

## The Mystique of Fieldwork

Adrienne Kaeppler

In 1969 Donald MacRae, in a lively article in *New Society*, attempted to find the key that separated sociology from anthropology. He concluded that anthropologists "have, in principle, all undergone the ordeals of a common *rite de passage*, i.e. they have all undergone at least a year of fieldwork in some exotic area. The field notes of this year are their store of magic potency, their *manna*. It is the magical element in this that makes them spend it so economically; spiritual capital is not lightly to be wasted" (1969: 562). Now, some thirty years later – as this book demonstrates – not only anthropologists 'go to the field' to learn about their chosen subject. If one adds that although all anthropologists do fieldwork, all fieldwork is not anthropological, we run the risk of incurring MacRae's further dictum that anthropologists (like other tribes made up of warring moieties) "unite before any outside threat and are appropriately savage to intruders or threatening groups" (1969: 562).

While I would not state these differences quite so strongly, I do believe that there are differences between what anthropologists and others do in the field – both qualitative and conceptual – with reference to the study of dance. To examine these differences, I will explore three questions: (1) What is the aim of an anthropological study of dance? (2) How does an anthropologist do fieldwork? and (3) What is the importance of the audience in the study of dance? As a prelude to these questions, however, it is necessary to ask 'What is dance?' – a distinctly anthropological question.

### Is 'Dance' a Category of Ourselves or Others?

Cultural forms that result from the creative use of human bodies in time and space are often glossed as 'dance', but this is a word derived from European concepts and carries with it preconceptions that tend to mask the importance and usefulness of analysing the movement dimensions of human action and interaction. Traditionally, in many societies there was no category comparable to the western concept – although in many languages it has now been introduced. Most anthropologists interested in human movement do not focus on 'dance' but enlarge their purview to encompass a variety of structured movement systems, including, but not limited to, movements associated with religious and secular ritual, ceremony, entertainment, martial arts, sign languages, sports and play. What these systems share is that they result from creative processes that manipulate (i.e. handle with skill) human bodies in time and space. Some categories of structured movement may be further marked or elaborated, for example, by being integrally related to 'music' (a specially marked or elaborated category of 'structured sound') and text.

We usually understand the construction of categories used in our own culture and language, but often inappropriately apply our categories to 'others'. For example, categorizing the movement dimensions of a religious ritual as 'dance' can easily lead to misunderstanding across, and even within, cultures. A more appropriate way to classify and define movement systems is according to

indigenous categories – concepts that can best be discovered through extended fieldwork.

### **Why Do Humans Move in Distinctive Ways and What Transforms Movement into 'Dance'?**

The aim of the academic discipline of anthropology is to understand other sociocultural systems and to understand ourselves better. An anthropologist traditionally studied everything during a year or more of fieldwork, especially if he or she was one of the first outsiders to live in a community. Today, most communities have been scrutinized by the gaze of outsiders, including anthropologists and other academics, and much has been written about nearly every society. Nevertheless, most anthropologists still attempt to understand all aspects of culture in order to understand society in all of its dimensions. Human movement is recognized as one dimension of a variety of activities and events and an anthropologist studies movement in an effort to understand the whole.

While observing and participating in activities and events it becomes evident that people of distinctive groups move in distinctive ways and categorize their movements accordingly. Anthropologists try to find the systematic patterns that lead to understanding indigenous categorization – the emic dimension of movement. To facilitate description and for cross-cultural comparisons, anthropologists may place specially marked or elaborated, grammatically structured human movement systems into theoretical frames in order to characterize the way the movements systems convey meaning – such as mime, dramatic realism, storytelling, metaphor or with abstract conventions – and may consider them as signs, symbols or signifiers, in any combination depending on their contexts. Movements are cultural artefacts, which, in their specific combinations and uses, belong to a specific culture or subculture and can be activated for specific purposes. Movement sequences may be audience-oriented ... to be admired as art or work, they may be participatory to be enjoyed as entertainment, they may make political or social statements, they may bring religious ecstasy or trance, they may be performed as a social duty. Movements given by the gods and ancestors may be perpetuated as cultural artefacts and aesthetic performances even if their meanings have been changed or forgotten as reference points for ethnic or cultural identity.

