

TRANSFORMATIONS OF WORSHIP AND LITURGY IN URBAN AFRICAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This paper attempts to describe a few of the general characteristics of African worship in conjunction with certain aspects of African spirituality, namely Ubuntu, Ubunye and Amandla. This is followed up by a theological-liturgical perspective on the phenomenon of townships, and how this phenomenon impacts on the characteristics of African worship that are described here. From this a profile of “township worship” is suggested, utilising keywords inherent in the concept of liminality: anti-structure, communitas and imagination.

1. WORSHIPPING WITH THE BODY

It has often been said that Protestant worship services are sometimes so inclined to be centred on the act of (cognitive) preaching, and that the latter deteriorates into a lecture with mere liturgical addenda (Meyer-Blanck 2005: 134). One could probably describe many Protestant services, even today, in the words of JF White: “*the most cerebral of the Western traditions... prolix and verbose... overwhelmingly cerebral*” (1989: 58 f.; cf. also Wheeler 2003: 348).

In part, this focus on preaching and listening, on teaching and receiving, could be ascribed to a certain understanding of *sola Scriptura* and the confession that the Spirit works through the Word. According to Wepener, “*The Reformatory saying Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei is still mainly and exclusively interpreted as the preaching being an auditory medium, and something like See/ Smell/ Feel/ Taste verbi Dei est (also) verbum Dei, is largely downplayed*” (Wepener 2002:13; cf. also Cilliers, JH 2007: 63 f.)

But the latter – seeing, smelling, feeling and tasting the Word – are not strange to African spirituality and therefore African worship services. Generally speaking, expression via the body² takes place more spontaneously in African worship services than is normally

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² In African anthropology there is no such thing as a “soul” that is something separate from the body. Body simply is soul, and soul body. Therefore African worship services, with their emphasis on body, can also be essentially described as “soulful”. Indeed, “soul” is a primary aesthetic criterion for the way that persons participate (bodily) in worship (cf. McGann 2002: 7).

the case in Western liturgies. Africans have an almost natural or instinctive bodily awareness, particularly also in a communal context. In the so-called Independent African Churches, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and in some congregations of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, the African culture (spirituality) of bodily and sensory expression is clearly illustrated in the liturgy. Music with rhythmical musical instruments, dance and bodily movements all form part of the pulsating expression of faith. Perhaps Romano Guardini had Africa in mind when he wrote the following: “*The people who really live by the liturgy will come to learn that the bodily movements, the actions, and the material objects which it employs are all of the highest significance. It offers great opportunities of expression, of knowledge, and of spiritual experience; it is emancipating in its action, and capable of presenting a truth far more strongly and convincingly than can the mere word of mouth*” (1997: 60).

One is reminded of the incident related by a colleague about the old man who could only shuffle his feet, while the others in his clan were dancing vigorously. He was mumbling something like *mpho, mpho* by himself all the time. When a visitor asked him what the word meant, he said: “*Well, actually it does not mean anything.*” “*But why do you keep on saying this and moving your feet?*” he was asked. “*I am praying with my feet*”, came the answer. In fact, he was performing his prayer through dance, praying and worshipping with his body.

What follows is an attempt to *briefly* describe a few of the general characteristics of this African worship-with-the-body in conjunction with some aspects of African spirituality, namely *Ubuntu*, *Ubunye* and *Amandla*. This will be followed by a *theological-liturgical perspective on the phenomenon of townships*, and how this phenomenon impacts on the characteristics of African worship described here.

2. AFRICAN WORSHIP AS UBUNTU

Briefly put, *Ubuntu* could be called the belief that one is a human being through others (“I am because you are”). The term *Ubuntu* comes from the Zulu and Sotho versions of a traditional African aphorism, often translated as “A person is a person through other persons”: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. Motho ke motho ka batho*. It articulates a basic respect and compassion for others. As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of

conduct or social ethic, both descriptive and prescriptive (Ramose, 1999:49f; Shutte, 1993:46).

Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of relationships. It represents a sort of *web of reciprocal relations* in which subject and object are indistinguishable. Therefore not: “I think, therefore I am”, but rather “I participate, therefore I am.” In participation lies identity. This is particularly true of African worship services. Their very core consists of corporeal engagement and participation.

