

LABANOTATION: LANGUAGE OR SCRIPT?

...I have always stressed the point that the endeavor to describe the movements of a dance in special symbols has one purpose. That is the creation of a literature of movement and dance. It is obvious that notation or script facilitates the communication of movement ideas to other people. When, ages ago, mankind awoke to the idea of standardising pictures and signs in order to communicate certain ideas to one another, bodily actions and gestures were of course included from the very beginning.

Rudolf Von Laban  
Foreward to Labanotation

Since its inception, claims have been made that Labanotation knows no international boundaries. Advocates of this system of notation are quick to proclaim its global application. Yet, if one scans available literature, the notation of Western theatrical dance far surpasses any extant notations of movement systems or dances of the rest of the world. It is with interest that one notes an observation made by Hutchinson<sup>1</sup> that "though Labanotation is a highly developed system, it will never be fully tested until movement of all styles has been analysed and recorded". (1980:45). If this is true, why is it that a script so rich in recording potential has made so little impact on the international scene? Hutchinson seems to share this concern because she asks, "Why has Asian or Pacific dance not been notated before? Why do the very people to whom it belongs, the people whose dance it is, seem unconcerned about preservation of the heritage?" (1980:46). Since many of these people do not write their spoken languages, it can be better understood why they lack concern for writing their body languages. We might well ask the same question about ourselves. Anthropologically, what Hutchinson seems to interpret as an 'indifference' on the part of a people to preserve its heritage may well be ethnocentric interpretation on the part of an investigator -- or simply human inconsistency.

Failure to view Labanotation as a script could very well contribute to its limited outreach. As long as we perpetuate the myth that Labanotation is a 'language' and remain satisfied with the bulk of recorded scores being Western theatrical dance, the potential of Labanotation will never be realized. Hutchinson (and many other senior notators)<sup>2</sup> has always been aware of the potential for Labanotation, for she said that in order for it "...to be adopted internationally, a system for recording movement must be capable of recording every type of movement, without bias toward any one style or limitations inflicted by an individual approach or analysis. Of more importance than the actual symbols used is the analysis of movement which must be established on fundamentally sound principles applicable to all manner of human movement. It must, therefore, rest on laws of motion recognized in other fields, that is scientific laws. It must be capable of stating any aspect of movement individually or in

context. Where minute detail is required, as often occurs for specialists in some particular field of motion study, the system must allow for such fine definition. Shorthands can be used, but only where the 'key', the longhand version of the same action described in all necessary detail, is at hand. Such a system, fully developed, could then be adopted by the peoples of the world, each using as much or as little of the entire system as their needs demand, with the knowledge that the limitation in use is of their own choice." (Hutchinson, 1969:45).

The "peoples of the world", however, must be permitted more liberty than simple adoption of the system: they must be permitted the liberty to create within the system of notation to accommodate their specific needs. If one can liken the relationship of the individual symbols within the entire Labanotation system to the multi-faceted usages of the individual letters of the Roman alphabet, one can see the potential for nearly unlimited development. If Labanotation is to be considered an international script, it must be allowed international input.

If our aim is to reach understanding and truth, then our insistence on emphasizing the rules of Western dance forms curtails our thinking because we refuse to expand our usages of this script. Could we not more usefully think of Labanotation in the following way?

Like chessmen, the symbols of pure mathematics stand not, or not necessarily, for anything denoted by them, but primarily for the use that can be made of them according to known rules. The mathematical symbol embodies the conception of its operability, just as a bishop or a knight in chess embodies the conception of the moves of which it is capable. The invention of new mathematical symbols which can be used in a more interesting or practically more effective manner has been going on through the centuries.

A notation invented by one mathematician may suggest to another some interesting variation of the corresponding conception. (Polanyi, 1958:85).

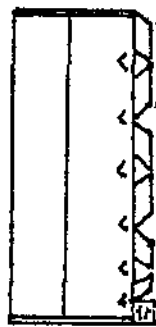
The individual symbols in Labanotation, as I now conceive of it, embody conceptions of operability that surpass international boundaries. Laban's theories of the forms of movement in space (Choreutics) and of the qualities of movement (Eukinetics) led him to base his notation on human movement in general. Clearly, the symbols used in Labanotation to determine direction, level, path and such, are operable because they are based on known rules that permit a wide application in many different 'grammars' of movement idioms.

