

DANCE KNOWLEDGE IN THE CURRENT HUNGARIAN FOLK DANCE REVIVAL

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the importance of dance knowledge and the status of the elder generation in the Hungarian folk dance revival movement. I distinguish several levels of *knowledge*, relevant to the investigated group, as they perceive Hungarian dance traditions. The members may recognize the different dances; some of them know how to do the dances in practice and are aware of the norms and traditions behind the diverse exact dances. The folk dance practitioners have idols and exemplars, who can change from generation to generation. In the first category, the *icons* are the elder villagers – musicians, singers and/or dancers who are considered as the bearers of the authentic folk knowledge. The professional dancers and choreographers who have gained embodied knowledge through practice and local experiences are also considered as authoritative agencies, the second sources of the true folklore for the current Hungarian revival movement. The main goal of the professionals is to transmit the real traditions and to present an authentic Hungarian dance performance on the stage. My research aim is to investigate the impact of these people on the younger groups of the folk music and dance revival movement. How and in what sense do these individuals affect the members of this subculture? How do the folk dance practitioners regard the relation between elder villagers, professionals and the concept of authenticity in the contemporary movement? How does the *knowledge* influence the action of dancing? How does it appear in different contexts? My research is in progress. I use data gathered through personal interviews and participant observations during several fieldwork events.

Keywords: knowledge, revival movement, elder dancers, generations, authenticity, transmission

In my paper, I discuss the concept of knowledge as related to the Hungarian folk dance revival movement, and the status of the elder generation within that subculture. My research concentrates on the contemporary movement and especially the perspectives of the young members. This paper negotiates the questions: what does dance knowledge mean to that particular group, what do they interpret as dance knowledge, and why has this concept become so essential? My conclusions are based on my observations during several fieldwork events in urban dance houses, competitions, and folk dance-music camps. I also collected information through personal interviews and an online questionnaire.

Field research

My field research is conducted at events and festivals involving Hungarian folk traditions, Transylvanian folk dance-, and music camps. In camps, the participants gather together for a week to learn traditional dances and music from a specific region. They can meet local villagers there who are invited to the camps to perform their own dances within a stage setting. These events include drinking, singing, and dancing, and are occasions for the members of the revival movement to interact with others who share the same interest. The campers can learn something new or deepen their own knowledge of dance in a particular village. These camps are constructed settings with conscious dance teaching. By including the locals, the participants can share an authentic experience in traditional folk dance. When the villagers perform, the practitioners may observe how the dance should be done, according to these authority figures. Beside the camps I am also investigating male dance competitions and the evaluation methods. The competitors have to learn a given dance sequence and perform it for a jury. The judges evaluate how authentic the dancer's performance is according to their previously gathered knowledge, and they give feedback on the competitor's way of performing. The young dancers have to reproduce the movements of the dancer recorded on an archival film, and also to try to meet the jury's expectations. The judges are usually acknowledged choreographers and professional dancers of an earlier generation.

Dance house movement as a subculture

The Hungarian Dance House Movement started in the 1970s in Budapest. It was as an underground action that existed outside of the mainstream society [Urban Dictionary 2002]. It was started by young urban dance groups with an interest in Hungarian traditional culture. The members of these ensembles acquired folk dance forms from experienced choreographers via modern pedagogical methods, or from tradition bearers by imitation and direct observation [UNESCO 2011]. Since then folk dancing has been popular for several generations. I identify the examined community as a subculture because it's different from the mass culture of Hungary. The members are bonded by their common beliefs, mode of thinking, and behaviour [Cohen 1969]. The group that I am looking at is interested in Hungarian folk dance, music, and folk culture in general. The participants participate in events where they can practice folk dance accompanied by traditional live folk music. Community members spend their free time learning folk dances and music usually within groups and ensembles. They take part in cultural events, festivals, and summer camps engaged with folk traditions. Moreover, they also engage online, with their own online magazines, Facebook pages, groups, and so forth [Kacsuk 2012]. In my investigation, I focus on the present movement's younger generation, usually college students and young adults. They are active dancers who practice folk dances in groups and who also take part in the aforementioned folk dance competitions, summer camps, and urban dance houses in Budapest.

About dance knowledge

According to Adrienne Kaeppler, kinetic knowledge of structured movement systems occurs in all known human societies. These systems of knowledge are products and processes of actions and interactions among groups who are constructed socially

and culturally [Kaeppeler 1990:309 cited in Felföldi 2002:14]. Dance knowledge can be defined conscious and sometimes unconscious, according to Anca Giurchescu. Dance exists in the dancer's body and mind and it is represented holistically. It includes the mental, emotional, and kinaesthetic images from the dancers' previous experiences [Giurchescu 1987:23 cited in Felföldi 2002:14]. Felföldi also describes the concept of dance knowledge, which includes all the information about dance as well as the *know-how* of dancing, which are preserved in the memory of the dancers and become manifested in schemes, patterns, and logical constructions [Felföldi 2002:16]. In connection with body practice and (cultural) memory, Paul Connerton distinguishes two modes of social practice: incorporating and inscribing practices. In the first case, dance is transmitted by kinetic, bodily practice through social activity, while in the second case it is passed on through documentary/documentation, photography, videos, films, notations, and computer images, or sometimes even via verbal descriptions as well [Connerton 1989 cited in Buckland 1995]. According to these definitions, dance knowledge is connected to body practices, memory, and interactions in their cultural environment. Knowledge can be considered as tacit, embodied, practical, or described by other words as skill or talent. This term has different levels. I distinguish various forms of it in the investigated group on the basis of how they perceive Hungarian dance traditions.

