

Polyrhythmic Preaching

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The rhythm is certainly one of the most fundamental characteristics of the utterance of a language.

R.H. Stetson, linguist

Where I come from we say that rhythm is the soul of life, because the whole universe revolves around rhythm, and when we get out of rhythm, that's when we get into trouble.

Babatunde Olatunji, drummer

Rhythm might be described as to the world of sound what light is to the world of sight. It shapes and gives new meaning.

Edith Sitwell, poet

Meaning and rhythm are interconnected, bound together in Black preaching, like "white on rice" or as "sweetness is to honey."

James Henry Harris, professor

As a drummer for more than forty years, I am acutely aware of rhythm. Rhythm pounds with a thump-thump in my chest and moves with the rise and fall of my breathing as I awake. I walk with a rhythm in my step and talk with a rhythm in my speech. The rising and setting of the sun is a slow rhythm that shapes my daily life. Rhythm is in the rain falling, the swish of windshield wipers, and the booming bass of cars that pass by in my neighborhood. It is in the tick of the clock on my office desk and the chirp of the bird outside my window. Rhythm becomes embodied as I slap a goatskin drumhead or shake a gourd rattle. I am surrounded by rhythm.

Having been a preacher for almost thirty years, I noticed there was also rhythm in my practice of preaching. There were many rhythms, polyrhythms, that I felt resonating in my bones through the cycle of years as a pastor. Liturgical celebrations from Advent to Pentecost created a sacred rhythm to the year. The up and down, back and forth flow of my week had its own pulse. As I prepared and performed a sermon there were accents and improvisation that gave the sermon my own swing. Syncopation regularly occurred between text, preacher, congregation, and social context. The spoken word had a pace, pulse, and pause that gave the sermon a certain "homiletical musicality."¹ I discovered that there was a polyrhythmic character to preaching.

Rhythm can serve preachers as a musical metaphor to reflect on the polyrhythms of their own practice of preaching.² Rhythm is not just a metaphor for drummers or musicians. Everyone experiences rhythm in daily life. And in spite of a popular myth, everyone has rhythm. Some are simply more skilled in the performance of making rhythm. Every preacher has her or his own preaching rhythms. Awareness of the diverse cadences of preaching is the beginning of developing the skills of homiletical polyrhythm. Polyrhythm as a metaphorical groove may lead some preachers to a more multilayered, lively, and rhythmic understanding and practice of proclamation.

Polyrhythm and Preaching

West African drumming is characterized by polyrhythm.³ According to Simha Arom, polyrhythm “consists of the superposition of two or more rhythmic figures, each articulated in such a way that its constituent configurations (as determined by accentuation, changing tone colour, or altering durations) will mesh with those of the remaining figures, and create an effect of perpetual interweaving.”⁴ The repetitive form of polyrhythm has the musical characteristic of an *ostinato* with “the regular and uninterrupted repetition of a rhythmic...figure, with an unvarying periodicity underlying it.”⁵ Put simply, polyrhythm is two or more beats played simultaneously and in repetition, interlocking and creating a complex texture of sound. It is the multiplicity of interwoven sounds in a repeated pattern that creates not only the richness, but also the meaning of the polyrhythm.

West African polyrhythm is not improvisational. These rhythms are composed of traditional parts played by various drums with differing tones. Improvisation is primarily the performance of the master drummer or soloist, who plays with, over, within, and through the multilayered polyrhythm. Each rhythm within the polyrhythm does not stand on its own, but is interconnected with the other rhythms weaving a tonal tapestry. It is the combination of beats within a polyrhythm that make the rhythm what it is. One rhythm defines another.⁶ Played alone each singular rhythm does not make sense. The combination of contrasting, and at times conflicting, rhythms within a polyrhythm provides the creative tension that drives the beat and gives it a dynamic energy. The skilled drummer must not only be able to play the various parts of a polyrhythm, but play one part in concert and tension with the other parts. Preaching is polyrhythmic. It is more than the isolated preacher performing a solo improvisation on a Sunday morning. Preaching is a complex interplay of diverse rhythms that converge and interlock to create a multilayered practice.⁷ There are many rhythms that converge to create polyrhythmic preaching within the lilt of the liturgy and the swing of the sermon. These diverse rhythms of preaching are neither performed nor understood on their own, but are interconnected in a multidimensional practice. These homiletical rhythms interpenetrate, interlock, and entrain with one another to form the polyrhythm of preaching. The preacher plays the sermon with, over, within, and through this homiletical symphony.

