

A Dancer Thinks About 'Dance' Cross-Culturally

Like many girls in America, I started taking dancing lessons at an early age and continued with them for most of my childhood. In my early twenties, after completing one bachelor's degree, I decided to change directions and study American modern dance full time, entering the dance program at the University of Minnesota. Choosing to study dancing at a university meant that I also began to study the academic disciplines which are concerned with the dance, which meant that my exposure to dance forms from other cultures began slowly to increase. At some point (I don't remember exactly when), I realized that movement is not a universal means of communication. The meanings of specific movements are culturally determined, and persons from two different cultures can misunderstand each other's movement and body language as easily as they can misunderstand each other's spoken languages. As I was introduced to the work of anthropologists who are studying and writing on human movement systems, particularly those of non-western cultures,¹ I became aware that the way different cultures think about movement and organize movement systems is also far from universal.

It is important for dancers (and here I especially mean people studying or performing in western concert dance genres) to realize that the ways in which the dance fits into our culture and the way we determine what is or is not a dance *applies only to our culture*. There has traditionally been a tendency to see ballet as the ultimate development of the dance and to classify all other forms in relationship to ballet: modern dance considered as a reaction to ballet; 'social', 'folk', 'ethnic', and 'primitive' dances seen as evolutionary precursors or off-shoots of ballet. In recent years, scholars in many disciplines have begun to examine the ways in which their traditions have been ethnocentric and to attempt to correct that situation. Correcting ethnocentrism in the study of the dance means placing the dances and dance forms of western culture along side of, not above, those of other cultures. It also means acknowledging when dances from other cultures have influenced dance forms and choreographers in our culture.

This paper represents a kind of 'personal anthropology' (see Williams 1991: 287-321) concerning ideas encountered through the anthropological study of human movement systems -- in particular ideas about the cross-cultural use of the concept 'dance' as a classification for human movement and how the use of the term 'dance' and adjectives such as 'primitive' or 'ethnic' contribute to western ethnocentrism.

'Dance' in Western Culture

Before beginning to consider 'dance' cross-culturally, it was necessary to clarify for myself some of the problems with classifying movement as 'dance' within western culture. The discussion is brief and somewhat dated, because I have since studied philosophical and aesthetical writings about western

dance. As a result, my thinking about these issues has become more complex and developed, however, it is worth leaving "as is" both because it shows where my thinking started, and, significant revision would produce another paper.

Within western culture, how do we determine which activities are considered dance and which are not? The category 'dance' is broad, including theatrical dance forms such as Ballet, Modern, and Jazz; social dances including Waltz, Fox-trot, Polka, Rumba, Cha-cha, and Mambo; aristocratic dances of the Renaissance; so-called 'folk' dances from various cultures, and dancing done in the streets and in clubs or discos, including American Hip-Hop' and many forms of Latin dancing. In contrast, sports such as football, soccer, basketball, skiing, and swimming fall in the 'not dance' group. In most contexts, these classifications are accepted, unless someone is trying to make a specific point about the nature of the dance. But what about activities where the movements, the rhythms, or the music may be similar to or even borrowed from a dance form? Here the distinctions become less clear and the boundaries more fuzzy. There are many activities that could be considered, i.e. gymnastics, rhythmic gymnastics, or color guards (from the marching band or drum and bugle corps idioms), but I will focus on just two examples: figure-skating and cheer leading.

Figure-skating is one of the most popular winter Olympic sports in America, yet in many ways it is very similar to dance. It shares common elements with three genres of dance in America. The most obvious connection can be seen in ice-dancing where we can still clearly see its beginnings in ballroom dance forms transferred onto the ice. In the compulsory round, athletes skate to ballroom dance rhythms like the Rumba, Fox-trot, or Paso Doble. On the other side, ballroom dancing, like ice dancing, has both amateur and professional levels of competition. The similarities between ballet and figure-skating can be seen most clearly in the men's and women's singles competitions. The carriage of the torso in both forms is upright with little bending and there is an emphasis on clean lines of the body. Ballet positions such as 'arabesques' and 'attitudes' are frequently seen in skating. In fact, many world class skaters like Oksana Baiul study ballet to improve their skating, and well known ballets are beginning to be staged on ice. *Sleeping Beauty* and the *Nutcracker* have been well received and it is certain that others will follow.

