

AFTERWORD

Scholarship and the dance has always (and continues to be) regarded as a subject not to be taken seriously. Academic scholarship about dances and dancing still takes place mostly in a Western cultural milieu. Many people in that milieu consider dances to belong to "the arts". They don't see dancing as a universally practiced human behavior that involves psychological, spiritual and cognitive functions as well as the more obvious physical expressions and functions. This behavior, while stemming from a universal biological and cognitive human apparatus, has a large range of cultural forms (obviously), individual and collective meanings (less recognized) and social functions (hardly ever discussed). Western culture has so conditioned Western scholars (and increasingly, "others" as well) to the categorization of dancing as "art" that they are worse than blind to the rest of the world of dancing.

There is, for example, a recent account in the *New York Times* of a British man who became blind shortly after birth and remained so until he was about fifty years old, at which time, a new medical procedure restored his sight. In experiments, he could not recognize or integrate objects into his frame of reference without resorting to touch, which was the way he had encountered and assimilated the world throughout his whole lifetime until his sight was restored. He would turn off the lights in his home at night and negotiate life as a blind person in the dark because for him, this was a familiar and unthreatening world.

Western minds seem to want the dance to remain in the dark in the same way. Scholarship with reference to the dance, dancing or dances is given no respect because old attitudes, vested interests, and stereotyped categories are so pervasive and ingrained that even scholars of other disciplines, for example, anthropology, political science, sociology and history, refuse to take dancing seriously.

As with any other prejudice, people keep on in the old comfortable habits of thought. Changes and the re-ordering they entail is always frightening and inconvenient. The most threatening feature of the required changes, if we are to shift our traditional prejudices, is changing what we think human beings are all about. That is, we aren't always rational, in control, masters of our fates, whether individual or collective.

Studying dances points to an alternate picture where, in addition to, and mediated by, cerebral processes, human beings can physically and collectively incorporate¹ symbols and imagery, and work out the business of human society and life (see Williams 1991 for discussion of the mind/body split in Western philosophy). We are still "animals" too. Does learning through physical encounters and movement stop after infancy?

Infant brains develop as their physical apparatus encounters, manipulates and integrates the objects of the world around them. Does this sort of visceral learning and thinking stop at some age? I don't think so. I think the power of dancing -- what makes it frightening -- is that it utilizes alternate ways of learning available to us throughout our lives. As music aids creativity, thought and synthesis, why not the dance?

Other examples of Western ignorance and disregard for scholarship in the dance world come to mind: as a teacher of introductory cultural anthropology courses, I am familiar with many of the popular texts available for college courses. I was first delighted to find a textbook in 1992 entitled *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Approach*, by Gary Ferraro (West Publishing Co., N.Y.), with a chapter devoted to "expressive culture".

While reading the book, I was dismayed to find the *only* authority on dancing quoted in this new, presumably up-to-date, book was Alan Lomax, familiar through his much criticized work on *Choreometrics*. I was appalled for several reasons and asked myself, doesn't the essential silliness of the idea that "dance tends to reflect and reinforce work patterns" (Ferraro, p. 23) prevent any social scientist from quoting Lomax? Apparently, it doesn't!

Five seconds of reflection on that statement should turn up several counter examples within anyone's experience whether they know anything about dancing or not. Reading the example cited -- Eskimo fishing movements that are repeated exactly in drumming and dancing movements -- is ludicrous. "Surely", I thought, "no one reading that ever took it seriously because it reduces human beings to automatons". Where, I wondered, is the "expression" in such "expressive culture"?

Criticism of Lomax, however, is not my objective here. That has been carried out thoroughly and more devastatingly by others.² My criticism is for Ferraro. It is disgusting that an author of a textbook would grab any old thing off the shelf about dancing and heedlessly include it in a new introductory

textbook. If the topic were kinship, religion or cultural ecology, we can be sure the author wouldn't have done this. He wouldn't have settled on the first reference that came to hand (a twenty-year old one at that) and not bothered to check and cross-check other sources that criticize, correct and augment this one author's viewpoint.

It seems to me (and many of my colleagues) that the contempt for studies of dances that produces such cursory treatment is the same contempt that produces sloppy scholarship like Lomax's in the first place. After all, the topic of expressive culture is at the back of the textbook. Nobody finishes textbooks anyway -- the idea being, apparently, that the "important stuff" has already been covered. Is it any wonder that Curt Sachs's *World History of the Dance* has not yet been retired with the rest of the armchair anthropological and ethnomusicological accounts?

Both Sachs and Lomax continue to be quoted by dabblers in the study of dances who, unfortunately, never bother to find out how roundly those authors have been rejected by those who have for years made serious studies of dances.

Further to the point: these dabblers in the dance are themselves another thorn in the flesh of serious scholars. A particular example that comes to mind is Alfred Gell's analysis of Umeda dancing.³ Gell is well-known for his work on New Guinea, but he, like so many others, imagines dancing to be an untouched aspect of human behavior, ripe for analysis by an enterprising social scientist. He tells us that,

One of the difficulties that has prevented progress in the field of the anthropology of dance...has been the need for a notation for the non-dance expert.... Labanotation and Benesh notation both have their advocates, but are equally incomprehensible to the rest of the anthropology profession who are unlikely to undertake the task of learning complicated systems of hieroglyphics lightly. It seems to me that this problem can only be attacked piecemeal.... For present purposes I have devised a system, for whose crudity I make no apologies, that reduces Umeda dance movements simply to movements of the leg, seen sideways on. Of course, when dancing Umedas move the whole body in extremely complex ways...(Gell 1985:186-187).