The Lilt of Liturgy

Congregational preaching is set within the context of the liturgy.⁸ Music might seem to be the most explicit place one might turn to in a discussion of rhythm in liturgy. Synchronization of music and preaching is an obvious arena for examining liturgical rhythm. But, there is a silent rhythm that pulses in the order and patterns of worship and liturgy themselves. Worship and liturgy provide the underlying rhythms that are crucial to the preaching performance. The fixed patterns of liturgy are foundational movements within and through which preaching finds its groove. The musicality and lilt of liturgy are found particularly in its repetitive patterning.

Repetition is a basic part of liturgy, ritual, and music. It is a distinguishing feature of African and African-American music.⁹ Jazz, blues, gospel, and rock music, which have their roots in African music, are particularly structured by repetition. West African polyrhythms are formed, like the patterns of African cloth, by repetition. In woven cloth the repeated pattern forms the fabric into a meaningful whole. In

percussive rhythm the repetitive pattern of beats is essential to the meaning of the rhythm.¹⁰

Repetition is an essential characteristic of ritual and liturgy.¹¹ The celebration of Christian holy days recurs within a yearly cycle. Worship, prayer, Eucharist, and homily occur regularly within a weekly pattern.¹² There is even repetition with certain rituals and liturgy (e.g., saying “Amen.”). Repetition serves numerous functions, which include *formative*, constituting a collective identity and experience;¹³ *performative*, conveying meaning to participants and observers;¹⁴ *communal*, allowing full participation; and *transcendental*, moving beyond the words or rite to an experience of the divine (e.g., mantras).¹⁵ Ritual repetition, like the repetition of drumming rhythms, is essential to its meaning.

Ritual and liturgy can become performative icons through which to catch a glimpse of the divine, rhythms that give sacred meaning and movement to worship. The long, low rhythm of the ritual observance of the Christian year is like the underlying bass line in music. Bass drum (djun djun) patterns in West African drumming are often longer rhythms that establish a foundation for the drums with higher pitches. The deep rhythm of the Christian year provides a slow, cyclical pulse that underlies the changing tones of the weekly liturgy.

The Christian year re-presents the movement and rhythm of salvation history embodied in the Christ-event: his first coming, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, sending of the Spirit, second coming, and eternal reign. The prelude of Advent, the procession of Christmas, the march of Epiphany, the dirge of Lent, the stillness of Good Friday, the cymbal crash of Easter, and the cacophony of Pentecost create a cyclical pattern that moves the body of Christ to a sacred, embodied, liturgical rhythm. The shifting themes and moods of the Christian year provide the preacher a perennial movement that supports the rhythm of the weekly liturgy.

The liturgy of weekly worship has its own rhythm. The structure of the worship service is a rhythm made up of the elemental beats of processional, song, silence, word, water, praise, prayer, movement, Eucharist, offering, benediction, and recessional.¹⁶ These elements create a sacred syncopation. Regular attendance at weekly worship engrains a liturgical rhythm within us. When the order of service is altered there is an almost unconscious awareness of a change in the rhythm of worship. If you have ever visited another congregation after attending your own for a long time, you may sense differences in the worship structure or style before you cognitively recognize the dissimilarity. It feels different. Like drum rhythms, liturgical rhythms become embedded within us. Broadening the worship sensibilities of a congregation may play a role in opening the congregation to other people’s rhythms. Changing the rhythms of worship calls for careful consideration. Preachers, pastors, and liturgists should be aware of the rhythmic sensibilities of the congregation as they preach and construct liturgies, but also be willing to risk new liturgical syncopations and backbeats.

Polyrhythmic Liturgy and Preaching

Mark Taylor has presented a polyrhythmic modality of liturgy and Word. He advocates a “polyrhythmic sensibility” within the church’s liturgical practices, which can open congregations to new rhythms of worship.¹⁷ Taylor draws upon the polyrhythmic worship practices of Caribbean diasporic cultures as a means of engagement with the world, adoration through collective performance and celebra-

tion, remembrance of the story of Jesus, experience of social liberation, and resistance to empire. Caribbean worship, drawing from its African sensibility, is intensely communal. Within community, Word and Spirit are “replayed” as they move through the members of the congregation (in sermon, story, or song) and repeated with variations on the theme becoming a “rhythm word.”¹⁸ This polyrhythmic mode of worship defies the binary rhythms that divide Word and Spirit. Through rhythmic repetition in communal performance, Word and Spirit intensify, creating “polymorphic complexities that defy mere binary rhythms.”¹⁹

