

## REVIEW ARTICLE

POLYNESIAN DANCE, WITH A SELECTION FOR  
 CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCES. Adrienne L.  
 Kaeppler. 1983. Phi Delta Kappa: Hawai'i  
 110 pp. incl. illustr. & author's dance  
 notation.

The private publication by a society of educationists of a book that in the main offers a collection of dance scores would not normally invite comment on these pages, were it not for the fact that the book also represents an attempt by a trained anthropologist, who specializes in the dances of her area, to make available to a wider public some of the results of her academic research. As Kaeppler herself puts it,

It is an attempt to make a complex subject with many dimensions easier to use by nonspecialists and yet convey accurate information that can be used as presented or augmented by further reading and research (p.5).

The concern that academic writing may be too esoteric and thus less than useful to the general public is not restricted to the field of human movement alone. Eminent historians, economists, physicists and archaeologists, among others, often write for the lay reader in an attempt to make their subjects more accessible to a wider audience (and, one might add, in order to allay misconceptions about their subjects as presented by popularizers who are less qualified to present this material). The difference is that members of the latter kinds of disciplines can rest assured that they possess bodies of knowledge that (a) have been developed over at least two centuries and (b) are valued by society at large. Consequently, well-written popularizations are often simple presentations of what is so far known; rarely do they offer practical advice of a 'do-it-yourself' nature.

The anthropological study of human movement systems, such as dances, however, is a relatively recent specialization within a discipline that is itself comparatively young. Moreover, it is being conducted in an age when notions of 'value' and 'validity' are increasingly being thought of as synonymous with the "measurable benefits of practical application". Thus it is easy to slip into an implied 'underlabourer conception' of its purposes (cf. Winch, 1958:3-7), according to which an anthropologist of human movement is expected to 'clear the underbrush' for dance ethnologists and dance teachers, who by this view are members of 'the real' (dance) world.

One sympathizes with a scholar who is asked by a group of school teachers to leave the high towers of academia and preoccupations with theoretical and epistemological issues in order to join the practical world where students wish to collect dances in graphic form so that they may reconstruct and then perform them, albeit with the overall purpose of expressing an ethnic identity and of maintaining cultural traditions. But one also questions whether the request is acceded to in a manner that adequately deals with the "many dimensions" of the "complex subject" even if these are presented simply.

Kaepler's introductory material on Polynesian dance in general, and on the three geographical sub-divisions -- Hawai'i, Central Polynesia, and West Polynesia -- is succinct, yet extremely informative. In the best of the ethno-scientific tradition to which she belongs, the author incorporates indigenous categories into the larger perspective within which she organizes her material. One is led to see these dances as they are regarded by those who perform them, and also as they may be regarded from a pan-Polynesian, even a world-wide, viewpoint. Careful attention is given to the intent and content of different genera of dances, thus providing a context from which to understand their respective aesthetics, forms and immediate social purpose. While these sections do not overtly address theoretical issues, they are clearly informed by them and successfully demonstrate how crucial such considerations are to sound ethnographic description.

The main body of the book, however, is devoted to the presentation of eight dances in a form of notation devised for the use of 'nonspecialists', and it is here that one notes, sadly, a marked absence of sound theory. Or rather, one is distressed by the assumptions about movement -- about how it can be adequately represented, and therefore about what it is -- that underlie the presentation. In trying to accommodate the 'nonspecialists' lack of training in movement notation, and lack of interest in 'esoteric' theory, Kaepler reinforces some misconceptions about movement that one would have hoped an anthropologist of movement would take pains to remove.

To begin with, although we are told that these dances have been transcribed into two notation systems expressly developed for movement (Labanotation and Benesh) the material has been published in a pictorial notation of the author's own devising. Kaepler's "integrated score" turns out to be merely a slight improvement on the kinds of mnemonic shorthands which describe movements in words and pictorial diagrams of some positions. While these kinds of truncated methods may be useful to jog the memory of someone who knows an idiom of movement and can already perform a specific dance, they rarely serve to communicate movements to those who are unfamiliar with them. A point that Kaepler seems to ignore is that movements are not positions, and that a graphic system for notating movements must be able to retain the flow of movement through time between positions rather than merely encapsulate jumps from position to position (cf. Farnell, 1984:125ff).