The repertoires of professional ice shows touring throughout America and around the world represent performance genres which have similarities with what we can see on vaudeville circuits and Broadway musicals. The skating seen in ice shows, like the dancing in musicals and in vaudeville, is entertainment which uses movement as its primary medium. Olympic and World class amateur skaters are first class athletes, but professional skaters are first class performers, entertainers, and I would argue that some are artists. The well known American skater Scott Hamilton has an Olympic gold

medal and still competes professionally, but when I watch him skate, I see a performer and entertainer in the same class with Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, or Dan Daily. Ice-dancing gold medalists from Great Britain, Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean, are another example of the combination of athlete and performer. In Christopher Dean's choreography for themselves and other ice-dance couples, many of the same issues exist as in the choreography of ballet and modern dancing. Torvill and Dean's performances could easily stand with Hollywood's greatest dancing couples.

The unique American activity -- cheer leading -- is generally not considered to be 'dance' but is classified as a sport. Students can even attend college on "full-ride" cheer leading scholarships. Regional and national competitions are heated on both high school and college levels. But what about the dance-lines or drill teams often associated with cheer leading? In 1996, the state of Minnesota was petitioned by parents, coaches and participants to classify this almost entirely female extra-curricular activity as a high school sport. The appeal was based on the nature of its competitions and training. On the other hand, these squads are often coached by (and their routines choreographed by) dancers who use movements from jazz and hip-hop idioms. In very good squads, many of the participants also take dance classes, particularly jazz-dance classes, outside of school.

I do not suggest that figure-skating and dancing, or cheer leading and dancing are the same things, because clearly they are not. However, some of the same aesthetic considerations might be brought to bear on all three, and when studying the role of each of the three human movement activities in American society, there would certainly be similarities.

In western culture dances may be forms of art, entertainment, recreation, social interaction and (to a far lesser degree) religious expression. Scholarship of the dance in the west has been concerned with the dance in three primary ways: (1) the *history* of dances in these categories and how they have developed and changed over time; (2) *practical* accounts and records of 'how-to-dance', both in treatises written by dancing masters of earlier centuries and in work by reconstructionists in this century and (4) *aesthetic and artistic theories and criticism* of the dance. There will continue to be debate in western scholarship about which specific activities are and are not designated by the term 'dance', but this does not seriously inhibit scholarship of the type mentioned above when it is concerned with western dance forms.

An Anthropological Look at 'Dance'

As anthropologists like Kaeppler, Keali'inohomoku, Williams and others have built up the anthropological study of human movement in the second half of this century, they have had to re-examine existing definitions of the dance. As Kaeppler points out, that we distinguish between what is and is not dance signals the existence of some sort of definition (1985: 93). Keali'inohomoku was unable to find a definition of dance that seemed

adequate to her, particularly *one that could be used cross-culturally*. After a number of years of careful consideration she set out her own definition:

Dance is a transient mode of expression, performed in a given form and style by the human body moving in space. Dance occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movements; the resulting phenomenon is recognized as dance both by the performer and the observing members of a given group (1980: 8).

According to Kaeppler, what we can know for sure about dance is that, "it has something to do with structured movement that is somehow further elaborated - perhaps by something as simple as having a definite beginning and ending" (1985: 93).

Is it ultimately possible to create a definition of 'dance' that is broad enough not to be exclusive and yet specific enough to be useful to the cross-cultural study of human movement? Even if we think we have a useful definition, we must take care in how we apply it. As Williams says,

[W]e must keep in mind the anthropological proviso that we satisfactorily determine beforehand that what we are seeing is a 'dance' and that we can legitimately translate the set of actions as if it was truly comparable to our understanding of that word (1991: 21).