### **Anthropologists and Other Dance Researchers**

It is instructive to consider how anthropological aims may differ from those of other academics such as folklorists and dance ethnologists, especially as they relate to fieldwork. Generally speaking, anthropologists aim to attain insights into a sociocultural group by studying its movement systems. Although folklorists who study dance and dance ethnologists will speak for themselves elsewhere in this volume, it seems to me that these researchers are more specifically interested in dances and dancing, and take 'a dance' or 'dances' as their primary unit, while anthropologists are more interested in the larger subject of human movement and the abstract concept of 'dance'. Folklorists are often already familiar with the societies they study and they have a different agenda which is community-based

and for a long time focused on authenticity (Bendix 1997). Their aim is often to collect 'dances' as part of this agenda. Dance ethnologists also focus on the content of dances and, if they study the context, it is usually the event context in which the dances take place.

Most anthropologists learn and embrace the four fields of anthropology as taught in many anthropology programmes, especially in the United States (physical anthropology, archaeology, sociocultural anthropology and linguistics) and the theoretical bases that integrate these four fields. Ethnography is embedded in sociocultural anthropology – which in most universities still requires the fieldwork *rite de passage*. Thus anthropologists of human movement are by definition also dance ethnographers (but not vice versa). Individuals who call themselves 'dance ethnologists' usually do not have degrees in anthropology or ethnology and are unlikely to have studied the theoretical background in which anthropology as an academic subject is embedded. Instead, their degrees are in dance, music, area studies, cultural studies or some other subject. What is relevant in the present context is that during fieldwork anthropologists study dance to understand society, whereas dance ethnologists focus on the dances themselves – and those who do study context do so primarily to illuminate the dances.<sup>1</sup> This influences the amount of time spent in the field – folklorists and dance ethnologists usually do not spend extended periods in the field, whereas anthropologists usually stay for at least a year.

While anthropologists of dance and movement study meaning, intention and cultural evaluation, the activities that generate movement systems, how and by whom they are judged, their aim is to understand how the examination and analysis of movement systems can illuminate the socio-cultural system – data that can be attained only during fieldwork. My fieldwork has focused on the structure of the various movement systems used by specific cultures and the abstract concept of 'dance'. Although I, too, analyse specific dances (and other movement sequences), I look at them as the surface manifestations of the deep structure and underlying philosophy of a society. While looking for concepts about movement as part of systems of knowledge, I do not take for granted that there is such a concept as 'dance'. Ultimately, my aim is to discover what is involved in understanding 'communicative competence' with regard to movement; how do individuals combine grammatical knowledge with performance knowledge in order to perform or understand movement in specific contexts?

Structured movement systems occur in all known human societies. They are systems of knowledge – the products of action and interaction as well as processes through which action and interaction take place. These systems of knowledge are socially and culturally constructed – created, known and agreed upon by a group of people and primarily preserved in memory. Though transient, movement systems have structured content, they can be visual manifestations of social relations and the subjects of elaborate aesthetic systems, and may assist in

---

<sup>1</sup> There are similar conceptual discussions about ethnomusicology: is this field of study primarily about musical content/product or the more anthropological notions that concern processes, events, ethno-aesthetics and cultural constructions about structured sound?

understanding cultural values. Thus, an ideal movement study of a society or social group would analyse all activities in which human bodies are manipulated in time and space, the social processes that produce these activities according to the aesthetic precepts of a variety of individuals at a specific point in time, and the components that group or separate the various movement dimensions and activities they project into kinesthetic and visual form. Through participant observation our bodies and eyes learn about the distinctive ways in which people move, how these movements are categorized and if there are specially marked movement systems that formalize the non-formal that might generate a concept similar to the western concept of 'dance'. But, more importantly, we also learn about social structure, politics, economics, literature, art, philosophy, aesthetics -- that is, the sociocultural system in which movement systems are embedded.

