, 304), corresponded to the patient/adept's acquisition of the capacity to cure.

By condensing a simultaneously benevolent and oppressive ancestral authority, Kavula emerges in Victor Turner's (1967/2005) exegesis as a foreshadowing of the principal axes of the theory of symbol in ritual action elaborated in the first chapter of *The Forest of Symbols*: dynamic and efficacy, multivocality, condensation, and the differentiation between manifest expression and latent content, associated with apprehending affective ambivalence.

Turner would resume the examination of the Chihamba ritual in two texts written in 1961 and 1962, respectively: "Some notes on the symbolism of Chihamba" and "Chihamba, the White Spirit," both later published in *Revelation and Divination* (V. Turner 1975). When we gather together these diverse apparitions of Chihamba in Turner's work, its multivocal nature

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14. *Revelation and Divination* (V. Turner 1975) explores this theme. Incidentally, the book is dedicated to Muchona, the curer discussed in the beautiful Chapter VI of *The Forest of Symbols* (V. Turner 1967/2005), "Muchona the Hornet: Interpreter of Religion."

becomes clear, alongside the role of theoretical condensation contained in its detailed ethnographic description. In the introduction to this latter book, Turner narrates how the “majesty of the Freudian symbolism of the unconscious” had emerged for him as a central paradigm when he read Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1900/1997) during his fieldwork among the Ndembu. In addition, Chihamba – the affliction ritual promoted in the regenerative phase of a social drama – is associated with the Ndembu sense of totality, no longer understood here in its sociological dimension. Focused on the suffering and sickness experienced and treated collectively, Chihamba induces the anti-structural state of *communitas* among the Ndembu. At the same time, in seeking an individual cure, Chihamba also emerges – and in this sense especially by the figure-symbol Kavula – as an expression of the possibility of direct and united connection of the subjects with the flow of ritual experience. From this approach evolves both the metaphysical and religious preoccupations of Victor Turner and his keen interest in performance, seen as the culmination of a lived process. Kavula! Victor Turner, restless ancestor.

**TRANSLATION**  
David Rodgers.

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