In polyrhythmic modes of worship the locus of the God-experience is the body. Taylor is convinced that embodied praise and polyrhythmic practice are essential for effecting social emancipation and resistance to empire. A polyrhythmic sensibility honors the drum; allows the drum’s rhythms to pervade the whole gathering of the community in worship; nurtures the flourishing of a diversity of rhythms (musical styles); and thrives when people give their bodies to the rhythm.²⁰

Taylor has tapped into a cross-cultural, embodied, polyrhythmic, world-engaging understanding and practice of worship and Word. His theo-musical reflections are more than a call for diversity in worship style or the addition of rhythm in congregations formed by binary rhythms. His understanding of “polyrhythmic sensibility” leads to emancipatory adoration. Without denying the implications of Taylor’s thesis for liberative, multicultural worship, I am suggesting that a polyrhythmic sensibility for preaching recognizes that the divine pulse beats through the multiple rhythms that make up the patterns of Word and worship. It is not simply the rhythm of the Other or the “exotic” that can be transformative. Polyrhythmic preaching can tap into the emancipatory potential within the diverse rhythms (i.e. liturgy, hermeneutic, context, language, performance) that constitute the polymorphic practice of preaching.

The Swing of the Sermon

Within many African cultures rhythm and word are interconnected. This is rooted in the relationship between language and drumming, which was noted earlier. Léopold Senghor states:

...rhythm is indispensable to the word: rhythm activates the word; it is its procreative component. Only rhythm gives it (the word) its effective fullness; it is the word of God, that is, the rhythmic word, that created the world.²¹

African languages have been described as “tonal” languages, through which different pitches determine meaning.²² Drums create tones that replicate language. Thus, drums are often used to communicate messages from village to village or to tell a story. A master Dagbamba drummer has stated that it is absurd to play a “talking drum” unless the player can speak the native language of Dagbani, since every sound has meaning not only as music, but also as language.²³ It was this ability of the drum to “talk” that led white slave masters in North America to legally ban the use of the drum among African slaves.²⁴ Drumming could call together slaves to plan rebellion. Although the drum had difficulty surviving in some areas of the African Diaspora, rhythm continued to be manifest in body, song, and the word. Poetry within certain African cultures is embedded in polyrhythmics. Like polyrhythmic drumming, poetry

uses multiple language forms, secondary rhythms, and repetition to create meaning.²⁵ A rhythmic understanding of the word is particularly evident in Black preaching.²⁶ The musicologist Jon Michael Spencer makes a direct connection when he says,

The 'drumming' of traditional black preaching (like that of black rapping) includes kinetic, linguistic, and metric manifestations, which together create a polyphonic multimetricity equivalent to that of African rhythm.²⁷

There is a "homiletical musicality" to Black preaching based in the rhythms of traditional African life.²⁸ Evans Crawford describes preaching rhythmically as "holiness in timing."²⁹ He uses the word "timing" to describe the musical qualities he examines concerning African American preaching. James Henry Harris recognizes cadence and rhythm to be uniquely combined in African American preaching.³⁰ Harris recognizes the indispensability of rhythm to the preached word in Black preaching. Rhythm and word come together in a distinctive manner within African American preaching.

The dialogical character of some African drumming is found in both the understanding of drumming as a form of communication that "conversational" relationship between rhythms within a polyrhythm.³¹ Dialogue is also characteristic of both African music and African American preaching.³² Henry Mitchell goes so far as to say that "without dialogue, there is no distinctively Black sermon, it is just that crucial to Black preaching."³³ Dialogue requires some form of conversation between speaker and listener. Call and response, a musical modality found within some African music, has shaped the dialogical nature of African American preaching. The rhetorical rhythm is heard in audible responses to the preacher, such as "Well?" "Help 'em, Lord!" "Amen!" or "Hallelujah!" that at times may be punctuated by musical instruments. This back-and-forth rhythmic conversation between preacher and congregation reflects the call and response chants and drumming signals within certain forms of African music.

James Snead makes reference to the "cut" as a rhythmic speech form found in African American preaching with a counterpart in African music.³⁴ The "cut" relies on repetition by abruptly moving back to a previous pattern or phrase. James Brown is known for using the "cut" in his music. Following a cue, vocal or percussive beats, the music will shift to a "bridge" or new mode, then, with another signal, the music "cuts" back to the original tempo or chord progression. In preaching, the "cut" may be as simple as a repetitive phrase (e.g., Praise God!) that interrupts the flow of the sermon, but which creates a rhythmic pattern to the proclamation.