### Strangers Abroad Looking for Systems

In his 1996 Distinguished Lecture to the American Anthropological Association, Sidney Mintz noted that "ethnographic fieldwork -- our sort of fieldwork -- is close enough to the core of our identity as a discipline to be worth preserving at any cost". What did he mean by 'our sort of fieldwork'? Fieldwork traditions can be traced to our anthropological ancestors, sympathetically explicated in a series of six documentary films entitled 'Strangers Abroad'. Four of these films set the stage and describe anthropological 'strangers' living with 'others', but two are especially important for the study of dance -- those that concern Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski.<sup>2</sup>

Boas emphasized cultural relativism which has long been a cornerstone of anthropology. Boas's view was that "if we choose to apply our [western] classification to alien cultures we may combine forms that do not belong together. ... If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people, the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours" (1943: 314). Likewise, Malinowski felt that our goal should be "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (1922: 250). Added to this was Kenneth Pike's dictum that we should "attempt to discover and to describe the pattern of that particular language or culture in reference to the way in which the various elements of that culture are related to each other in the functioning of the particular pattern" (1954: 8). From Pike came the 'etic/emic' distinction: "'emic' criteria savour more of relativity, with the sameness of activity determined in reference to a particular system of activity" (1954: 11).

Anthropological interpretations of human movement have evolved and changed along the same lines as general anthropological theory. Collecting data, organizing and analyzing it according to the basic tenets of the time, as well as voicing dissatisfaction with past analysts of the data collected and organized, is characteristic of studies of dance as of other fields of anthropology. Our anthropological ancestors seldom focused on human movement systems, especially before 1950, but those who did found that analysis of movement could help to explicate basic cultural values. Boas, working in North America in the late

---

<sup>2</sup> 'The Shackles of Tradition' [Boas] and 'Everything is Relative' [Malinowski] (Singer 1985).

nineteenth/early twentieth century, was concerned with data collection in the empirical tradition and looked at dance as part of culture rather than using dance data to fit theories and generalizations. Radcliffe-Brown in his 1922 study of the Andaman Islanders brings in dance throughout his monograph, describing movements, the ceremonies in which they are used and their social function. Evans-Pritchard published an analysis of one Azande dance in 1928, and noted "it requires a stereotyped form, a prescribed mode of performance, concerted activities, recognized leadership and elaborate organization and regulation. If these problems are not in the mind of the observer he will give us an interesting description perhaps, but not a detailed account of great value to the theoretical worker" (1928: 446). In contrast to the empirical traditions based on fieldwork of American and British anthropologists, Curt Sachs, deriving his data primarily from literature, published his *Eine Weltgeschichte des Tanzes* in 1933 as a theoretical treatise in which dance was used an example of the *Kulturkreis* theories of Schmidt and Graebner in which worldwide diffusion resulted in a form of unilineal evolution. In 1935 Marcel Mauss published *Les Techniques du Corps* in which he discusses the notion of the body and its movements in cross-cultural perspective. During the 1950s, Gertrude Prokosch Kurath, although not an anthropologist herself, worked in collaboration with anthropologists to analyse the content of dances so that movement could be related to its social and cultural background.<sup>3</sup>

It is only since the 1960s that a few anthropologists have focused on human movement systems in an effort to understand society. Among them were the ten colleagues invited by Anya Peterson Royce in 1974 to Bloomington, Indiana, to discuss the importance of movement analysis in the study of anthropology. In 1979, Paul Spencer convinced a number of his anthropological colleagues to use the movement data that helped them to understand the societies in which they had carried out fieldwork in a series of lectures at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. This resulted in the book *Society and the Dance* (Spencer 1985).