Small wonder then that dancing is so important in African worship services. It expresses, in a dynamic and corporeal way, the essence of participatory identity. One could even say: “I dance (with you), therefore I am.” We dance ourselves into existence, together. As McGann puts it: “*In contrast to Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am,’ a Black African perception might be summarised, ‘I am, I dance the other.’ In Black Africa, you dance because you feel. And to dance is a verb with precisely that object-complement; you never dance without dancing something or someone. Now, to dance is to uncover reality, to re-create, to fill one’s being with vital force, to live a fuller life, to BE, which, after all, is the highest mode of knowing*” (2002:19).³

In African Christian worship services, based on the spirituality of *Ubuntu*, the congregation forms the primary witness of faith. A sort of *ecclesiological inversion* operates here: instead of the minister or liturgist playing the primary role of inspiring the congregation through words and actions, the congregation as such brings the whole liturgy to life. One could say that a type of *de-clericalisation* takes place: although charismatic leadership is important in the African setting (cf. 4 below), the congregation as such provides the visible embodiment of the life of faith.

In the African tradition, a silent and unresponsive congregation is almost unthinkable. It would in any case contradict the foundations of African spirituality. The responsive congregation takes the worship to its heights, and at the same time inspires the liturgist towards dynamic leadership.

3. AFRICAN WORSHIP AS UBUNYE

³ Research has shown that dance also represents a particular expression of God’s presence for the aboriginal people (*Aborigines*) of Australia: when they dance, God is no longer past time, but realistic presence (Jordan and Tucker 2002: 308).

Coupled with *Ubuntu*, Africans also adhere to the spirit of *Ubunye*, which literally means: we are one. This has to do with the *integration of life*, which also includes the spirit world and the departed ancestors. In Africa life is not divided into compartments, with separate spheres of human existence, for instance, “spiritual” and “secular”. Life as such is spiritual, is perceived as a wholesome, holistic experience, in which all spheres of life interpenetrate. Africans, indeed, have a more systemic understanding of life as a dynamic space for holistic relationships, an integral whole of cosmic and social events. Africans generally adopt a *non-analytical, more integrative* approach to our existence on this planet (cf. Berinyuu 1988:5).

In theological terms one could say that this represents a sacramental world view. The incarnation of Christ underlines the integration of life, and all processes of integration or reintegration in the light of the Christ-event becomes sacramental, mediating life (salvation). According to McGann, “*all aspects of creation can be channels of God’s grace. In contrast to the God often projected in Christian ritual – one who requires reserve, decorum and propriety – Black people have envisioned a God who is lover of singing and dancing, of human expressiveness, of color and dress. Worship that is truly human and truly Godlike requires a broad sensorium that reflects the ‘fertile genius’ of God exhibited in creation*” (2002: 8).

To receive this sacramental mediation of life through all aspects of creation requires the use of all the senses. Therefore African worship services have a natural tendency towards dramatic structuring and artistic expression. Whilst Western, and particularly Protestant, liturgies are still to some extent influenced by a spirit of puritanism, with a denial of corporality, a distrust in anything that could mediate pleasure through the senses, a fear of emotion, etc., African liturgies engage all the senses (ocular, oral, aural, etc.) in a holistic aesthetics of observation and experience: “*There is a natural tendency for interpenetration and interplay, creating a concert or orchestration in which the ear sees, the eye hears, and where one both smells and tastes color, wherein all the senses, unmuted engage in every experience*” (McGann 2002: 18-19).

In Africa a worship service that consists primarily of a liturgist speaking and a congregation listening – in other words a service that appeals mainly to the sense of hearing – is as unthinkable as a service with an unresponsive congregation.

4. AFRICAN WORSHIP AS *AMANDLA*

Amandla literally means power or energy or life-force. It is not that easy to describe. In Africa this power is directly linked to a Divinity⁴ that rules over humanity and determines our fate (Setiloane 1989: 34). This Divine Force penetrates all of reality as a cosmogenic presence, but is not necessarily understood in terms of personhood. It is rather the all-penetrating force that enables individuals and communities to receive and experience life. This ever-active, penetrating force initiates existential experiences of *force vitale*, even to the point that humans in turn strive to exercise power over any force that is perceived to endanger society or the individual's well-being. The (divine) Power empowers.