### Special Considerations in Notating Three Luo Dances

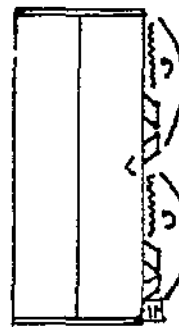
To complete my advanced certification in Labanotation and because of my interest in social anthropology, I undertook the notation of three Luo dances as danced by members of Bomas, Kenya's National Dance Company.

Two members of Bomas, John Mathenge and Christopher Wanyonyi, who are now dance students at City University of New York, served as informants.

It was evident from the beginning that pure observation on my part was not enough. From an anthropological standpoint, I was clearly involved in eliciting a folk-model and extremely dependent upon my informants concerning the movements. I started by having Mathenge and Wanyonyi teach me small stretches of movement (kinesemes) of the Nyatiti dance.<sup>3</sup> It is a matter of personal preference that I chose to learn these stretches, but it is not necessary for every notator to use this approach. Skilful questioning can serve to elicit the necessary information. Often it was necessary to ask questions that would provide insights into how best to write a movement or a phrase of movements. It became increasingly obvious that Labanotation was the means to record the messages (the 's-structures') in particular movements, but did not contain the code (the 'p-structures'). In other words, one can record gross physical movements, (see Fig. 1(A)) but this does not mean that one has captured the intended movements of the native dancers,<sup>4</sup> (see Fig. 1(B)). For example, in the Karachuonyo<sup>5</sup>, I observed a movement of the shoulders that appeared to diminish in size and increase in tempo. When I questioned Mathenge about this, he informed me that the movement was 'internal'; that he was not thinking of 'moving his shoulders'. I, therefore, had an obligation to record what I saw, but also had an obligation to record what was 'performed'. In Fig. 1 below, the differences can be seen:



(A) Physical movement  
of shoulder-shaking



(B) Shoulder movement from  
Karachuonyo score

Fig. 1

These two movements are not 'the same', although they involve the same body parts. Example (A) is devoid of semantic content. Example (B) possesses meaning only as it is intended in the context of the Karachuonyo dance. This fairly common linguistic and anthropological distinction is reinforced by philosophers thus: "...an intentional action is not the same as a physical movement since the latter can be described in various ways according to one's point of view and one's beliefs about the person performing it. One cannot specify an action, as opposed to a purely physical movement, without taking into account what the agent intended." (Best, 1974:193).

Thus, to rely on a purely 'observational' approach to cross-cultural notation is to record 'behavior'<sup>6</sup> in terms of raw movement as seen through the investigator's own set of mental and kinesic spectacles. This approach eliminates the recording of movement in terms of meaningful sequences. Best would be in agreement with social anthropologists when he says, "Roughly, the meaning of a particular movement is given by the whole dance, the meaning of the dance is given by the dance tradition of which it is a part or extension, and the meaning of that tradition is given by the culture, society, form of life to which it belongs" (1974:187). Methodologically, of course, semasiologists understand this kind of thing as 'p:s relations' (see Williams, 1977).

There are two points that must be stressed: 1) the methodologies employed by a notator are crucial to what is recorded. It is the user of the system who bears full responsibility for the significance of what is recorded, not the system itself. 2) For a movement score to be truly anthropological, the notator has to have had anthropological training.

### What Are The Real Issues?

The experience of notating these dances was illuminating. Primarily, it simply reinforced my desire to study social anthropology, if for no other reason than the many issues of authenticity that surfaced throughout the project. For example, neither Mathenge nor Wanyonyi are Luo, but belong to Kikuyu and Luhya tribes, respectively. In the recording of Dodo<sup>7</sup>, the fact that this women's dance was taught to me by men is significant. If I were to see this dance performed by Luo women in Kenya, would it resemble the notated version? The dances were notated as they are danced by Bomas, a professional company. Therefore, specific entrances and exits and stage directions were incorporated into the notated score as performed by Bomas. It is naive to believe that these adaptations to a Western theatrical setting have not influenced the movement, the spatial dispositions and the semantic contents of them.

