



Rituals

“As a social animal, man is a ritual animal”, emphasizes the British anthropologist Mary As a Douglas. “If ritual is suppressed in one form it crops up in others, more strongly the more intense the social interaction.” Modernization, urbanization, and globalization: nothing can be done about it: the life of social communities is always based on rites and rituals, far beyond religious matters. Just take a look at the Dance Biennial Parade in Lyon. The popular enthusiasm that it generated when it was created in 1996 convinced the organizers that it was essential to make this one of the highlights of each edition, a sort of civic ritual that would offer performers, amateur dancers and citizens of the Lyon agglomeration the opportunity to congregate in the centre of the city (Bonus ITW Dujardin). Since the 2012 edition, the parade has been programmed to take place on the first day of the festival and, as such, acts as an opening ritual.

1. Putting Order into Disorder

In sacred dances, like for example in *Odissi*, one of the classical Indian styles from the tradition of temple dances, the greeting ritual – referred to as *namaskaram* – is used to mark the transition between phases of everyday life time and that of dance. The dancer carries this out before and after every lesson, every rehearsal and every performance. This short sequence of gestures indicates a transition between the profane and the sacred. It also boosts the performer’s mental and corporal availability. Even today, *Odissi* dancers, like **Madhavi Mudgal** here, who create group works, engage in this ritual unflinchingly.

On the island of **Bali**, most of the dances relate episodes from the *Ramayana*, one of the great sacred Hindu texts. A wide range of rituals that ensure the sacred aspect of the celebration must be put into play to embody gods and goddesses, kings and other mythological figures. A set of codes relating to the arrangement of the space and the orchestra, known as “Gong”, evolve from this. Here, the musicians escort the performers who arrive, who engage in a court dance, in the village square in front of the temple.

The rituals that structure certain dances in Bali and in India address a function: to organize reality in such a way so it becomes intelligible given the ungraspability of the world. The etymology of the word “ritual” refers, moreover, to an idea of order: order among humans, among gods, among planets. Rites are used, as such, to put order into disorder, to give meaning to the accidental and the incomprehensible in life, to facilitate our understanding and apprehension of the world.

Although they are part of age-old traditions, they can also be used for creations and reinterpretations, depending on the intention of those who produce them. The choreographic writing of the South African, **Vincent Mantsoe**, who has been residing in



France for several years now, blends elements drawn from healing rituals, which he was initiated in, with movements from Zulu and Xhosa dances, from Tai Chi and from modern-day western techniques. **Kim Maeja** uses a similar approach. Her gestural vocabulary is inspired by Buddhist ceremonies and Korean folk dances and shamanic dances.

2. Achieving Change

By putting order into chaos, ritual strives to act on reality. The gestures and actions that are performed during the ritual are not executed, as such, for themselves but with the intent of stimulating an action on something else, something that is inaccessible. This is why ceremonies that aim to establish an exchange with the spirits, divinities and the beyond require preparatory rituals. The altered state of consciousness, which includes possession dances and trances, requires a ritual system that is able to trigger individual transformation. In this *Hauka* ceremony, filmed in 1965 by the ethnologist **Jean Rouch**, the participants become as one. Entranced by the repetitive rhythm of a stringed instrument, they whirl round and round until they are “taken over” by the spirit that they personify. The *Gnawa* trance, a Moroccan religious ceremony, is preceded by preliminary ritual elements: musical procession, musicians’ dances. The latter then consecrate the area with incense whilst food is brought as an offering, inviting the genies to reveal themselves.

The states of the body in which the Japanese **Sankai Juku** dancers and the Taiwanese **Legend Lin** dancers move and their incredible slowness, are the result of intense work on body awareness, on breathing, on releasing and on the relationship with gravity. They appertain to a whole other corporeality. As such, prior to walking on stage, the performers need a long period of preparation, which is deemed a ritual. They meditate, cover their bodies with a white ointment which, in turn, characterizes this transformation of the being. What’s more, Ushio Amagatsu never discloses the recipe of the ointment that he prepares for the **Sankai Juku** dancers.

3. From Ritual to Performance

The visual power of images, their spiritual resonance, the quality of the dancers’ presence, dancers that appear to be in total communion, their hieratic gestures, give these performances an allure, a sense of ritual ceremony. Other modern-day choreographic works can be qualified in the same way. The presence of symbolic objects and elements (sand, water, flowers, etc.) is one of the reasons. In *b.c. janvier 1545* by **Christian Rizzo**, the myriad of candles that are placed on the black console conjures up the lighting of a church. The scenography and the play on light also contribute to centre staging a religious atmosphere, like in *Birds with Skymirrors*, by the Samoan **Lemi Bonifacio**. It is also by invoking slow, grave gestures, founded on solemnity that the dancer becomes a celebrant. Last but not least, the very dramaturgy of the performance



and the scenic configuration reproduce schemas that are specific to rituals. **Raimund Hoghe** begins his performances with a circular promenade, that he undertakes himself, at a leisurely pace, alone on the stage. Through this inaugural movement, he consecrates the dance space and illustrates that here, something is going to take place, in front of the audience. Something intense.