In the light of this understanding of *Amandla* one could say that the main inclination of religious activity in Africa is to achieve harmony with the Divine Force and the spiritual world(s) related to that. It is all about creating and maintaining spiritual equilibrium. Charismatic leaders are therefore seen as people with power and as people who can generate power. Music⁵ is seen as a key to the effective performance of power. In an African understanding the Spirit (Power) does not descend without music. If there were no music, there can be no power and in fact no worship service. Solo or choral or instrumental music is never an end in itself, but is intended to supercharge a worship service with spiritual energy, with this *force vitale*. And in order for music to achieve this, it needs the space of *Ubuntu* and the notion of *Ubunye*; it needs community and sensory integration.

The term *Amandla* is also associated with the struggle for political freedom. It is a known fact that worship services have been a platform from which many African communities have struggled against oppression, whether it is political, social or economic. In worship services people have been literally *empowered* to act prophetically, but even before that,

⁴ Of course, there is no homogeneity in terms of the understanding of "Divinity" in Africa. It is impossible to go into detail concerning all the nuances of the concept on our continent. For a good overview, cf. Smith, EW 1966. *African Ideas of God*. London: Edinburgh House Press.

⁵ Interestingly enough, Western traditions with their ocular and linear approaches are inclined to be more orientated towards music as *melody*, whilst in African oral cultures it is rather rhythmical and indeed poly-rhythmical structures that create *discontinuity* in the musical score (cf. Katani 2008: 115 f.). The intention of African rhythm is however not to 'disrupt' the flow of the music (as the word 'discontinuity' might suggest); it rather means that the emphasis is not necessarily on *melodious coherence*, but on the impetus that rhythm can provide.

to be reminded of their human dignity, often in the face of a society that structurally proposed and actively enforced the diametrical opposite. Through song and dance, music and corporeal participation, people were brought into contact with the power of the Divine and his liberating acts. In short, a service that is experienced by African congregants as non-empowering is as much a non-event as a service without communal, multi-sensory responses.

5. TOWNSHIPS: SPACES FOR LIMINAL WORSHIP

Townships could rightly be described as in-between places, inhabited by people coming from rural areas and customs, and being *en route* to the city. They no longer belong to the past, but they have not yet arrived at the promised land of the future. The reality of this intermediate state is, furthermore, that it has been forced upon the majority of people living in these townships, firstly by the policies of apartheid, and secondly after the dawn of democracy (1994), when even more people flocked to the townships in search of employment. It could therefore rightly be called a “coerced in-betweenness”, which could also be described as “marginalisation” or “being coerced to remain on the edge” (cf. Lee 2001: 98). Townships are places of *displacement*.⁶

A township is not the same as a “normal” *urban* area. It is even further removed from being a *city*, although some of them, like Soweto (south west of Johannesburg), are massive in terms of population and dimensions. Soweto is, however, also not a *megalopolis*, with skyscrapers, tarred roads and modern infrastructure. It is simply a massive township, where contrasts have been condensed into a geographical area to form a unique blend of “urbanisation”.

Townships are places of paradox *par excellence*. The so-called informal houses or shacks, for instance, may appear shoddy from the outside, but a visit to one of them may be quite a surprising experience. Many of them are quite spacious and meticulously neat. For the outsider it may seem as if there is no sense of community or even order, but the reality is often quite the opposite. One might have the impression that the townships are not safe places to visit, especially at night, but most inhabitants will inform you to the

⁶ They could also be called places of *dislocation*. Ironically the Afrikaans word used for townships during the apartheid era was “*lokasie*”, which means *location*. It was, however, a place where people were located against their will and should rather have been called “*dislokasies*” (*dislocations*)!

contrary. The marks of globalisation can be detected everywhere, with modern media technology such as cell phones, computers and television setting the trend.

It is important to realise that not all townships are the same. Some, like Soweto, are experiencing a boom as never before, with new houses and massive malls shooting up like mushrooms. Others, like Alexandra, are still struggling with harsh issues such as poverty, unemployment, crime and social disruption. Whilst many Africans have joined the growing middle class, with more prosperous lifestyles, higher incomes and more luxurious housing, others are sinking ever deeper into the pit of poverty, and yet others have become multi-millionaires, seemingly overnight.

