

Editorial Foreword

In this issue, Hall and Martin discuss the dance traditions of two island nations, Ireland and Haiti respectively. Juxtaposing these accounts raises some interesting definitional and classificatory problems that we will discuss briefly below, but first, some facts and figures about the two nations

Ireland (Irish Éire) is an island country lying to the west of Great Britain. The island is roughly 302 miles long from north to south and 171 miles wide from east to west, with a land area of 27,137 square miles. Its only land neighbor is Northern Ireland of the United Kingdom, which occupies the northeastern portion of the island. Except for that, Ireland's south, west and north borders are the Atlantic ocean, with the Irish sea and St. George's Channel separating it from Great Britain to the east. The capital is Dublin. In 1992, the population was estimated at 3,519,000. In contrast to mountainous Haiti, only 15% of the country rises above 700 feet elevation. The highest peak, Carrantuohill, is located in the southwestern highlands reaching 3,414 feet above sea level. Ireland was invaded and colonized within historic times by Celts, Norsemen, Normans, English and Scots, but racial and ethnic distinctions are virtually nonexistent in the republic today. Human settlement began on the island sometime around 6,000 B.C. by hunters and fishers on the east coast. Celtic Ireland dates approximately from the Iron Age (perhaps 300 B.C.) St. Patrick arrived in Ireland in the 5th century A.D. and is credited with Christianizing the entire country. Nearly 95% of the population today is Roman Catholic. Irish is the first official language and English the second, but English is universally spoken and taught in all the schools. Although Ireland's gross national product *per capita* is lower than those of its western European neighbors, it is considered to be a developed country .

The Republic of Haiti is an island country of the West Indies -- the only independent French-speaking country in the Americas. It lies approximately one thousand miles southeast of Florida in the Atlantic Ocean and has a total land area (comprising two peninsulas) of 10,579 square miles, most of it mountainous. About two fifths of its land is above 1,600 feet elevation. Its northern border is the Atlantic Ocean, the eastern border is The Dominican Republic and its southern and western borders are the Caribbean Sea. Its capital is Port-au-Prince (see map, p. 92). In 1990, Haiti's population was estimated to be 5,590,000. Nearly the entire population (excepting 5% mulattos and a tiny minority of whites) are descendants of the 480,000 African slaves who won their freedom in 1804, at the time of Haiti's independence. Roman Catholicism is the major religion, but Vodou, a syncretic folk religion in which a Christian Divinity rules over an African pantheon, is widely practiced. Haitian Creole and French are the official languages. Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas, with a developing market economy based mostly on agriculture and light industry. Agriculture accounts for one third of the gross national product and employs about three fifths of the population. Production of food falls far short of domestic demand and nearly all of the country's food is imported. The Republic's history prior to Columbus's voyage to Hispaniola

in 1492 is comparatively unknown, except for facts such as the decimation of the indigenous Arawak Indian population by the Spaniards and some of the activities of French pirates during the 17th century who were based in the Cayman Islands and had great influence in western Hispaniola, being the precursors of the French West India Company. The country's greatest period of economic prosperity was achieved during the 18th century, but its former slaves rebelled against French rule declaring their independence under the original Arawak name -- Haiti (summarized from *Encyclopædia Britannica*).

Both island nations have strong dance traditions, each of which is in a different stage of internal evolution. Ireland's folk dances are undergoing a process of change, noticeable through the unusual posture of Irish dancing:

Although there has been some discussion about the reason for the unique posture of Irish dances, investigation reveals there is no single reason for the style. A number of forces have impinged upon the practice of solo Irish step-dancing. Three factors emerge: (i) the practice of the dancing as physical education; (ii) the processes and requirements of formalized competition, and (iii) the agenda of nationalism. These features merge to form a powerful and consistent ethos that has precipitated the particular development of Irish dancing, including its posture (*infra*, p. 74).