What may appear to untrained eyes as 'dance,' may not occupy a place in its own culture that has anything to do with what westerners think of as the dance. *The concept 'dance' is useful only if there is an indigenous cultural equivalent*. Similarly, it is difficult for those of us in the west to talk about shamanism because there is no direct equivalent in our culture. The problem of using western concepts to discuss events or ideas in non-western cultures exists in many fields, not just in the study of human movement. Historically the practice has resulted in misunderstandings and fallacious conclusions.² Truly to learn about a society, we must examine it through the lens, not of *our own*, but of *its own* culture.

Kaeppler points out another problem that occurs when the category 'dance' is imposed on other cultures' movement. The western tendency is to classify movement elements gathered from various activities and consider them together as 'dance'. When we use the term 'dance' to group together movement elements of activities from a non-western culture, we often bring together activities that are separated in their own cultural context (1985: 93).

Hughes-Freeland helps explain how this happens. In western culture, performance is thought of as being divided into classifications: theater, dance, music, opera. It is also divided into genres: tragedy, comedy, classical, contemporary (1991: 346). In her study of Javanese palace performance, Hughes-Freeland points out the lack of agreement between Javanese and Western performance classifications. The Javanese do not have generic words for 'dance', 'theater', 'art', and music. Performers are identified by the specific form in which they work, "thus *bedhaya* for the *Bedhaya*, *ringgit* for the name of the character portrayed in *Ringgit Tiyang*" (1991: 349). Therefore, when

western scholars group Javanese performances into western genres, they impose a classification system based upon assumptions about art and performance in their own culture, thus obscuring the cultural role and significance of the forms in Javanese culture.

Expectations and Communication

Because of the strong emphasis on dance as an art form in western cultures, it is helpful briefly to examine how we view 'art'. Western art has been interpreted for centuries based on the Aristotelian principle that art imitates nature. This idea has been questioned, particularly in modern art, but the principle is still applied both inside and outside western artistic traditions. The result is an emphasis on the importance of meaning. If meaning can be identified, it can be analyzed and recreated verbally, resulting in a constant search for meaning in art (Hughes-Freeland 1991: 346).

The search for meaning leads to an expectation that information will be communicated, however, this is not always the goal of the person performing the movement or of the society of which it is a part. Hughes-Freeland warns against assuming that value depends on communicability. She reports that Javanese palace dance has meditative and esoteric qualities in it. "When palace dancers of the oldest generation talk about expression, they speak of an inward dynamic, an 'in-pression', not an extroverted movement of energy or emotion" (1991: 345-6). The type of attention audience members give to performers also shows the type of communication they expect. The audience for Javanese palace performance engages in other social activities during the event (Hughes-Freeland 1991: 352), much like westerners at a ball or party with live music, while the rapt attention of an audience for western performance is a measure of the success of the performance.

When an observer expects to receive information from a performance in a culture where this is not the intention, the perception of that performance is altered. Much of what western observers have missed when studying other cultures is a result of basic ignorance about the forms of indigenous aesthetics in the cultures they investigate or observe. As Hughes-Freeland argues, if we begin by looking for or expecting communication in Javanese palace performance, we may find what we are looking for but miss what the society itself values (1991: 347).

The message intended in performance may not be direct commentary about society, relationships, politics, etc., as is often the case in the west, but it may constitute an indirect reinforcement of proper roles in society, relationships to rulers, to the gods, and so on. These are issues that may be considered inappropriate for direct communication. "It may be that the 'actual content and meaning' may be the denial or dissimulation of clarity and accessibility" (Hughes-Freeland 1991: 347). In Tongan society, the value of indirect communication is seen in the aesthetic principle *heliaki*. *Heliaki* is seen in poetry, movement, and manner of speaking. It is the concept of not

speaking about or pointing to something directly, but rather alluding to it indirectly using symbolism and juxtaposition of opposites (Kaeppler 1985: 96).