Perhaps one could say that townships represent a type of in-between culture, or even embody the *schizophrenia of an in-between experience*, with people being sandwiched in between contrasting, and sometimes radically different, layers of society. People in townships exist in the in-between zones of poverty and wealth, the sacral (tradition) and the secular, the group and the individual, certain hierarchical traditions and democracy, indigenous religion and (Christian) faith, violence (power) and the manipulative impact of capital, owning and smuggling, being part of an extended family and being reduced to a nuclear family, etc.

This *schizophrenia of an in-between experience* has, of course, found its way into township art – one of many interesting phenomena originating in the townships. In a remarkable art work by Western Cape based artist Willie Bester, you see the typical shacks of the township, a collage of current newspaper clippings (on news that has an impact on the township), the ingenuity of small business and entrepreneurial skills operative in townships (the centrally placed lorry with goods being sold from its side), objects signifying typical township life (self-made musical instrument, children in the street, etc.); but overriding all of this, or rather encircling all of these, you see the faces – reminiscent of African masks.

What was the artist trying to portray by these? In my opinion, exactly this *schizophrenia of an in-between experience*. Some of the masks have police hats on, whilst others are like babies, sucking on dummies; some are wearing sun glasses, whilst others are adorned with traditional headdress and painted in traditional colours; some have serene expressions, whilst others seem to be filled with fear. In short, the masks exemplify all

Essentially liminality implies an ambiguous phase between two situations or statuses. Often this in-between space or liminal displacement is filled with potential and/or danger. It breathes *“a sense of displacement, that sense of being in no man’s land, where the landscape appears completely different, there is no discernable road map, and where the journeyer is jolted out of normalcy”* (Franks and Meteyard 2007: 216).

Characteristically the liminal phase is constituted by the convergence or interweaving of qualities of both categories between which it is sandwiched: *“Since the liminal is neither fully one type of space (category) nor the other, it will take on aspects of both; it is this indeterminacy of quality and therefore predictability that creates the aspect of danger”* (Kunin 1998: 30).

Liminality therefore represents a highly creative phase or space, where the combination of new forms and relations is possible. This heightened sense of creative possibility is articulated poignantly by Sang Hyun Lee, reflecting on the experiences of Koreans in borderline situations in America:

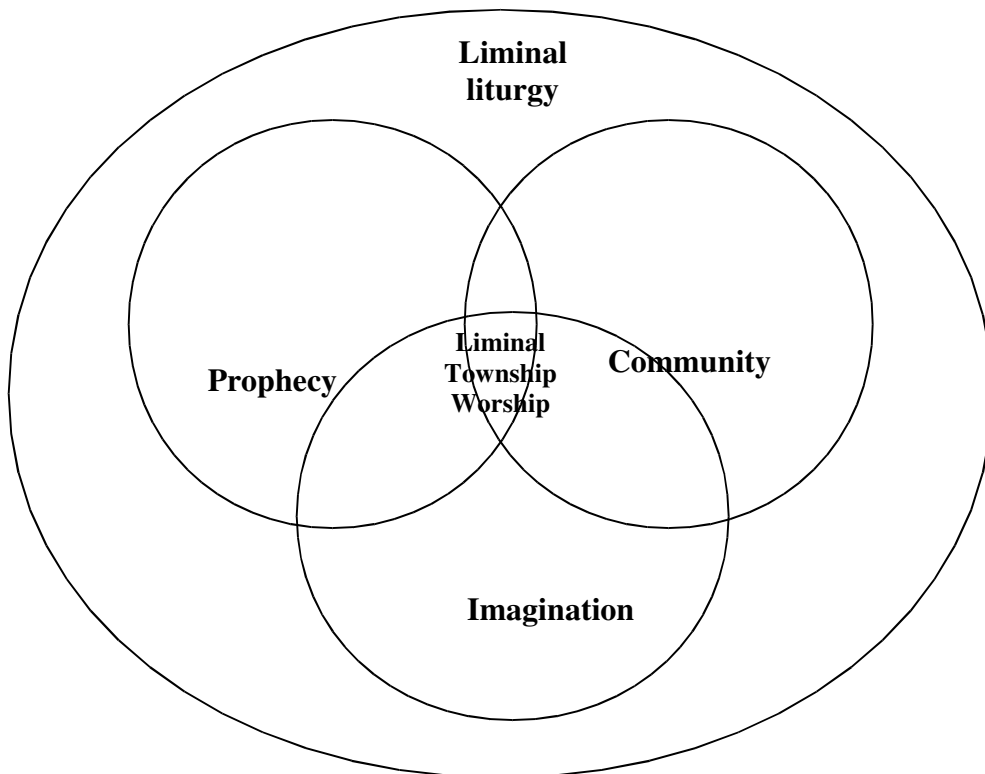
Released for a moment from social structure, persons in liminality can relate to each other simply and fully as human beings and experience an intense quality of human communion usually impossible in structured society... It is in such moments of liminal communitas... that persons can be free enough to reflect on their lives or society, envision new ideas and ways of doing things, and dream new dreams. Powerful rituals latent with ultimate meanings, new or old insights, and alternative ways of interpreting reality can have their powerful impact on persons in liminal communitas.
(2001: 98)