Would this sort of thinking and cavalier treatment be tolerated, given the respect for printed forms of knowledge, if it concerned a kinship analysis, an economic model or a linguistic analysis? It is precisely because of such piecemeal and improvised "systems of crudity" that the field of the anthropology of the dance and human movement studies has not progressed. We may well ask, would linguists propose their own phonetic alphabet on the grounds that the international standard is a "complicated system of hieroglyphics" which is too much trouble to learn? Would works done in such improvised idiosyncratic systems get published, or would they be laughed out of court?

It seems that everyone is an expert on the dance because anyone can see dancing, *ergo*, it must all be quite obvious and superficial requiring no preparation to study it. From my own experience, Labanotation is in fact easier to grasp (and it is a writing system in which anthropologists should become minimally functional) than learning a second language -- something all anthropologists are expected to do without complaints about difficulties.

In *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*, Williams uses Gell as an example of "commonsense theories" of dancing:

...commonsense thinking about dancing is mainly composed of an individualized aggregate of received ideas, assumptions, personal experiences, casual observation, prejudices, which taken together do not amount to very much, yet, the influence of this kind of thinking should not be underestimated. Because there is little or no formal preparation in social and cultural anthropology for the study of movement, actions or the dance, the investigator is often forced to fabricate *some* kind of thinking (Williams 1991:234).

Thus, we have come full circle. The teaching about dancing in anthropology courses isn't taken seriously or approached critically and anthropologists without training continue to provide amateur, non-comparable, individualistic studies -- and the cycle continues.

Finally, I come to the issue at hand: the two versions of the articles on Australian Aboriginal dancing presented here. The first versions of Williams's and Fisher's articles are carefully thought out. The second versions are "condensed and edited" by the Encyclopedia's editors. I, too, have suffered from such editorial hatchet-jobs: a ten page paper was condensed to four

pages; a table showing the historical relationship between several Kenyan dance forms was uncut, but the discussion and comparison of similar processes in different dance cultures (Tonga and Swahili) was cut (see Franken 1987)⁴. The significant point I, as author, wanted to make was lost to all readers, just as Williams's and Fisher's points have been lost to readers of the *Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*.

The root problem is, in my opinion, the same: that is, dancing isn't serious anyway, so why bother to print accurate and challenging insights about it? The old assumptions, stereotypes and inaccuracies have served well enough in the past, although we might ask, "served whom?", and "to do what?" The dance isn't serious anyway, except for fun and/or profit, so it really doesn't matter. Anyone can take a pot-shot at dances and the scholars who write about them because,

- (a) their subject is trivial,
- (b) dancers are marginal, along with "primitives", gays and women, and
- (c) the activity is just for fun and profit anyway.

Now, we have editors who are so sure of their correctness, entrenched as it is in western academic attitudes toward the dance, they feel no compunction what-so-ever in chopping to useless, misleading mincemeat the very scholarship they are supposedly advancing.

How deep do prejudices penetrate? How much damage do they do? The United States, almost thirty years after the Civil Rights movement, got another reminder through the recent Congressional controversy about the Confederate flag -- a symbol of slavery that still wounds Black Americans. What about the prejudices against dances -- and anyone, including legitimate scholars, who are involved with them? Has anyone died because of this prejudice? Probably not, but surely many have suffered mental anguish as a result, as I have, and as the two authors cited in this issue have.

Entrenched, immovable prejudices in these cases has caused standards of truth and integrity in scholarly publishing to succumb. The irony is nearly overwhelming. In a publication ostensibly intended to advance the position of dances as a scholarly subject, we find repetitions and perpetuations of some of the worst stereotypes about "primitives" and "primitive dancing"⁵ ever to see the light of day. But, after all is said and done, who cares?

It's only dancing.

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NOTES:

¹ I intend this word to be taken in an absolutely literal sense.

² See Keali'inohomoku, J. 1976. Caveat on Causes and Correlations. *CORD NEWS* 6(2):20-24; Williams 1976. Review of Lomax *et al*, *Choreometrics*. *Dance Research Journal* 6(2):25-27; Williams 1991, chapter 6 'Functional Explanations' in *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey; and Youngerman, S. Curt Sachs and His Heritage: A Critical Review of World History of the Dance with a Survey of Recent Studies that Perpetuate His Ideas. *CORD NEWS* 6(2):6-19.

³ See Gell, A. 1985. Style and Meaning in Umeda Dance. *Society and the Dance*. P. Spencer (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, U.K.

⁴ See Franken, M. 1987. Womens' Dances on the Swahili Coast. *Dance Ethnology Journal*, #11, U.C.L.A.

⁵ Glasser's article, to follow, deals yet again, with the category of "primitive dance" and its deleterious effects on research and writing about dances.. Following what Franken has to say, the article needs no further introduction. [The Editors]