My own fieldwork in Tonga was not intended to focus on dance, but on aesthetics. I was influenced by the empirical traditions of Boas and Malinowski which recognized the importance of insiders' views and ethno-science. These I intermixed with ideas about competence and performance derived from concepts promulgated by Saussure and Chomsky. My 18 months of fieldwork in the mid-1960s used etic/emic distinctions derived by 'contrastive analysis' and emerged as linguistic analogies, which I then elaborated as ethnoscientific structuralism (1978, 1986). I continued to carry out fieldwork in Tonga during the following 30 years – a period of fieldwork which now totals more than three years. I examined movements and choreographies in order to find the underlying system and I attempted to discover indigenous theories about indigenous movement systems. Systems, of course, cannot be observed, but must be derived from the social and cultural construction of specific movement worlds. These systems exist in memory and are recalled as movement motifs, imagery and as system, and are used to create compositions that produce social and cultural meaning in

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Kurath, 1956, 1960, 1964.

performance. Such analyses involve deconstructing the movements into culturally recognized pieces and learning the rules for constructing compositions according to the system. I also focused on more traditional anthropological subjects – publishing articles on kinship, social structure, funerals, material culture, and what I really went to the field to study, aesthetics. My participant observation in dance and other movement systems was primarily a way to understand society.

Anthropologists are interested in understanding how meaning is derived from movement, how the frame of an event must be understood in order to derive meaning from it, how intention and cultural evaluation can be derived from the framing of the event, the necessity of understanding the activities that generate movement systems and how and by whom the movements are judged.

Although fieldwork is the mainstay of anthropological method and theory, it has seldom been explicitly acknowledged in the anthropological study of dance. How does an anthropologist go about fieldwork when studying movement systems as part of a sociocultural system? There are four aspects of fieldwork which I feel are important: participant observation, language, recording information and preliminary analyses.

1. In participant observation important elements include observing movement content and its contexts, taking part by learning the movements (if this is permitted) and asking questions about the movement and its contexts. Participant observation should lead to an understanding of the various structured movement systems, how they are indigenously classified, what the relationships are between and among movements of ritual, dance, everyday and ceremonial life, and if there even are cultural concepts such as dance. While taking part, the structure of the movement systems can be derived by using linguistic analogies; that is, what the relevant small pieces of movement (kinemes and morphokines - analogous to phonemes and morphemes) are, what the characteristic movement motifs are, and how these movement pieces are put together (analogous to phonology and syntax in language). One observes surface manifestations and behaviour, making it necessary to ask questions about underlying systems and intentions. Behaviour plus intention equals action, and it is human action, and interaction in which anthropologists are interested.
2. Learning the spoken language is important not just for communication; linguistic emphases also furnish keys to cultural or social emphases, and language structure may be the key to movement and other structures.
3. Recording information should be done in a variety of ways; taking notes, preliminary movement notation, film/video recording of performances in their contexts as well as just for the camera eye if possible, in your own body by learning the dances or at least the important movement motifs, and using fieldguides or questionnaires if appropriate.
4. Preliminary analyses should be done from your own observation and participation as well as through the eyes of performers and audience members. One should look for patterns of movement and patterns of social action and their meanings and elicit if these observed patterns are meaningful

to dancers and audience members. Video recordings can be used for instant replay for preliminary analysis, for eliciting information about intentions, for clarifying movement motifs and movement sequences and to find out about mistakes and if movements (or whole performances) can or should be evaluated.

In the field, I watched whole dances to find what body parts moved and what sorts of movements these were. Next, I tried to watch certain individuals do the same movements over and over again. Having people teach me dances necessitated that they do the movements repeatedly. While learning, I questioned my teachers if movements should be done one way or another – always asking if the movements were the same or different. If they said it ‘didn’t matter’ or if they did not perceive differences in what I did, I concluded that the differences were not significant. In this way I also learned how much movement varied as done by one person (personal variation). Then I tried to see several people do the same dance or dances of the same genre that used the same kind of movements. From this I learned how much variation there was from individual to individual (interpersonal variation). A combination of these two types of variation gave me a chance to see the same movement performed in several movement contexts (contextual variation). After I learned the movements I performed them in what I considered to be correct and incorrect ways. My teachers would correct versions that were not acceptable. My procedure was to make observations and form hypotheses about what the significant units were. Hypotheses were tested by performing the movements for holders of the movement tradition, thus verifying, modifying or rejecting them.