In liminality the borders remain porous, open to all sides. Here is given the possibility of (new) revelation and transformation, of dying and living, hope and resurrection. In a nutshell: in the liminal space one experiences both the fullness and emptiness of presence and absence (cf. Friedland and Hecht 2006: 35).

I am of the opinion that the township phenomenon, so typical of (South) Africa, can make a meaningful contribution towards a deeper understanding of what liminal liturgy

entails. After all, scriptures also seem to be filled with experiences of, and metaphors for, liminality – the most representative probably being the tomb, the wilderness and exile (Franks and Meteyard 2007: 218-220). Liminality is without question part and parcel of the life of faith, and therefore also of the life of worship.

If one looks at township worship, the distinctions made by Victor Turner might prove to be a helpful tool in understanding the essence of what happens (or should happen) in worship services taking place in these areas. I would like to revisit his concept of *pilgrimage* in terms of its keywords: anti-structural (prophecy), new community (communitas), and possibility (imagination). Perhaps the *essence of liminal township worship* could be illustrated graphically as follows:



5.1 Township worship as prophecy

In our description of African worship as *Amandla* (4), reference was made to the empowering effect of charismatic leaders, music, etc. also in *inter alia* the (political) struggle for liberation. In essence the struggle for freedom in South Africa was anti-

structural and anti-status quo; it was fundamentally prophetic. South Africa has indeed produced a remarkable number of “prophets” agitating for liberation.

Many of these figures were devoted Christians, and many of them found their spiritual power in African worship services indeed characterised by experiences of extreme liminality and marginalisation. One could say that their passion was to restore the equilibrium of power, so misused during the time of apartheid. Many of the “worship services” took on the form of protest marches, literally of *pilgrimages*, with masses of people marching on to government buildings and institutions, being lead by charismatic leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Beyers Naude and others. These leaders symbolised anti-structure and anti-status quo stances through their very being; they embodied the longing for the restoration of equilibrium.

Many of the rituals and much as the music of worship services served as tools and media of empowerment during apartheid: there was no sharp distinction between religious and political and social content and intent. Worship services were simultaneously religious and political, true to the African spirituality of *Ubunye* (cf. 5.3 below). Worship services were understood to be confronting and undermining the apartheid government in a subversive, prophetic manner. Therefore many people could indeed describe our (relatively peaceful) transition to democracy in 1994 as a miracle, *wrought by God Himself*.

It is a valid question whether contemporary worship services, especially also those in spaces of liminality (as in the townships) are still generating anti-structural and anti-status quo prophecy. The dawn of democracy could be described as a period of transition in our country, as a liminal phase, but clearly we have not left it behind us. We are still in transition, with many burning issues such as poverty, HIV and AIDS, unemployment and especially the phenomenon of ongoing crime that plagues our country. Perhaps it would not be an unrealistic prediction to make that some day, soon, there will be marches again, and new pilgrimages led by new charismatic leaders to government buildings and (new) government institutions. Perhaps worship services will once again serve as bases for empowerment, as the equilibrium of power has clearly not been established, at least not at grassroots levels.

5.2 Township worship as community

In our description of African worship services as *Ubuntu* (2), we made mention of the importance of (corporeal) participation, often expressed in dancing, and underlining the fact that the congregation serves as the primary witness of faith. Through a type of *ecclesiological inversion or de-clericalisation*, the liturgy is given back to the people; the people themselves become the liturgists. This innate sense of community is strengthened by the notion of liminality, in which the potential for the creation of new communities is intrinsically imbedded.