Hall explains that the central issues with regard to Irish dancing are (and have been for some time) those of authenticity, authority and control. The author convincingly argues that it is the way these themes interrelate and merge "in the practice of Irish dancing as physical education, competition and national symbol", that constitutes the recognizable national style of these dance forms. The role of religion and the church in the present process of change is relatively minor, although interesting legends and folklore about its influences historically abound. In strong contrast, Vodou is a "way of life":

Within its purview fall such subjects as health (physical and psychological), personal relationships, the potential success of business ventures, artistic expression and entertainment, and more orthodox religious obligations and practices concerning Divinity. Views regarding the expressive properties of the body are thus consonant with the overarching wholistic thrust of Vodou philosophy (*infra*, p. 94).

Vodou dances and dancing neatly conform in every way with Geertz's paradigm: viz.,

[T]hat sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos--the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood--and their world view--the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (Geertz 1973: 89),

but Irish dances and dancing do not exactly conform to the paradigm. Why?

Because Irish dancing, even the distinctive posture that is a marker for the idiom and provides a launching point for so much heated discussion about authenticity and national identity, isn't a system of *sacred* symbols. Yet, there is a sense in which the posture of Irish dancing *does* embody the tone and character of a significant portion of Irish life and -- if Hall's teachers and

informants are to be believed -- it certainly involves their moral and aesthetic character and their characterizations of Irish life.

The interesting thing about juxtaposing accounts of the dance forms of Haiti and Ireland is the definitional problem into which readers are projected, and the possible solution Geertz provides, which will be discussed later. In the meantime, we shall keep in mind his warning:

[I]t is notorious that definitions establish nothing, in themselves they do, if they are carefully enough constructed, provide a useful orientation, or reorientation, of thought such that an extended unpacking of them can be an effective way of developing and controlling a novel line of inquiry (Geertz 1973: 90).

In the vexed, confused (and confusing) definitional terminology currently used by the majority of western dance scholars, Haitian dancing *might* be referred to as "tribal dancing" and would almost certainly be classified as "primitive" dancing because, apparently it

[I]s essentially a self-contained system. While it may possess sophisticated cultural and social structures, its technological and economic structures are generally primitive. Consequently, by the late 20th century such societies had become increasingly rare, and many tribal dances had either died or become transformed. . . . In extant tribal societies, such as the Hopi Indians of northeastern Arizona, dance retains most of its traditional form and significance. The Hopi still dance as a form of worship, with specific dances for different ceremonies . . . (Mackrell 1994: 954).

The author of the *Tribal and Ethnic Dance* and *Folk Dance* entries in the latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had a real problem: not only does the word 'tribal' cover so many different kinds of dance, it is inapplicable in other ways:

An interesting parallel with tribal dances may be found in the break-dancing and "body-popping" craze that swept the United States and Britain in the 1980s. While the dancers clearly were not members of a tribe in any strict sense, they were often members of a distinct group or crew that had its own style and identity. . . (Mackrell 1994: 955).

Then, too, like the Hopi (whose dances, we are told, are 'tribal' because of their religious content), Haitians "still dance as a form of worship", but are the Haitians a 'tribe'? Mackrell might say "no" to that, choosing instead to classify Haitian Vodou dances as "ethnic", since they are dances that are "characteristic of a particular cultural group" (1994: 955).

Afro-Caribbean dance forms are usually considered to constitute a distinct ethnic form because they share certain characteristic movements. As in Indian dance, the legs are frequently bent, with the feet stamping out rhythms against the ground. The torso and back are also very mobile, executing sinuous rippling actions or more jerky, rhythmic movement. The body is frequently bent slightly forward, and there is greater use of the hips, which sway and circle in syncopated rhythms. Gestures and facial expressions are used in some narrative dances, but they tend to be much less sophisticated or strictly codified than in Indian dance (Mackrell 1994: 955).

The dances of Haiti are no doubt part of the larger category, "Afro-Caribbean dance forms" and they *do* possess "characteristic movements," but these are

dictated by the *lwa* (the Divinity whose dance it is), as Martin so ably describes (*infra* pp. 108-110). It isn't true, however, that they bear resemblance to the Indian forms of dancing Mackrell compares them with because (a) the feet and legs aren't deliberately turned out, even though the knees are usually bent, and (b) the torso doesn't remain "lifted and upright", as, for example, in Bharatanatyam, where the torso is only rarely "bent slightly forward". In fact, the carriage of the torso in Bharatanatyam is more similar to that in Irish dancing.