In the study of Javanese palace performance (and in the study of other Asian and Oceanic cultures) the western desire to see communication appears as a preoccupation with *gesture*, specifically hand gesture (1991: 347). The belief is that if we can learn to read the meanings of specific hand gestures, we will then be able to understand the meaning of the dance, as if the gestures were part of a sign language, each roughly equivalent to a word. While gestures in classical Indian dances do have specific meanings, the specific gestures and movement sequences of the Javanese forms do not have fixed meanings in and of themselves (Hughes-Freeland 1991: 354).

As an alternative to previous methods, Kaeppler outlines the shape of her preferred method of human movement study:

An ideal study of a movement system would analyse the cultural forms in which human bodies are manipulated in time and space, the social processes that produce them according to the aesthetic precepts of a specific group of people at a specific point in time, and the components that differentiate activities that include movement (1985: 93).

Kaeppler recognizes that this type of study is difficult. Aesthetic sensibilities, cultural contexts, and social processes are often unexamined within a culture itself and they can be hard to determine or to discover. Nevertheless, learning how a society regards its movement systems is a vital part of understanding that society.

As a non-native observer of a culture, an anthropologist will always have a slightly different perspective from someone who has been reared in that culture. The perspective of an outsider allows the observer to notice things about another culture that remain hidden and unexamined by its insiders. However, at the same time, the observer must attempt to understand the view point of the culture itself as fully as possible to avoid drawing conclusions based on his or her own culture, but this is exactly what western scholars have been doing for centuries.

Scholars in many fields have been unaware of or have chosen to ignore the multiplicity of ways of conceiving of the world and society. In the worst cases, westerners have assumed that our ways are the only ways. If a practice or attitude did not fit our conception of what is right, civilized, or proper, it must be -- or have been -- wrong, uncivilized and improper. It has not had the option of fitting a different concept of those same ideas.

Ethnocentrism

Williams points out that when two cultures encounter one another, two different modes of conceptualization may actually be meeting (1991: 29). Historically, western dance scholars have often been unaware of this. Like

people in cultures around the world, we have divided the world into two groups: 'us' and 'them'. 'We' are naturally considered to be superior to 'them' and we often do not recognize that 'they' may have a different way of looking at life and the world around them. As Williams puts it, "we speak and write about other peoples as if we did not realize that they are talking about us at the same time" (1991: 29).

In a Eurocentric way of thinking, 'we' are civilized, and 'they' are primitive. Generally this thinking works on a sort of continuum, with western Europe, the U.S., Australia, Canada -- the "developed" countries on one end, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures in the middle, and Pacific, African, and Native American peoples on the other end. It is this type of thinking which shaped scholarship of what we call the dance until the second half of this century. Sadly, it still exists, even among otherwise educated people in all fields, including dance, who have not examined the assumptions handed on from the past. The use of 'human movement systems' as a category for study helps to get beyond these stereotypes.

Not only is the concept 'dance' troublesome in studying human movement anthropologically, the related concepts of 'primitive' and 'ethnic dance' are also, and in some ways more, problematic. These categories affect not only how we understand the movement of other cultures, but also how we value their movement. In her article, *On the Notion of 'Primitive Dance'*, Glasser does an excellent job of setting out the meanings implied by the word 'primitive'.³ She groups them into two sets

1. savage, underdeveloped, uncivilized, unskilled, unsophisticated, simple, basic.
2. natural, instinctive, spontaneous, exotic, romantic, colorful, unspoiled (1993: 84).

The origins of these meanings lie in nineteenth century concepts. As the more technologically advanced western countries colonized land occupied by technologically simpler societies, Christian missionaries worked to 'save' and convert people whom they considered to be savages, pagans, or heathens. When Charles Darwin's biological theories about evolution were applied to the social sphere, producing Social Darwinism, the idea appeared that human society also evolved. This meant the more technologically primitive societies represented stages through which western industrial societies had already passed. Consequently the vast diversity and complexity of 'primitive' societies was condensed into a footnote in western cultural evolution. The members of these societies were seen as simple-minded children at best, and at the worst, as non-people (see Williams's concept of *homo nullius*, cited in Glasser 1993: 185).