It can be said that throughout the apartheid years worship services, especially also in the townships, offered certain markers for identification and a sense of belonging to congregants. Relationships of trust were formed here, and these relationships in turn facilitated communication and the coordination of activities in society and contributed towards the wellbeing of participants (cf. Cilliers and Wepener 2007: 37-55). They often offered the only space, the only community of solidarity and comfort, where the cries of the struggle could be articulated and heard. Often church buildings became organisational spaces for struggle activities, but more importantly: the corporate liturgy played a decisive role in reaffirming human dignity and equality. The Eucharist – to quote but one example – presented the story of the suffering of the people in a symbolic way, and in doing so not only re-interpreted their story, but re-configured their reality and generated new spiritual endurance.⁷ The sense of belonging (*Ubuntu*) strengthened the sense of identity.

It is interesting to note how often dancing in the church (a powerful expression of corporeal community) was followed up by dancing in the street. The dance of worship became a dance of protest (the so-called *toyitoyi*). As a matter of fact, the communal dancing not only had anti-status quo (prophetic) meaning, but was a deep expression of solidarity, of *Ubuntu*. South Africa was not only transformed through the skills and spirituality of charismatic leaders, but also through dancing. Africans danced their way into democracy.

Although Africans will probably always have this sense of belonging, it remains an open question whether contemporary worship services are not straining under external

⁷ Cf. in this regard also Robert Schreier, *Reconciliation. Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*. The Boston Theological Institute Series Volume 3, Maryknoll, NY (Orbis Books) 1992, 55&74-76.

influences such as globalisation and Americanisation, up to the point where the sense of community is fragmented by a spirit of individualism, consumerism and privatisation. What has always been an integral part of township worship, and indeed what is of paramount importance for South Africa in its present phase of transition, namely a sense of community, seems to be under attack. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the common goal of struggling against apartheid has now been diversified into addressing many, seemingly overwhelming goals, for instance, poverty, HIV and AIDS, unemployment, the collapse of our value system, crime and corruption.

5.3 Township worship as imagination

In our description of African worship services as *Ubunye* (3) the point was made that the spirituality of holism and the integration of life represents a sacramental world view in which life (salvation) is mediated through all the channels of God's creation, and which can only be perceived and observed in a multi-sensory way. *Ubunye* articulates the reality, and therefore also the dream, of being one.

As we have seen, liminal worship services are filled with open possibilities. They represent a place of imagination and anticipation. Alternatives are articulated, dreamt about and prayed for – not unlike the famous “I have a dream” speech by Martin Luther King. When people gathered in township worship services during apartheid, it was not only to lament the horrible state of our country, but also to meditate on, to sing about, and to dance towards a new society. The dream of ultimately being one (*Ubunye*) permeated the worship services, exactly because of the liminal character that it of necessity had.

This imaginative anticipation of an alternative society is, of course, now more urgent than ever. Whether contemporary liturgy succeeds in creating the spaces for this to happen, however, is an open question. Perhaps the township artists have a keener sense of anticipation than many liturgists or even congregations. To mention but one example: the art work of Cape Town-based artist Velile Soha, pictured below, may seem on the surface like just another colourful depiction of a typical township scene. But there are deeper levels of meaning. On the one hand, it portrays the reality of life in shacks, with virtually no infrastructure such as tarred roads or ablution facilities, and the ever-present danger of

being flooded (especially in the so-called Cape Flats areas during winter). The muddy road beckons the observer to step into this reality.

On the other hand, the figures of the two children playing in the centre are not there just for the sake of an aesthetically pleasing composition. They represent another world where people, also and especially children, can play as one. Therefore the figures are playfully interlocked, exemplifying *Ubuntu*. In the midst (literally) of the harsh realities of township life, the children play as one (literally), pointing towards another possibility, embodying an alternative society.

This effect is strengthened by the reflection of the two figures in the pool of water. The pool not only represents the chaos of a typical flood on the Cape Flats, and the hardships of a muddy Cape winter to go with that, but the calmness of the water is unmistakable. It evokes a sense of serenity; it is a pool of peace in which the imagined and anticipated new society, represented by the playing children, can find its central place. Although the reflection also includes fragments of the old society (shacks), it exudes a sense of new life, of rebirth, of baptism, of a new society under a new heaven...

This is indeed liminal, African liturgy.



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