Under the categorical scheme Mackrell uses, we are invited to conclude that Haitian dances are "ethnic" because they are "characteristic of a particular cultural group" and "they share certain characteristic movements". They are also "primitive" not only because they exist in a "developing" rather than a "developed" country, but because they are seen "to be much less sophisticated or codified than Indian dance". Martin's account of six Haitian dances effectively destroys *that* myth, providing ample evidence, as she does, that these dances are strictly codified in every sense of the word.

About all we are left with, then, is "primitive" -- an ineffectual category *because it has nothing to do with the dancing*. The word refers instead (in the Haitian case) to the technological and economic state of the republic in which it takes place. According to the line of thinking suggested by this classification, *does it not follow* that highly complex Haitian dance forms depend, *not upon the dancing itself*, but upon the medium of exchange Haitians use -- or the presence of hand-plows and hoes instead of tractors -- and wooden outhouses instead of tiled bathrooms?

We may well ask, if "ethnic" dances are dances that are "characteristic of a particular cultural group," then aren't Haitian dances *and Irish dances* "ethnic dances"? But no -- we find a further category:

FOLK DANCE. When tribal societies in Europe gave way to more structured societies, the old dance forms gradually developed into what are now called folk or peasant dances. For a long time these retained much of their original significance and therefore could have received the modern classification of "ethnic." . . . The types and styles of these different dances were numerous, and, as with tribal dances, many were lost so that information about them often remains sketchy . . . (Mackrell 1994: 955).

Mackrell would have done well to take several pages out of Keali'inohomoku's seminal article entitled, *An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as an Ethnic Form of Dance* (1969/1980). For those who are familiar with this work, we may seem to be beating a dead horse yet, in spite of Keali'inohomoku's suggestions, we find that the same old definitional problems still persist.

Sometimes they appear in new guises. If the categories used above merely restate labels long ago recognized by anthropologists as inadequate, equally unhelpful are more recent "ethnochoreological categories" such as those presented by Nahachewsky (1995). This author suggests we embrace the terms "participatory" and "presentational". In Nahachewsky's own research this contrast names two different contexts for the performance of the same

Ukrainian dance, *Kolomyika*. So far, so good. Serious problems begin to arise, however, when he conflates this distinction of *context* with a distinction between *types of dances*, as when he then refers to Kaeppler's use of a contrast between "dances of impersonation and dances of participation" in Melanesian ceremonies, or the ethnocentric tendencies of Western dance critics to talk in terms of "communal dances executed for the pleasure of the executant" versus "art dances executed for the edification of the watcher". Later we learn that the typology is based upon neither context nor type of dance, but "differences in the identity of the recipient of the communicated dance message" (1995:2). A basic error involved here, then, is the author's failure to recognize that to characterize one thing as different from another requires one to say that they are different "in some respect" that is, that there is *a common dimension in terms of which they differ*. Without recognition of such a common dimension typologies cannot characterize meaningful differences in a principled manner.

In addition, the categories themselves are subject to further slippery treatment, being presented first as a "dichotomy" and then as a "participatory-presentational axis" (Nahachewsky 1995:2).

Focusing on "the recipient of the danced message" Nahachewsky concludes that "a complete listing of possible viewers may allow us to group dance phenomena into four categories"-- "reflexive dance", "participatory dance", "sacred dance" and "presentational dance". So the original dichotomy (or axis?) has now become an all-encompassing four-way typology on the basis of "possible viewers". Apart from a failure to understand the anthropological import of the term "reflexive" as distinct from "reflective" (which is what he actually means here), the author again offers no common ground on the basis of which we should accept this typology as meaningful. He simply states that the "short circuit" of a somewhat mechanistic communications model of choreographic performance corresponds to his "reflexive" category, while the "long circuit" of the same model includes all three of the others. He assures us that, just as the short circuit and long circuit are "simultaneous communication routes during dancing" so these four categories are not exclusive -- the typology is "based on the relative importance of each communication circuit" (1995:4). So now the categories refer neither to context, type of dances, nor type of viewers, but to relative placing on a message transmission circuit!

