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Exploring the Essence of Dance

Darlene O'Cadiz

Theatre and Dance Department at California State University Fullerton
P.O. Box 6850, Fullerton, CA 92834-6850
docadiz@fullerton.edu

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Abstract

This paper explores the purpose of dance from the most rudimentary level referencing metaphor and justifying the study of dance as part of the quest to understand humanity. Alan Lomax's contributions to preserving dance for anthropological study along with his theories presented in the documentary "Dance and Human History" is examined. The idea is presented that dance is a Universal language and has the capacity to communicate on a deeper level reflecting belief systems and social practices to genuinely express cultural attitudes.

Darlene O'Cadiz
California State University Fullerton
Theatre and Dance Department

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Dance is a Metaphor for life. Dance seems to mimic not only natural human movements and experiences, but also complex natural processes. There have been many metaphors using dance as the reference. Scientists talk about the dance of particles and organisms. The idea of something in constant motion, cooperating, flowing rhythmically triggers one to compare it with the idea of dance. As Santhanam Nagarajan states in his article *Carl Sagan, Fritjof Capra on The Dance that Reveals the Mysteries of Universe? Part II* " Physicists speak of the continuous dance of sub-atomic matter which goes on all the time. They have actually used the words dance of creation and destruction or energy dance. This naturally comes to mind when you see some of the pictures of particles taken by physicists in their bubble chambers." Writers also often describe ideas of life using the metaphor of dance. Nietzsche uses metaphors of dance to describe life and ones connection to the earth yet a desire to dance with the gods and be one with the art. He refers to "primal unity" surrendering will in the Dionysian ecstasy dance of the reveler:

In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community: he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing...he feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams...He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself. (Nietzsche, Friderich (1871), *The Birth of Tragedy*) p.38

Defining dance is like defining life to some people. A common Bontu greeting is "What do you dance?" meaning how do you express life? What is life about? Exploring different cultures and their dance styles sparks the pursuit to discover the human spirit and how people express life through movement. Witness the dance as it reflects belief systems and societies structure in different cultures. Discover life and how to live it revealed in the dance.

What is Dance?

Before we can explore the history of dance, we must first define what dance is, and why humans do it. Most simply put, dance is **movement to rhythm**. The first instinct of a human being is to put his or her body in motion. While still in the mother's womb a baby listens to the rhythm of the mother's heartbeat and has the urge to move. Before language is learned and developed, communication is revealed by means of movement and gestures. Movement is the most basic experience of life essential to human survival.

But even though dance is a form of moving, its function goes beyond the simple movements humans rely on everyday. Dance is expression. Webster's dictionary defines dance as, "Moving rhythmically to music," but it is so much more. Dance is a vehicle that has the power to unite mind, body, soul; it is a nonverbal means of communicating in the universal language, expressing abstract ideas and emotions by emitting an energy that can be recognized and felt by the affected observer. It has the power to transcend cultural boundaries and speak to people on a deep, spiritual level.

The more subtle and complex components of dance are **centering** and **breath**. These highly emotional elements are what allow a dancer to be capable of authentic expression.

Centering is related to the basic component of balance. In order to achieve a sense of balance, a dancer must engage the solar plexus and lower torso. This portion of the body is where most of the body's crucial organs are located. Focusing on this area gives a dancer a greater sense of strength and connectedness within his or her own body. This stability allows the dancer to bring forth a spiritual essence that can be displayed and expressed with confidence. These deep feelings can be seen and felt by the audience. Dance is not the only practice that is aware of the power that comes from focusing on one's center. Centering has also been used as a term in ancient philosophies and religious practices to define a pathway for realizing bliss and inner peace. Zen masters refer to it as a way to focus inward, while the Quakers used the term "centering down," to explain a state of focused attention, of attentive listening to one's inner voice. (Richards, 1989 p.xx)

Breathing and **Breath** are essential to all humans. Breath is life, we must breathe to live and move. More specifically, our muscles need oxygen in order to respond to the command of our brain. In dance, an awareness and control over the breath allows the dancer to maintain a sense of rhythm. Most dances are synchronized to some form of music or sound. If the music is faster, the dancer must move faster and therefore breathe faster. If the music and dance is slow and elongated, the dancer will be better able to perform if he or she focuses on taking deep and deliberately elongated breaths. The dances of some cultures employ chanting, and these dances require and even deeper focus on the breathing patterns. But regardless of the type of dance, a dancer must be aware of breath to get oxygen to the part of the body producing the energy to move. It takes concentration and practice to learn to breathe efficiently while moving, but once this element is mastered, a dancer is able to express a greater sense of grace and control.