One is surprised that a linguistically trained anthropologist such as Kaepler should fail to recognize the importance of the relationship between graphic symbols and the signs they are used to represent. The use of a proper writing system for movement is not simply a methodological tool, it is a technological innovation comparable to the phonetic alphabet. To substitute the alphabet with an ad hoc method for writing spoken language (say, one which was based on notating mouth positions) simply because a non-literate population might find these easier to relate to than 'a' and 'b', would be a tremendous set back not only for literacy per se but also for an understanding of spoken language. While Hawai'ian dance teachers and students may be non-specialists in the sense that they are less concerned with an anthropology of movement, they are nevertheless users of the living body languages

concerned and thus wish in a way to specialize in them. Moreover, in making a request for notated dances they have themselves expressed the need for a system of writing. Why then could Kaepler not have developed one that was based on the symbol set of an extant system of writing movement such as Labanotation?

The issues of movement literacy, discussed by Williams (1976, 1977, and 1980), Farnell (1983), Puri (1984), Durr (1981) and Farnell and Durr (1981) are not separable from the concerns of movement research, but involve the very understanding of movement as a symbolic system for communication among human beings. While discussion of theoretical considerations may not be of interest to a nonspecialist reader, they should inform the presentation of movement material by specialists who are involved in such concerns.

Kaepler furthers some misguided preconceptions about learning movement writing when she proposes her pictorial method: that such shorthands are easier, i.e. less time-consuming, and more useful, than learning movement writing symbols. Yet an intermediate level in Labanotation, for example, which is adequate for a beginning reader (and even writer), can be acquired within six weeks, or ninety hours in a classroom. As currently taught, the pedagogical system favours the learning of those symbols and conventions for writing movement which are most frequently used in western dance idioms such as ballet, American modern dance, and European or north American 'folk' dances. There is no reason, however, that a trained anthropologist of movement and specialist in the dances of an area could not develop a simplified usage of Labanotation appropriate for a particular family of body languages (cf. Puri, 1983), one which could be taught simultaneously with instruction in the movements themselves. The time taken to learn the conventions of a pictorial shorthand would be comparable to the time necessary to learn the symbols for writing the movements themselves. The difference is that a student would also have acquired an understanding of the major movement elements of the body language concerned. The visual image of a graphic symbol for a 'hip swing', for example, would then be fused to the concept of that movement in Tahitian 'aparima' regardless of whether that movement were perceived kinesthetically, visually or rhythmically (as opposed to its being seen as two static positions represented by 'stick figures' as on pp. 54-55 and 75-81). Detailed analysis of the movement could be presented in a glossary, while the symbol proposed for actual use in scores could be simplified, as is the case with the complex Graham contraction used by notators of that idiom of American modern dance (cf. Hart-Johnson, 1984:74; Puri and Hart, 1982:bet. pp. 82-83).

Given that Kaepler's major contribution as a specialist has been a detailed analysis of the kinemic elements of Tongan dance, one is surprised that no attempt was made to incorporate such research into her scores. Instead she appears to have fallen into the trap of divorcing theory from methodology and also of making a distinction between 'esoteric' methodology (i.e. that which is followed by an ivory tower academic) and 'methodology for the lay person' into the bargain. Thus in attempting to bridge the gap between scholarly writing and practical or applied forms of dance study, she serves in the end to create a chasm between

them, implicitly reinforcing the view held by many members of 'the real' dance world that a concern with the anthropology of movement is a self-indulgent game valuable only to an elect few. Perhaps the present reviewer takes too seriously the responsibility of an academic researcher to the more practical realms of a field of knowledge, but that is because one cannot believe in the separation of theory and practice.

As a member also of that 'real' world of performers and teachers, I am aware of the value of the 'esoteric' anthropological knowledges to the practice of dancing, and am convinced of the importance of understanding how a body language works to the actual performance of it, particularly when one deals with idioms of movement that are not wholly 'native' to the performer (i.e. where these kinds of knowledges have not been acquired as part of growing up in and living a particular culture).

In offering a collection of notated artifacts to a group of people who wish to perform dances as one means of furthering their understanding of their traditional culture and of keeping it alive, one also offers a way in which these can be understood. No amount of overt eschewing of theory can guard against the fact that such presentations are, willy nilly, theory laden. I wish therefore to suggest to specialists in human movement that it is far better to incorporate a well-considered theory into one's material (however much that material may be simplified) than to permit the reinforcement of the very misconceptions that are anathema to one's specialization. In the same way that Kaeppler's simplified (but not simplistic) descriptive and verbal overview of Polynesian dance is informed by a classificatory schema grounded in sound anthropological theory, so too a simplified presentation of specific data and the action signs themselves should (and can) profit from theoretical understandings arrived at after years of research. Failing this, an anthropologist attributes dubious ethnographic omnipotence to the very people who turn to him or her for guidance and, not incidentally, gives the impression that (s)he believes that 'they' cannot know better.

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