Had Nahachewsky restricted himself to "context" as the dimension common to these two categories, then a distinction between contexts of participation and contexts of presentation might indeed prove useful when discussing changes in Ukrainian and other Eastern European dance traditions. The distinction might also be productively applied to other situations in which traditional dance forms undergo change to accommodate tourist audiences or performances in European and American capitals. Caution is again necessary, however. Such categories would make no sense at all, for example, in discussions of contemporary Plains Indian dance forms, where changes in context do not alter the fact that "participation", -- whether formal or

informal, by dancers who are members of the local community or visitors -- is always simultaneously "presentational".

In the anthropology of dance and human movement studies we have tried to work towards what Geertz suggested: definitions and classifications that provide a useful *reorientation* of thought (1973: 90).

Geertz's analysis of the classificatory problems with regard to religion turns around a known western partiality for *compartmentalization*. He asks that we set this tendency aside and *re-evaluate religions themselves as cultural systems*. We suggest that his suggestion be applied to dances, where we would benefit by setting aside our partiality for compartmentalization, because, as we have seen, the compartments that are commonly used to classify dances are so muddled they are nonsensical.

Could we not replace the phrases, 'ethnic dance', 'tribal dance', 'folk dance', 'social dance' and 'primitive dance' with the phrase 'cultural tradition' -- even 'traditional dance form'? By doing so, we will see that some cultures separate their dancing from religion (as in the Irish case), and some cultures do not (as in the Haitian case). Vodou *does* amount to a total way of life for its practitioners, where Irish step-dancing -- even the growing institution of *competitive* Irish dancing -- does not represent a way of life in the same sense.

Comparative method continually prompts us to look at a whole range of danced traditions. Dance scholars are being pushed to the limits of their definitions and beyond because of the demands of the multi-cultural world in which we find ourselves today. Talking about *all* forms of dancing as cultural traditions would permit us to continue asking how and in what ways dancing interacts with other aspects of their socio-historical contexts, and -- who knows? -- we might be able finally to discover if it is possible to isolate those phenomena that are specifically 'dancing' from other formalized movement systems. We might question the usefulness of western conceptions of 'dance' as a universal category, as Kaeppler encourages us to do in her perceptive analysis of Tongan cultural traditions (1985). We could *really* pay attention to the ways in which people from different social and linguistic backgrounds classify and define what dancing is, which is the most disappointing omission in the commonly used, largely unexamined, definitions and interpretations of 'dance' that Mackrell uses. We could thus try to interpret dances both as 'culture' and *as distinctive examples of human actions that correlate with other elements of the cultures in which they exist*, as both writers in this issue of *JASHM* have done.

Semasiologists call danced cultural traditions "action sign systems". According to Urciuoli, the phrase is "very apt", because

[S]ignification is an action and so must be located in time and space. The defining properties of meaningful action are precisely those not visible in a grammatical-semantic model, the units and rules of which are essentially timeless (cf. Bourdieu 1977). The creation of meaning is above all embedded in human relationships: people enact their selves to each other in words, movements, and other modes of action. All selves are

culturally defined, as time and space themselves are culturally defined. Time and space are never simply there; they are continually cut to fit the agenda of the movement (Urciuoli 1995: 189).

The phrase "action sign systems" is, however, tied to a particular theoretical and methodological system of analysis which some may not wish to embrace, hence the alternative solution suggested by Geertz's work. His phrase, "cultural tradition" (danced cultural tradition; cultural dance tradition) is theoretically neutral. Apart from that, we think these three choices would represent vast improvements over 'ethnic dance', 'primitive dance', 'tribal dance' and 'folk dance'.

All social *personas* are 'ethnic', thus we think of Irish step-dancing, Haitian Vodou dancing or *any other form of dancing, including the ballet, as ethnic*. Not only does doing so erase the none-too-subtle implications of superiority implied by 'primitive' and 'tribal', it is simply more accurate to talk about danced cultural traditions or ethnic traditions.

The Editors

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