Recognition of indigenous aesthetics in 'primitive' cultures was further blocked by Romanticism, with its idea of nature and civilization as opposites. Culture belonged to civilization, and so-called 'primitive peoples' were associated with nature as 'noble savages' who lived instinctively and spontaneously outside culture. So much for systems of aesthetics or cultural

structure. Sadly, there are those who still support such ideas, relying largely on outdated work that is cluttered up with unexamined assumptions and suppositions.

The term 'ethnic dance' has a similarly checkered, if somewhat less derogatory history. It is often applied to the dance of those cultures who fall in the middle of the range between 'civilized' and 'primitive'. It is also used as a synonym for 'folk' dance, referring most often to dances in western societies that have their origins in peasant traditions and have not been 'refined' for the ballroom. As Keali'inohomoku points out, anthropologists use the term differently.

In the generally accepted anthropological view, *ethnic* means a group which holds in common genetic, linguistic and cultural ties, with special emphasis on cultural tradition. By definition, therefore, every dance form must be an ethnic form (1980: 10).

From this definition, Keali'inohomoku argues that ballet is a form of ethnic dance. She points out that the themes and characters of ballet reflect our culture. We see our courtship, marriage, birth, and death rituals as well as Christian and pre-Christian religious festivals. Ballets reflect our ideas about unrequited love, self-sacrifice, and sorcery and show the economic pursuits of our culture. The stories and settings also show those animals and plants that we find beautiful or symbolic: horses, swans, roses, and lilies rather than pigs, buffalo, yams, coconuts, or squash blossoms (1980: 11). She rejects the picture of ballet as a high and lofty ideal toward which all other dance forms are striving (or, as in the case of early modern dance, ballet was the establishment against which artists rebelled).

In designating ballet as an ethnic dance form, Keali'inohomoku helps to remove western value judgments from discussion of movement systems in other cultures. By looking at *all* dances, or structured human movement, as 'ethnic', we immediately concern ourselves with the culture that produced the particular form and can more easily examine it from its native cultural perspective. This is a crucial part of eliminating ethnocentric thinking from dance scholarship and from the thinking of dancers in general. Western dance forms are not any better than forms from other cultures, nor do they represent the high point of a world-wide evolution of the dance. They are products of western culture and as such can teach us about our societies.

As the anthropologists have shown, 'dance' is a problematic term. When used outside discussions of western culture, the idea of 'dance' may be used to bring together activities which are actually unrelated. It invokes western ways of looking at art, including an expectation of direct communication of meaning. We cannot use the concept 'dance' unless the culture we are studying has an equivalent concept. One solution to this problem is to learn and use culturally indigenous terms, but this has its own difficulties. We must first have a frame of reference in order to grasp the meanings of classifications from other cultures, which are also specific to their cultures,

and we still need a way to make cross-cultural comparisons. The term 'human movement system' is one alternative.

Dancers or dance scholars who do not have the anthropologists' knowledge must proceed cautiously when discussing danced movement (or any movement) from another culture. In some cases, it may be acceptable to use the word 'dance' if it is used carefully. As dancers, we need to learn about the movement *systems* of other cultures and be educated about the performances, events, rituals, etc. which we may see. We must view the movement with an open mind, not attempting to judge it by the same criteria we use for movement from our culture.

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Notes

¹ I agree with Glasser that the terms 'non-western' and 'western' are problematic (1993: 194). I also wish to say that I use 'western culture' here to refer to the culture of industrialized societies or sections of a society in North and South America; Europe, including parts of the former Soviet Union; and Australia, New Zealand, and in some ways, white South Africa.

² For an excellent account of misunderstandings in the study of San Bushman rock art and shamanistic trance dancing, see Lewis-Williams (1989).

³ For more discussion of meanings for the word 'primitive', see Glasser (1993: 184-5).

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