Most of my anthropological fieldwork, however, was less structured. During my fieldwork in Tonga, I learned about Tongan society, poetry, music, dance, material culture, values and so on. I participated in various aspects of Tongan everyday life and ritual events, accompanying Tongans with whom I resided and attending events with Tongan friends. Besides observing, I asked questions in order to understand Tongan evaluations of performances and how these had changed over time. In the 1960s and 1970s, I had a few special mentors: Queen Sälote, Vaisima Hopoate, Sister Mary Tu’ifua, Kavapele, ‘Aho, Halaevalu Mataele, Nanisi Helu, Kalo Sitani, Tu’ialo Kefu, Baron Vaca, Tu’imala Kaho, Bekehala, Queen Mata’aho, Lavinia and Atiu Kalaniuvalu and several others. We were all great friends, and I learned more and more each time I talked to them and attended events with them. I seldom tape-recorded them. Often one of these friends would accompany me to interview Tongan-only speakers if they thought my Tongan was not adequate to understand fully the metaphors and varied meanings of Tongan words (in addition to the cultural prescription that women should not go about alone). After analysing this information with Tongans, and using all available information, I attempted to discover movement and other cultural systems. I wrote about what I had learned and gave my writings to Tongans for their opinions. I found that dance is not something that is ‘out there’ or movement that can be ‘quantified’ by ‘verifiable facts’, but a socially constructed system of knowledge. Anthropologists are ‘strangers abroad’ trying to find such systems.

### What About the Audience?

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of the audience to fieldwork on human movement systems. Audiences do not have the same role from culture to culture and the audience-performer relationship may be a continuum rather than two distinct categories. Performances require viewers, but who are these viewers and what do viewers see and understand? Viewers may be the gods, engaged audience members, spectators who have little understanding of a performance, or, perhaps, only the performers viewing themselves. Performances range from ritual investitures, the theatre of church services, the marching of brass bands and the presentation of gifts, to dancing as political theatre and dancing as entertainment. Viewing these performances requires knowledge. If an event is to be understood, observers (like performers) could have 'competence' in the movement tradition. Competence in a movement system is acquired in much the same way as competence in a language is acquired. Competence relates to the cognitive learning of the shared rules of a specific movement tradition, as Saussure's concept of *langue* is acquired. Competence enables the viewer to understand a grammatical movement sequence never seen before. 'Performance' refers to an actual rendering of a movement sequence, *parole* of Saussure, which assumes that the performer has a level of competence and the skill to carry it out. Movement sequences are analogous to utterances, and without knowledge of the movement conventions, a viewer will be unable to understand what is being conveyed. In addition to movement-meaning, meaning in a larger sense (such as symbolic, narrative and so forth) is not inherent in movement itself, but is attributed to movement by people who are part of the larger activity and depends on knowledge of the cultural systems, such as male and female roles in movement, social status, social structure and access to politics and power.

Ritual has been of special interest to many anthropologists, but the movement element of ritual has seldom been the focus of interest; often people who write about 'ritual dancing' have little idea about what anthropologists mean by the concept. Ritual can be defined as 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers' (Rappaport, 1979: 175). Such formal acts have a number of features in a more or less fixed relationship to one another, are learned from the ancestors and are not generated by the performer. Performers and viewers may not fully understand the movements, only that it is necessary to do them; the *process* of performing is primary.