Another rhythmic form within the African American preaching is known as "the hoop." It is characterized by "vocal gymnastics that require gasping for air, panting, long pauses, or rapid speech...Articulation is marked by elongation of vowels, repetition of phrases or initial consonants, or omission of word endings" that leads to an emotional and spiritual intensification.³⁵ The practice of hooping in some ways reflects the repetitive, rhythmic intensification of the drumming that often leads to spirit possession that is found in Yoruban culture and its counterpart in Cuban Santería.

Other rhetorical practices in African American preaching, such as repetition of phrases, alliteration, acceleration of pace, vocal dynamics, and linguistic and thematic improvisation have their rhythmic counterparts in African drumming.³⁶ Repetition

occurs in the normal course of the sermon. Texts, sayings, or other “significant statements are restated for emphasis, memory, impact, and effect.”³⁷ As I noted earlier, repetition assists in clarifying meaning in some forms of African drumming. Repetition in African American preaching serves to produce, energize, and instill meaning.

When I teach drumming to beginners I tell the students that everyone has rhythm. We all heard and felt the constant rhythm of our mother’s heartbeat for close to nine months. One does not have to be an African or African American to have rhythm. It is just that rhythm becomes more highly developed in some cultures and people than others. Rhythm exists in sermons outside the African American preaching tradition. It may be less developed or subtler, but there is rhythm there nonetheless. There is rhythm in the “movements” or “homiletical plot” of well-constructed sermons.³⁸ Rhythm resides in the pulse of language, phrasing, punctuation, pause, and pace. Every sermon has a rhythm and can be constructed in such a way as to enhance its rhythmic qualities.

Preparing to “perform” the sermon involves practicing the sermon’s pulse and pace. Thomas Long entitled a section of his seminal book on preaching “Finding the Rhythm,” which is about rehearsing the sermon aloud. Speaking the sermon aloud places the preaching in the role of listener. Long says, “Listening to our own sermon being spoken makes us aware of the rhythms, movements, and intrinsic timing of the sermon in ways that studying notes or a manuscript can never do.”³⁹ Rehearsing aloud is a means of hearing and sensing the swing of the sermon.

Finding Your Polyrhythm

“Finding your voice” has become a metaphor for learning to express your own distinctive self in preaching.⁴⁰ “Finding your preaching voice” is the path that leads preachers to bring to the practice of preaching all the various elements of their own uniqueness. Having a voice does not indicate a monotone. Through the preacher’s one voice is expressed not only the polyphony of his or her own experience, but also the conversation that the preacher has had with text, theology, liturgy, congregation, community, and world. These elements are shaped by the preacher’s own voice.

Using the metaphor of polyrhythm, the preacher brings together the diverse rhythms of text, contexts, liturgy, sermon construction, performance, and personality to create a complex polyrhythm. As with drumming polyrhythms, these various homiletical rhythms interlock, create tensions, play off each other, and converse in type of call and response, while at the same time they are heard as one specific rhythm in the preaching event. Each rhythm has its meaning only within the complex structure of the polyrhythm. Each homiletical rhythm (i.e., text, context, liturgy, personality, etc.) does not stand alone, but is understood only within its relationship to the other rhythms. For example, the meaning of the biblical text is interconnected with the contemporary context. Meaning is constructed in a call and response conversation between text and context, then and now, biblical world and contemporary world.

The interaction of diverse hermeneutical and homiletical rhythms gives the text and the sermon its meaning to all those involved in the preaching conversation. It is the conversation and energy from the interactions of the various rhythms within polyrhythmic drumming that communicates its meaning and causes the dance. It is the preacher’s own creativity and energy in bringing together the diverse rhythms of the practice of preaching into a sermonic polyrhythm that communicates sacred meaning and causes the people to dance.