I recognize, too, that my understanding of these three Luo dances is limited by my inability to speak Luo. In studying any of the dances of Africa, one must look beneath their surfaces in order to determine their meanings; eventually, one may gain insight as to how one's informants' thoughts work as well. Therefore, if the spoken language of a particular society is understood by all who are involved in the research, a bridge rather than a barrier to further understanding is created. Without the knowledge of the spoken language one wonders what has been notated. I am no longer satisfied to procure notated scripts that may be duplicated by future generations. I realize that this process is but an empirical exercise that results in the collections and classification of certain kinds of 'facts', but sheds little light on real understanding of the dances.

In the light of my new level of comprehension, it would be difficult to try to justify Labanotation as being more than what it is: a 'script'. It can demonstrate the 'how' of a movement, but not the 'why'. This is not meant to be interpreted as any attempt to discredit the system, but merely as an attempt to clarify its usage and importance. Labanotation

has the potential to provide credibility to the areas of movement and dance that have long and rightly been criticized for their lack of research and documentation. The key words may very well be 'scholarly respectability'. A clear understanding of Labanotation and its use can permit a crossing of scientific barriers as well as international barriers. To recognize Labanotation for what it is, i.e. a 'script' and for what it does, e.g. a means of making movement literate, is to strengthen its very existence and expand its 'operability'.

### Body Language and Writing

Ferdinand de Saussure, known by many as the father of modern linguistics, notes that "the first linguists confused language and writing" (1959:24); that "language is a storehouse of sound-images, and writing is the tangible form of those images" (1959:15) and that "we generally learn about languages only through writing" (1959:23). These observations strengthen the need for investigators of body languages to identify Labanotation as a 'script'. Williams states that "systems of human actions are kinds of languages too: they are not the same as spoken languages, but they can be notated, they possess syntax, grammars and all the rest. They are reflexive, referential and relational. They structure space. Their 'vocabularies' and the degrees of freedom of their executants' bodies may be more or less articulate" (1980:24).

Dixie Durr

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### NOTES

1. Ann Hutchinson, a leading exponent of Labanotation, was one of the founding members of the Dance Notation Bureau in New York City. She is the author of Labanotation or Kinetography Laban, a seminal text for notation students. Hutchinson is active in the International Council for Kinetography Laban, which serves as a governing body that discusses and determines changes and new ideas for implementation into Labanotation.
2. Hutchinson, Muriel Topaz, present Director of the Dance Notation Bureau, and other notators using the Laban system continually propound the potential of Labanotation to meet international demands. Because Hutchinson is a prolific writer in championing the cause of notation, she has provided a wealth of quotable material.

3. Nyatiti, described as a dance of 'pure entertainment' by my informants, is a graceful dance that was originally danced only by women. Nyatiti means harp, which is the main instrument used in the dance. The Nyatiti player is the head choreographer and through the music he determines the order of the steps. Thus, the choreographic arrangement of the steps may vary. The Nyatiti player sings and in his song he may praise himself as well as others.
4. In the first draft of the notation experience, it was obvious that I was capturing gross physical movements. In order to procure more than a notated score of gross physical movements, I had to rely on my informants and allow for their inputs into the diacritical process.
5. I was told that Karachuonyo is a funeral dance that demonstrates power and is performed in honor of the death of an individual either of old age or status, such as that of a chief. The dance is done primarily by the men, while the women remain in the background. The dance is led by a horn blower, who determines the order of the steps. The men carry a shield, spear and/or club.
6. I use the same distinctions regarding the term 'behavior' established by Ardener (1973) and Williams (1975).
7. The Dodo is a graceful dance that was originally performed, I was told, during wedding and funeral ceremonies. The dancers are primarily adult women. They hold in their right hand a tamborine-like instrument, known as a pweke. This percussion instrument is hit into the palm of the left hand.

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