The Essence and Origins of Dance

When studying the history and development of dance, we must start at the beginning. Where and when did dance originate? The answer is simple: dance has existed for as long as mankind has. It is believed by many to be the first means of artistic expression, preceding even ancient forms of music and painting. In primitive societies, dance was both a social and ritualistic practice. Primitive men danced to celebrate every aspect of life. They danced to appease the Gods and give thanks to them, believing it would please

them and keep them from causing natural disasters and other forms of calamity. They also danced to express emotion and to understand their relationship with nature.

Many early peoples believed that when they danced with a particular energy and rhythm, they could bring about a desired effect. For example, some cultures believed that a well-executed rain dance could bring rain. Rhythmic movement was seen as one way to communicate with the Gods. Early man had many elements to deal with, including natural catastrophes. Without the aid of modern science, these events often seemed random and inexplicable. They attributed these events to the will of the spirit world. Often the meditative collaboration of tribal musicians and dancers would send the performers into what was thought to be an altered consciousness. This was believed to be a sign of divine presence. In this state of being, the participants often claimed to commune with the spirit world, and receive messages and instructions for how to survive. While to the modern viewpoint, these ideas may seem illogical, ritualistic practices, such as dance, were one way that ancient peoples could explain or cope with forces beyond their control. They danced with the hope that it could influence the decisions of the Gods. And when a desired result followed their dance, such as a heavy rainfall following a rain dance, it gave people a sense that they had some impact on their situations. It made them feel intuitive and powerful.

In fact, some of the earliest rock paintings show dancers, indicating that it was a well-established part of primitive existence. For example, Archeologists have discovered prehistoric rock paintings from the Paleolithic era (circa 17,500 BC) in Lascaux, France that depict dancing figures. Many other primitive drawings and paintings found in caves and burial tombs around the world attest to the fact that dance was a major part of expressing life.

The well-known dance critic, John Martin discusses the significance of dance in ancient cultures:

"If we go back to the earliest times, we find that primitive men danced when they were deeply moved...Whenever the primitive mind came into contact with something that happened without his having anything to do with it, something with the element of mystery and supernaturalism, he danced" (Martin, 1989 p.8-9)

Dance has survived as a means of communication and a way of preserving traditions in different communities in different cultures. The ritual of dance connects the dancer to a supreme force outside of oneself. Social dance connects the dancer to the tribe and others in the community. The art of dance brings self-awareness to the dancer and their audience through storytelling and expression of emotion.

Explanation of Alan Lomax's study of *Dance in Human History*

Since dance is the most repetitious, synchronic of all expressive behaviors, it has turned out to be a kind of touchstone for human adaptation. Alan Lomax, 1975

Alan Lomax was an anthropologist interested in analyzing dance from different cultures, and identifying communication that occurred on a kinetic and subconscious level. He searched relentlessly for footage of dance from around the world particularly, in remote locations. In his article, "Toward an Ethnographic Film Archive" Lomax expresses his concern about the changing world and the threat this had to primitive cultures. He believed that the negative bi-product of scientific progress and modernization was that it could cause these cultures to lose their traditions, rituals, and art. Dance in particular, was in extreme danger. Unlike a painting or sculpture, which can be preserved in its original form or reproduced in photographs, dance is an ephemeral art, and can only be understood by experiencing or observing it. Written descriptions can only hint at the message the actual kinetic movement displays. Thus, Lomax felt it crucial that cultural dances be documented not through static media such as photography or written descriptions, but through film. His film, *Dance in Human History*, produced in 1976, makes use of the footage he collected to demonstrate his theory of movement defining cultural traditions.

At the American Anthropological Association meeting held in San Diego in the fall of 1970, Lomax presented his reasons for preserving original dances on film. This presentation was monumental in the field of dance history, and as a direct result, anthropologist Margaret Mead was elected the president of the Anthropological Film Research Institute. Her work led to the establishment of The Ethnographic Film Archive in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. (Lomax, 1971). Alan Lomax and Margaret Mead and other leading anthropologists dedicated themselves to filming and archiving films of indigenous dances to help preserve the study of cultural traditions. The work of Lomax and Mead, along with John Wesley Powell led to the establishment of the National Anthropological Archives in 1979.

Alan Lomax created the term **Choreometrics** to describe his study of dance as a form of expressive behavior. He took advantage of the film archive and analyzed dance styles from around the world, classifying them by the type of repetitive movements found in each culture's dances. One of his most groundbreaking discoveries was a correlation between the type of dance movement a culture participated in, and that culture's economic status and standing. He described movement types in terms of **dimensions**. The most basic dance dimension is **one-dimensional style**. It consists of linear (straight up and down) movements, which reflected the kind of work movements someone uses when working with stone or wood. He determined that 70% of simple economies employ a one-dimensional movement style. For example, people working with stone or wood must apply careful straight strokes in order to carve into these hard and brittle mediums, and also to skin animals for food and pelts clothing. Meanwhile, the **two-dimensional style** uses curved or circular movements. 80% of the economies that used metal tools like sickles, which require a semicircular slashing motion to cut wheat or other materials, also

used that kind of motion in their dance. Examples of this two-dimensional style can be seen in many dances that originated in Africa, and also in some European dances, such as the Spanish Jota. Finally, **three-dimensional movement styles** use a spiral motion, which mimics water wheels used in Asia and Europe for agricultural irrigation. 80% of these more sophisticated economies use the full body spin in their dance styles. The correlation between the motion of a culture's daily tasks and the type of motions found in that culture's dances suggest that these dances were meant to express or record specific aspects of their civilizations. On the other hand, if these correlations were not conscious, Lomax's theory is supported by what we know about human muscle memory, which naturally lends itself to any repetitive bodily motion. Even when these cultures used movement as a means of release and recreation, they tended to move in the same way as they did when working.

In addition to his classification of dimensional movement, Lomax also defined **single unit** and **multi-unit** movement styles. The **single unit style** uses a solid torso, mostly moving the legs, feet and arms and sometimes bending or using a rhythmic rocking motion forward and back at the waist. 85% of the cultures that displayed this kind of dance were from patriarchal hunting cultures. They also tended to exist in cultures from colder climates. Meanwhile, **multi-unit styles** use an articulate torso, in which there is movement in the hips and undulation in the ribcage. 90% of cultures displaying multi-unit styles of dance are from matriarchal and agricultural societies. These styles are found in warmer and often tropical climates. One explanation for the difference styles of dances found in patriarchal and matriarchal societies is that in matriarchal and agricultural societies, there is a greater value of fertility. The hip rocking motions found in these cultures are representative of sexual motion, and can be seen as a way to prepare a person for sexual activity.

The purpose of Dance

While modern science informs us that human rituals do not affect environmental forces, that rain dances do not in fact, cause rain, dance is still an effective means of communication and a way of preserving traditions in different communities and cultures. The ritual of dance has the power to connect. Primitive people danced in honor and celebration of every aspect of life. There were dances to give thanks and honor the gods and ancestors along with dances to cast out evil spirits. There were dances to celebrate the rites of passage like birth, puberty, marriage and death. There were dances to prepare for the hunt and war. Some dances were used to tell stories and pass on tribal traditions. A strong and mobile body was vital to survival in prehistoric times and dancing helped to keep the people strong. Ritual dances and social dances were a way of life.

In our society today we still celebrate certain aspects of life with dance. Children naturally dance to music as they express happiness. Teenagers and young adults go to school dances or clubs to dance and socialize. There are coming of age dances that are still celebrated. In the Hispanic community the Quinceanera or girls 15th birthday is a celebration where dance is a component. Also at the Bar Mitzvah a Jewish coming of age celebration for boys turning 13 a circle dance called the Hora is performed along with

some social dancing. Dancing is also a part of a wedding celebration. The Bride and Groom do a first dance and their parents cut in to have one last dance then all the guests join in to celebrate.

Cultural attitudes are reflected in the dance. While watching a dance from another country where you don't know the language one can somehow interpret the basic idea. This is because movements expressing emotions transcend language. As part of the human race we all seem to feel and understand the same emotions. All human beings experience joy, sorrow, honor, fear, gratitude, love, empathy, anger, disappointment, and a multitude of emotions that are expressed in body movements and gestures along with the minds intentions that can be recognized by the sensitive observer. Because of the awareness of different cultures and blending of different cultures around the world, dance styles from different cultures are blending too.

Dance can express feelings and emotions but can it also heal the spirit or even the world? In the popular reality TV show "Dancing with the Stars" Steven Guttenburg one of the contestants in season 6 made the comment that dancing with a partner requires a level of cooperation and communication that is highly sophisticated and if the world leaders would learn the cooperation and coordination of dancing the world would be a better place.

It is important to study dance history to contemplate and gain understanding of the rhythms of life, to realize its universal communication possibilities, and to better understand cultural differences and similarities as a means of broadening our awareness of humanity.

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Discussion Questions

Discuss each question and give examples to explain your conclusion. If you use outside sources please make reference to them and include the citation in your written work.

1. Why do human beings believe there is a force outside of themselves that controls life?
 - a. Can you prove that there is?
 - b. Why is the belief so strong?
 - c. Will humans always believe there is a superior being or force?

2. In the 1970's Alan Lomax expressed his concern about the rapidly changing world and the need to document traditional dances. How has the world changed since then?
 - a. Do you think that most people around the world are aware of different cultures?
 - b. What has contributed to the changing world?
 - c. Has technology contributed to global awareness? How?

3. Dance is thought to be a universal language. Why?
 - a. Are there other ways to communicate transcending the language barrier?
 - b. What needs to all humans from every culture have in common?
 - c. What makes each culture unique?

4. What kind of dances represents your generation?
 - a. How does this dance express the attitudes of your culture?
 - b. Can you find a link to a culture other than American culture? Is there history?
 - c. How does it compare to your parents generation?