Notes

1. William C. Turner, Jr., "The Musicality of Black Preaching: A Phenomenology," *The Journal of Black Sacred Music* 2, no 1 (Spring 1988): 27.
2. For an example of using the arts as a metaphor or model for the practice of preaching, see Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998); Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching: How to Preach with Great Freedom and Joy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).
3. I may refer to the specific drumming traditions of West Africa (Ivory Coast, Guinea, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Sierra Leone) or rhythm in "some African traditions," rather than speak of a generic "African rhythm." A postcolonial perspective recognizes "African rhythm" as a European invention or reification of a more complex reality. The countries and tribes within Africa are not one homogeneous body and neither is the music. For a postcolonial critique of "African rhythm," see Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
4. Simha Arom, *African Polyphony and Polyrhythm: Musical Structure and Methodology* trans. Martin Thom, Barbara Tuckett, and Raymond Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 272.
5. *Ibid.*, 40.
6. John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 52.
7. Hauerwas presents preaching as a practice. Stanley Hauerwas, "Practice Preaching," *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, Erskine Clarke, ed. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1998), 62-68. Ronald Allen claims "preaching is not a distinctive practice, but a part of the practice of worship." Ronald Allen, *Interpreting the Gospel* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998), 12. Preaching fits MacIntyre's definition of practice and can be considered as such. Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 187.
8. A thorough presentation of preaching within the context of worship can be found in David M. Greenhaw and Ronald Allen, eds., *Preaching in the Context of Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).
9. Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, 80. In his insightful essay, James A. Snead notes that in black music repetition is valued in and of itself. Rhythmic repetition creates the framework for improvisation, polymeter, and call-and-response, which are key characteristics of both African and African-American music. James A. Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture," in *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4 (1981): 146-154.
10. Repetition in music has been recognized as a psychological necessity for making sense. Since music has no clear "object" to which we can direct our minds, the repetition imprints music's shape within us giving it coherence and meaning. Richard Middleton, "'Play it again Sam': Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music," in *Popular Music*, vol. III, Richard Middleton and David Horn, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 236.
11. Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 100.
12. On the use of musical repetition to reflect on the ritual of the Eucharist, see Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 155-175.
13. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1915), 463ff.
14. Clifford Geertz understands ritual to symbolically encapsulate the ethos and worldview of the performers. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 113. For further discussion of Geertz's perspective on ritual and meaning, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 30-46.
15. The repetitive nature of mantras, like drum rhythms, can serve as a means of bypassing the cognitive and connecting a person with the subconscious and Spirit. Dru Kristel, "Drumming and Mantra," *Breath Was the First Drummer: A Treatise on Drums, Drumming, and Drummers* (Sante Fe: QX Publications, 1995), 85-92.
16. Tom Driver lists rhythm as an essential quality of eucharistic performance. In speaking of the rhythm of ritual as the "soul, the heart-beat of worship" he describes a sacramental celebration in which a company of African drummers and dancers drew the congregation into a storm of hand-clapping, screaming, and cheering! Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 215-216.
17. Mark Taylor, "Polyrhythm in Worship: Caribbean Keys to an Effective Word of God," in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. Brian Blount and Lenora Tubbs Tisdale

(Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 108-128.

18. Ibid., 119.

19. Ibid., 120.

20. Ibid., 123-125.

21. Quoted in Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: The New African Culture* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 164.

22. Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, 75.

23. David Locke, *Drum Damba: Talking Drum Lessons* (Crown Point: White Cliffs Media, 1990), 7.

24. Jon Michael Spencer, *Re-Searching Black Music* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1996), 11.

25. Jahn, *African Culture*, 166.

26. James Henry Harris, *The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 81-82.

27. Spencer, *Black Music*, 17.

28. The term “homiletical musicality” is borrowed from Jon Michael Spencer, *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (Westport: Greenwood Press), 1987. On the musicality of preaching and African tradition, see William C. Turner, Jr., “The Musicality of Black Preaching: A Phenomenology,” *The Journal of Black Sacred Music* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 25-26.

29. Evans E. Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 17.

30. Harris, *Word Made Plain*, 91-94.

31. Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, 55.

32. See chapter 7 in Henry H. Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977).

33. Ibid., 122.

34. Snead, *On Repetition*, 151.

35. Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 171-172.

36. For a discussion of improvisation in preaching as it relates to Jazz, whose roots are in African music, see chapter 5 in Kirk Byron Jones' *The Jazz of Preaching*.

37. Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 93.

38. Eugene Lowry presents the sermon form and structure in terms of a narrative plot, which constructs a type of “linguistic dance” to the sermon. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980). David Buttrick describes sermon structure as “moves,” as opposed to static “points,” which create a sequential rhythm to the sermon. David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

39. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 186.

40. David J. Schlafer, *Your Way with God's Word: Discovering Your Distinctive Preaching Voice* (Boston: Cowley Pubs., 1995); Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).