The ritual, by definition mobilizes the physicality of those who accomplish it, through a sequence of codified actions that are organized over a period of time, leads us to deduce that it constitutes, as such, a source of inspiration for choreographers, above and beyond the significations that it can have. “It’s like choreography, it’s well defined”, explains Raimund Hoghe, for whom all theatrical performances are a matter of ritual.

4. A Work Metamorphosed as a Ritual.

Hoghe produced his version of the “*Sacre du Printemps*” (*Rite of Spring*) in 2004. Like almost 200 other choreographers throughout the world, at a certain point in his career, the German artist encountered the masterpiece that Stravinsky created back in 1913. The Russian composer confided in his memoirs that the idea of this work came to him through a vision. “I caught a glimpse of the performance of this majestic, sacred Pagan rite: wise old sages, sitting in a circle, observing the dance upon the death of a young girl, who they sacrifice to entice the God of Spring to be favourable to them”.

Devoid of any intrigue, the ballet was structured in two parts. In the first, entitled “Adoration de la terre” (Adoration of the Earth), an entire race, divided into different age groups, celebrate the Earth’s forces and implore nature to be reborn. “The Sacrifice”, describes the second part of the ritual that this population, which existed in a far-off Slavic era, engages in. The ‘chosen one’, designated among a group of young girls, initiates a sacred dance in front of an audience of elders before succumbing and, as such, offering up her youth.

On Stravinsky’s partition, with its striking rhythm and dissonant chords, Vaslav Nijinsky created a choreography that resolutely broke away from the classical vocabulary codes: en-dedans postures, sharp-featured arms, bust-flexing, leg-trembling... The modernity of the work on both musical and choreographic levels provoked a real scandal that led to clashes between spectators. A sort of Battle of Hernani. After only eight performances, the ballet fell into oblivion, whilst Stravinsky’s partition continued to be performed. It was not before 1987 that the **original version**, Nijinsky’s version, was re-established.

Before this date, back in 1959, the young Maurice Béjart rose to the challenge that had been set for him: to create a ballet to this frighteningly complex music. This time round, it was a triumph. Since then, a great many choreographers have produced their “version”. Because, in its very essence, the work sets the artist in front of existential



questioning: the role of the human being in the universe and in the social community. It pushes mankind as far as it can. It exhorts mankind to express what its dance is viscerally founded on. For Angelin Preljocaj, who produced his version in 2001, “the specificity of the Sacre (Rite) is to reveal [...] the intimate of every choreographer who encounters it.” This profound, difficult and occasionally painful confrontation between the artist and himself forces him to take an important artistic step. Through this the Sacre (Rite) became, as such, a rite of passage through which the choreographer declares his maturity. The now currently-used expression: “faire son sacre” (to go through a rite of passage), just like one would receive communion, confirms this.

Heddy Maalem did just this in 2005, which was qualified as “African Rite”, in particular as a result of the West African origin of the fourteen performers. Marked by the urban chaos of the Nigerian capital, where he had resided, the choreographer built on Stravinsky’s music to reveal the violence of the world, and the interweaving of life and death. The theme of copulation, at the heart of B ejart’s intention in his Sacre (Rite) of 1959, also arrived on the scene. Men and women meet, copulate passionately, led by twins, whose veneration in West Africa is part of the celebration of the mystery of life. As for Maryse Delente, she relates the awakening of women to sexuality, the explosion of an unknown desire, both exhilarating and frightening for these young women who waver between innocence and perversity. The red of their dresses illustrates the colour of the ultimate sacrifice: by losing their virginity, they gain access to the cycle of fertility.



To go further:

Martine Segalen, *Rites et rituels contemporains*, Nathan Publications, Paris, 1998.

Mary Douglas, *De la souillure : Essais sur les notions de pollution et de tabou (Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo – Routledge, 2003)*, Paris, Maspero, 1971.

Mary Douglas, "La ritualisation du quotidien", in *Ethnologie Française*, 1996, XXVI,2.
Igor Stravinsky, *Chroniques de ma vie (Chronicle of My Life – V. Gollancz, 1936)*, [1962], Denoël-Gonthier, 1971.

Credits :

Excerpts selection

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Text and bibliography selection

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Production

Maison de la Danse

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The "Rituals" course was launched thanks the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation.