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Whose dance?
Questions of authenticity and ethnicity,
of preservation and renewal

Frederick Naerebout (Holland)

The theme of the 8th International Conference on Dance Research to be held in Drama in July 1994 and to which this paper is a contribution, is 'dance beyond frontiers'. The underlying question of this conference clearly is not whether it is possible to remove dance from its original habitat and relocate it across some border. This is of course what has happened and still happens all the time: dances have always been transmitted from the one group to the other, and nowadays habitually travel all over the world. The one tradition borrows from the other what can be put to some purpose. The individual may agree or disagree, but that is of no account: we speak of acculturation processes that are as old as human society. With music, or any other cultural phenomenon, it is the same thing. Obviously, what is at stake in this conference is not the possibility of relocation, but what it does to the dance that is thus deracinated. Does a particular dance tradition stand to lose or to gain from being relocated? Is it a process that deserves to be stimulated?

The unfavourable view of relocating dances

A frequent opinion states that removing a dance from its 'natural' surroundings leads to a loss of 'authenticity' (although one usually also suggests that 'authenticity', or a fair measure of it, can be restored). Most people, if asked whether a dance performed by villagers as part of their cultural heritage is more authentic than the same dance performed by outsiders who go 'folk dancing' one night every week, will unhesitatingly point out the villagers' dance as the most authentic of the two. This might seem common sense, but in fact authenticity is a highly elusive concept, that deserves to be looked into much more closely[1]. But before studying the increasingly
fashionable concept of authenticity in some detail, let us first dismiss straight away the related concept of ethnicity.

A supposed diminishing or disappearance of 'authenticity' is often explained by pointing to ethnicity: the original 'inventors' of a dance are supposed to be the only ones who, by birth, can understand its nature inside out, and thus the only ones who can guarantee its authenticity. Outsiders can at most be clever imitators. But this appeal to ethnicity is a fallacious argument[2]. There is no shred of evidence that for instance Laplanders are born into this world with something in their mental make-up and their nervous system that makes them particularly adept at dancing Lappish dances. We do have evidence, however, for the fact that any movement idiom can be learned by anybody, presupposing bodily fitness and some aptitude for acquiring new movement patterns in general. That it might be much easier to learn some particular idiom in a situation where the dance is still a part of living culture (what has been called first existence[3]), or where teachers are available who have still experienced that first existence, is beyond doubt. But this has nothing to do with ethnicity: it has to do with exposure to a particular idiom from an early age onwards. All this does not mean that I deny the reality of ethnicity as an ideological force: it is obvious that dance traditions, and whatever else, are considered the constituent elements of ethnic identities. That is what happens and everybody must find some way to cope with it: there are many political and moral issues involved[4]. Even though ethnicity as ideology is very real indeed, I maintain that in scholarly debate, for instance on the effects of relocating dance in a new environment, ethnicity (from the simplest local chauvinism to nineteenth-century nationalism) should not be brought in. The concept has no explanatory value.

But in rejecting ethnicity as an argument, we have not discredited authenticity as such. Those who do not appeal to ethnicity, will nevertheless distinguish authentic from unauthentic. What do we actually mean by 'authenticity'? The word and its cognates are derived from the Latin authenticus, which in turn derives from the ancient Greek authentikos.

Authentikos was used as something that was authoritative, for instance original letters or autograph manuscripts. The subsequent development of the semantics of the word in French and English is very involved, but includes the notions of authority, (legal) validity, qualification, reliability, originality, factuality, certainty, credibility and truth. The most obvious use of the word is to indicate the undisputed origin of a document or a work of art. When we, however, state that a performance, such as a dance, is authentic, we cannot mean to say that the performance is 'original', as we would say of a manuscript or a painting. Characteristic of a performance is that it is something impermanent and that all or part of it can be repeated, without the repeated
performance being any more or less original than the performance that went before. It is a recurrent recreation of a text, a choreography, a score. The text, the choreography or score might all be original, while their performance never is. Thus when we say that a performance is authentic, we must mean something else; it appears that the speaker usually intends to say that the performance in question is 'true to origin', shows the essence, is 'as it should be'[5].

But what is the origin of a particular dance? What is its essence? Which standard shows what it should be? If thought on long enough, these are all unanswerable questions. Thus no dance is authentic (from a different philosophical standpoint one also might defend that every dance is authentic, which adds up to the same thing). Not only a dance that has been relocated and is supposed to have lost its 'authenticity' on the way; the dance that is still being danced in its own habitat, even if still in its first existence, is not authentic either. There is no single origin, there is no enduring essence, there is no standard against which to measure: every particular dance is at most true to itself, because dance is ever changing. As society changes, as performers change, dance changes. Relocating a dance away from its original surroundings might accelerate change, or slow it down. But however and wherever dance is being danced, it changes. I do not at all intend to deny that a dance tradition can show a continuity of some sort. But continuity in fact implies change: when a dance tradition is alive and creative, it is in a constant flux; it will be relatively slow to change when it is marginalized in one way or another; when it does not change any more, it is stone dead.

Those who deny change reason from the preconceived idea of unchanging, primeval 'folkways'[6]. But the idea that some societies ('primitive' societies), some communities (rural communities) or some aspects of human culture (religion, 'superstition', 'folkways') are not prone to change, has been discredited long ago. It is a misconception caused by the lack of a clear time perspective, by enthusiasm and nostalgia[7], or by nationalistic sentiments (ethnicity again)[8]. Folkways do change: as the famous folklore researchers Iona and Peter Opie have put it: 'tradition is ever on the lookout for novelty'[9]. Every human society changes, and everything that belongs changes with it, including the dance. There are many examples of dances supposed to have been faithfully preserved, but can actually be shown to have been changing all the time[10]. Dances said to be 'unchanged' or 'ancestral' need not even be old: such dances may very well have been newly introduced but a relatively short time ago. Thus with the Australian aboriginals traditional dances, they are considered as having primeval, 'Dreamtime' origin, while new dances are constantly being handed down by the ancestors; but recently received dances will eventually achieve the status of having Dreamtime origin. There is no difference between 'traditional' and 'newly made' dances, except that those in
the last category still have to 'mature'[11]. The true state of affairs is revealed by the common protests against degeneration and innovation, against dances 'without an origin': contemporaries feel their dances to be changing, even when such change is not intended[12]. Change cannot be stopped: attempts at fixation can even lead to a greater susceptibility to outside influences, because such a fixation can cause dysfunctionality. If a tradition can resist outside influence, this might well be because of a persistent process of internal change[13].

Although, as we just saw, several dance traditions deny the fact that their dances are always changing, there are also many dance traditions that do not insist on the preservation of particular movements: with dance 'folkways' the quality of dance might in fact be the potential to be danced in several different ways. Fixed figures and movements are typical of second existence, in first existence it is rather the grammar than set figures that is transmitted. Nowadays in the Western world we ask after seeing a dance performed: 'was it good? Did they perform it in a proper way?'. But in Africa one asks: was the performance good? Did they perform nicely? There is not a particular choreography to judge, but there is above all a canon of performative excellence[14]. A living tradition is a complex of vocabulary and rules, and not of ready-made stuff. This vocabulary and rules allow for all possible degrees of improvisation. Indeed one could speak of a continuum from complete memorisation to improvisation or extemporising. The freedom to move in this continuum, the freedom allowed to Levi-Strauss's bricoleur, we find in folk poetry, in folk art, in music and also in dance[15].

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that it would be possible to preserve the exact choreography of a dance: then we could 'get all the steps right'. If the dance movements look every bit as they did yesterday, or one, two, three generations ago, or even centuries ago, does that add up to authenticity? Obviously not, as the choreography is but one element amongst many. When I speak of a dance, I mean what anthropologists have called a dance event [16]. 'To get the steps right' is a necessary, but insufficient precondition for authenticity: if the performers, the audience and the context in which they perform or watch have all changed, the direct contact with the past, whether a recent or a distant past, has been broken. There is no such thing as an 'innocent eye': we can only look at things from within our own perspective. As the German philosopher Gadamer has put it: every interpreter is a captive of his historical context. Nor can he avoid being influenced by earlier interpretations[17]. Interpretations are restrained by several 'horizons', in the words of Gadamer[18]. This even holds true in a pre-modern world, where change will usually have been slow. It is completely inescapable in a modern world, where the conditions of life of our own grandparents, if not our parents, are a thing of the past. It is not so much modernity replacing tradition,
but relatively slow moving communities, mainly agricultural, being eroded away in favour of relatively fast moving communities, mainly urban[19]. We will come back to this in a moment.

Authenticity is a modern ideal. The western world has become obsessed with preserving 'the real thing'. The reason for this obsession seems the quickening of change with a resulting sense of loss and alienation, the feeling that there is no turning back, possibly even the feeling that it might all end in disaster. Since the industrial revolution ever more people have come to live in a world in which things change beyond recognition within the lifespan of a single individual, and in which we at the same time try to keep things from changing by putting them in 'museums'. Everything has to be preserved, and whatever is preserved is authentic. Or ought to be: when it became known that in Florence famous statues had been replaced by copies to keep the originals free from the bad effects of air pollution, vandalism and ordinary weathering, there was an outcry; the wish to preserve and the wish for 'authenticity', usually going hand in hand, had come into conflict. Please do not misunderstand me: I do not say we should not spend money taking the Parthenon apart, and putting it together again: we should, if only we realize that what we are doing is the late 20th-century rebuilding of the late 19th-and early 20th-century rebuilding of a 17th-century ruin of a 5th-century BC temple. Nor do I say that the so-called Early Music movement is not a good thing: it is, but we should realize that playing Bach's keyboard music on a harpsichord, preferably an old harpsichord, does not mean that Bach himself is raised from the dead. I repeat: 'authenticity' is a modern ideal: what that ideal produces is modern as well [20]. An 'authentic' dance performance is not any of those things that 'authentic' is supposed to mean; it is completely of here and now.

**Arguments in favour of relocating dances**

If authenticity is a chimaera, what does it all matter? If dance is perpetually changing, why bother about questions of relocation, preservation or revival? Does not the above arguments add up to the idea that any performance is equally valid? In a sense, that is indeed the logical outcome of what has been said above: there are no standards, no yardsticks. When a first existence dance tradition is flourishing, there is no need to support, preserve or revive anything: such a dance tradition preserves itself, though the researcher may be dissatisfied with the continual change inherent in such preservation and may want to freeze the dance at a particular stage of its development (thereby helping to kill it off). But there is a hitch, and that is the earlier observation that relatively slow moving communities, mainly agricultural, are being replaced by relatively fast moving communities, mainly urban. In the process first existence- ce dances disappear. This does not mean
that there will be no first existence dances left; there will always be new first existence dances. But with the rapidity of change increasing and with the relative uniformity brought by urban culture, more dances are more rapidly changing beyond recognisance or completely disappearing from first existence than ever before. Continuity is cut short, as in the past it only was by the most tragic disasters that wiped out whole communities. We should not suppose that these developments can be curbed one way or another: they cannot. The most pernicious consequence of these inexorable processes, that is the loss of variety, can, however, be combatted.

If we accept the inevitable, which is that a great variety of dance traditions will at most survive in second existence, we have to make sure that a dance tradition at least gets the chance to acquire the new lease of life offered by second existence. Even before first existence comes to an end, dances should be copied into second existence (which is of course much better than trying to resuscitate them at a later stage). Not to preserve them without change: this is impossible, but to keep them alive, albeit artificially. It is here that relocation comes into the story again. The effect of relocating dance across borders is no diminishing or disappearance of authenticity, which does not exist, it is increasing the chances of survival. Second existence survival, to be sure, but that is the best we can hope for. One could compare animal species threatened with extinction: their chance to survive at all, even if it is in sorry captivity, is best when many individuals are distributed over many zoos, which can set up breeding programmes. Whoever wants to see diversity, variety of dance preserved, and not an unrealistic ideal of 'authentic' dance, must support the relocation of dance over as many frontiers as possible. A body of knowledge, on the brink of being lost, may be preserved for future generations, to hand on and build upon. Though the continuity guaranteed by first existence has snapped, still some sort of continuity can be saved after all.

Preferably, this should not be done in order to use dance for some non-dance purpose, such as fostering a national or ethnic identity, or the adherence to some creed. A strictly unpartisan attitude, where dance is dance for reasons interior to the dance, will help in its maximum dissemination and thus in its survival. To give a concrete example: a particular dance tradition of a particular village on a particular Greek island should be exported to the Greek mainland, should be exported abroad, far and wide. It had best be carried across all borders by a Greek, by an inhabitant of the island in question, preferably by a villager from that very village. But he or she should not merely teach it to people from his or her community, nor to other Greeks wherever in the Greek diaspora, but to everybody.
There is another argument in favour of relocating dance across borders, additional to preservation of dance variety by second existence, and that is 'crossbreeding'. As more and more relocated dances are coming together in one spot, why not take advantage and try also to bring the different traditions together? There are already beautiful examples in the arts, especially in music, of cultural influences from different countries combining into new and exciting forms. Teaching the dance tradition of a Greek village to children all over the world is a contribution to peace and understanding; a Greek dance merging with an Indian dance and an English dance in London, Cape Town or Melbourne is another contribution to peace and understanding. The world in its present state needs a lot of crossing of frontiers.

Notes

1] The social sciences have not yet given much attention to the concept of authenticity: if discussed at all, it is in the context of art sociology, especially the cultural criticism of the Frankfurter Schule (Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno; see e.g. J.R. Hall & M.J. Neitz, Culture. Sociological perspectives (Englewood Cliffs 1993) 95-97). But the implications of its current usage are much wider.


3] See F. Hoerburger, 'Once again: on the concept of "folk dance"', Journal of the International Folk Music Council 20 (1968) 30-32, who contrasts first and second existence: during first existence dance is an integral part of community life, part and parcel of living culture, learned by participation, steadily changing; during second existence a dance is artificially kept alive or revived, the property of those individuals who have been taught by teachers.


fossils of more primitive stages ('survivalism'), and a static doctrine of cultural continuity. J.-M. Guilcher, 'Aspects et problèmes de la danse populaire traditionnelle', Ethnologie française 1 (1971) 7-48, uses 'survivances' to indicate an unbroken tradition (which, however, is not conceived as static). On the concept of 'survival' see also M.T. Hodgen, The doctrine of survivals, London 1936.

7) T. Buckland, 'Traditional dance, English ceremonial and social forms', in: J. Adshead & J. Layson (ed), Dance history. A methodology for study (London 1983) 162-175, argues that the theorists of survival ignore the towns and industrialized communities: theirs is a purely rural interest, fed by romantic ideas about the peasantry (164). This, while true, does not discredit the idea of survivals in itself. A more serious (related) problem with survivalist thinking is that change is seen as degeneration.


11) A. Grau, 'Sing a dance - dance a song. The relationship between two types of formalized movement and music among the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands, North Australia', Dance Research 1,2 (1983) 32-44. Some African dances also might not be very old: see J.M. Chernoff, African rhythm and African sensibility. Aesthetics and social action in African musical idioms (Chicago 1979) 202f., n.32; 206, n.61, on Dagomba drummers, also the tribal historians, ascribing an historical origin to particular 'traditional' dances.

12) 'Those who have given up the true way of practising this dance and have introduced their own style which is without origin', as it is put in the Chams Yig, a 17th-century text on dancing written by the fifth Dalai Lama; see R. de Nebesky-


18] Gadamer, op.cit., p.311: ‘Vielmehr ist Verstehen immer der Vorgang der Verschmelzung solcher vermeintlich für sich seiender Horizonte’ [Understanding is always a process of the fusing of such apparently separate horizons].

19] See N. Guilcher-Raviart, ‘Comment penser une pédagogie de la danse populaire dans une société qui n’est plus traditionnelle?’, in: A. Raftis (ed), I di daskalia tou chorou / teaching dance. Proceedings of the 7th international conference on dance research, Portaria, 7-11 July 1993 (Athens 1993) 25-26: ‘Si le savoir faire en danse est d’abord une manière d’être, il est bien évident que nous ne pouvons plus danser comme les danseurs traditionnels. Façons de sentir, de penser, d’ éprouver la relation sociale, conditionnements moteurs, culturels, tout a changé ‘[If dancing is first of all a
way of being, then it is evident that we can no longer dance as the dancers of traditional society did. Ways of feeling, of thinking and of experiencing social relations, the motorial and cultural preconditioning, everything has changed.

20] This equation of a striving for authenticity with modernity is argued at length by R. Taruskin, op.cit.

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