Theatre, which in my view includes presentational dances, has roles for performer and audience but these roles vary greatly between cultures and even within a culture depending on context. In theatre the acts are encoded by the performers and rather than the performance itself being the message, the audience is engaged and derives the message from the performance. Performers and audience understand the languages of speech and movement, as well as the stories and cultural values being conveyed – they have communicative competence. A viewer who is not engaged with understanding the performance or knows how to decode what is being conveyed by the movements can be considered a spectator. Nevertheless, performances need not be understood to be



appreciated. It is what the beholder brings to the performance that determines how it will be decoded and if he or she will be a ritual supplicant, an engaged audience member or an appreciative spectator. The same movement sequence may be meant to be decoded differently if performed for the gods, if performed for a human audience or if performed as a participant for fun; and it may be decoded differently depending on an individual's background and understanding of a particular performance as well as the individual's mental and emotional state at the time. Choreographers, performers and viewers are socially and historically placed individuals who operate according to sociocultural conventions and aesthetic systems. Dance, like all symbolic systems, creates new meanings by combining old forms in new ways. The product and process interact dialogically, relying on shared understandings among composers, performers and viewers. It is important to record this audience knowledge in the field or this crucial data will be forever lost.

### Conclusion

Why should anthropologists study human movement? Can human movement studies assist in more general anthropological understanding? Current anthropological concerns include ritual, gender, the body, cognition, identity, the negotiation of tradition, performance, aesthetics and turning the anthropological eye to our own society – concerns often addressed by dance and human movement researchers. Those studying movement systems in the field can contribute to these anthropological concerns, but only if they have the theoretical background and knowledge about fieldwork methods before becoming a stranger abroad looking for systems.

### References Cited

**Bendix, R.**

1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

**Boas, F.**

1943. Recent Anthropology. *Science* 98: 311-14; 334-337.

**Evans-Pritchard, E. E.**

1928. Dance. *Africa* 1(4): 446-62.

**Kaeppler, A. I.**

1978. Melody, Drone and Decoration: Underlying Structures and Surface Manifestations in Tongan Art and Society. In *Art in Society: Studies in Style, Culture and Aesthetics* (Eds. M. Greenhaigh and V. Megaw). London: Duckworth, pp. 261-274.

1986. Cultural Analysis, Linguistic Analogies, and the Study of Dance in Anthropological Perspective. In *Explorations in Ethnomusicology: Essays in Honor of David P. McAllester* (Ed. C. J. Frisbie). Detroit Monographs in Musicology 9. Detroit: Information Coordinators, pp. 25-33.

**Kurath, G. P.**

1956. Choreology and Anthropology. *American Anthropologist*, 58: 177 -179.

1960. Panorama of Dance Ethnology. *Current Anthropology* 1(3): 233-254.

1964. Iroquois Music and Dance: Ceremonial Arts of Two Seneca Longhouses. *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*, 187.

**MacRae, D.**

1969. When is an Anthropologist? *New Society* 9: 562, October.

**Malinowski, B.**

1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

**Mauss, M.**

1935. Les Techniques du Corps. *Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique*, 32(3-4): 271-293.  
Reprinted in *Economy and Society* 1973 (Trans: B. Brewster). 2(1): 70-88.

**Pike, K.**

1954. *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structures of Human Behavior*. Glendale, CA: Summer Institute of Linguistics.

**Radcliffe-Brown, A. R.**

1922. *The Andaman Islanders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Rappaport, R. A.**

1979. The Obvious Aspects of Ritual. In *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Ed. R. A. Rappaport). Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, pp. 173-221.

**Sachs, C.**

1933[1963]. *Eine Weltgeschichte des Tanzes* [World History of the Dance] (Trans. B. Schönberg). New York: W. W. Norton.

**Singer, A. (producer and director).**

1985/86. Strangers Abroad. Film series written and presented by Bruce Dakowski, Central Independent Television, England.

**Spencer, P. (Ed.)**

1985. *Society and the Dance: The Social Anthropology of Process and Performance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.