In my paper, I investigate the concept of knowledge from the points of view of my examined groups. It depends on many things: such as how much a person is involved in that subculture: how long s/he has practiced dance, since when has s/he been a member of a particular group, what is his/her status in the group. Although these questions need more and deeper research. According to my observations, some members recognize the various kinds of dances and distinguish the diverse dance types. Some of them know *how* to perform the dances in practice, they know the given structure and pattern, while many of them are *aware* of the norms and traditions behind the diverse exact dance cultures, which is important in the process of representation of folk dances on stage. We can distinguish a range of levels of knowledge, progressing from more elementary to more sophisticated.

The role of the individual in the subculture depends on the quality of dance knowledge. This leads to the issue of transmission of dance within and between generations.

Transmission of knowledge through generations

Transmission means to pass something on [Nilsson 1991], in this case, knowledge of dancing. Dance knowledge can be transmitted in several ways between the generations of the Hungarian revival movement. I distinguish three categories of transmission, based on the means through which the dancers learned or are learning Hungarian folk dances. I associate the revival movement generations somewhat in accordance with the way they learned the dances. In the first category, I place the elder villagers who may be musicians, singers, and/or dancers, and who are considered as the bearers of the authentic folk knowledge, because they have learned the dances in traditional settings. As an example, in the original context, male dances were acquired by young male children through games. The young boys usually asked old expert dancers to teach them the movements. Dances were traditionally transmitted through games and learning from outstanding dancers [Martin 2009]. I situate the contemporary professional, trained dancers and choreographers into a second

category.¹ They gained embodied knowledge through (mainly) practice and personal experience related to folk-tourism. Urban folk dancers usually went to villages to meet with locals to discover traditional dances in an empirical way. They attended weddings, locally organized dance houses, and other social events that included customs, dances, and local people to whom the dancers could join. Sometimes they made amateur recordings and used their experiences for choreographing [Stein and Varga 2010]. Younger urban revival dancers also consider the professional dancers as authorities, like secondary sources of the true folklore for the current Hungarian revival movement. The transmission of the real traditions is the main goal of the professionals. The purpose is to present an authentic Hungarian dance performance on the stage. The young generation, as the third category, acquires dances by conscious learning in groups, workshops, or in camps. The pupils follow the instructions of dance teachers who also obtained their knowledge from university education, archive films, and personal encounters. In several situations, young revivalists can also meet peasant villager dancers and learn from them.

Dancing idols

My hypothesis is that, like many other groups, Hungarian folk dance practitioners have idols and exemplars. They are different from generation to generation. According to my observations, the members of the second category, professionals and acknowledged choreographers show the most admiration for the elder villagers. They respect the peasant dancers' knowledge of dance and folklore, and their lifestyle, history, and cultural background. They regard the tradition bearers as authentic authorities in the field of folk culture. They also stand as the sources of the "genuine, traditional, original, real, and authentic" folk tradition. This impression is reinforced by personal encounters and common experiences at dance events. Extensive Hungarian dance folkloristic collections make the village dancers' practical knowledge and repertoire available, and these materials stand as benchmarks. Even if the individual dancers are no longer alive, the recordings preserve their dance knowledge and ability. The video recordings have an essential role in the folk dance revival movement because the practitioners acquire the movements based on them, and the movements that have been recorded are regarded as authentic cultural phenomena. The professionals evaluate stage dances according to these videos, which revivalists consider as standard reference points of genuine folklore.²

The younger urban generation of dancers considers the professionals as their main models. The professionals have already achieved fame in their field, which is recognized by the younger generation. They stand as exemplars for the youth. In addition, even the elder villagers make a considerable impact on young dancers.³

As an example of this admiration, I analyze a YouTube video edited by a professional folk dancer: István Mátyás *Mundruc* (1911–1977) was a Hungarian peasant dancer from Magyarvita (Viștea, Romania). György Martin wrote a monograph about him, including a information about his dance life, how he learned and practiced the *legényes* solo male dance [Martin 2004]. *Mundruc* referred by his nickname, is a

1 I consider the professionals as people whose profession is to be an official dancer or choreographer.

2 The issue of these recordings is another part of my research.

3 It is also important to consider how the elders' status is defined in general in current Hungarian society.

well-known dancing individual in the Hungarian revival movement. He was recorded several times during his lifetime. More than thirty videos are on the *Knowledge Base of Traditional Dances* database [Fügedi 2007–2017]. A famous recording was made in Budapest, at the Buda Castle in 1967. The male dancers of the Hungarian National Dance Ensemble created a recording where they performed the same movements that *Mundruc* had performed. The video shows clips from the original collection. *Mundruc* also appears as a hologram who dances with the professional dancers. The title of the video is: *In memory of Mundruc*. That was made to honour the peasant dancer and to demonstrate an appreciation of the *legényes* folk dance [Sánta 2015].

Conclusion

In this paper, I identified three subgroups within the current Hungarian revival movement in connection with the notion of dance knowledge. I am examining these groups during my Ph.D. studies. In my following research, I am going to study the impact of the elder generation on the younger one and vice versa, by focusing how the members of the latter subgroup perceive themselves within the revival movement. My position in the research can be defined as a mediator between the subgroups because I have access to all three of them. The main research question is about authenticity, and what this concept means to the aforementioned generations. Why has it become an essential concern of the staged folk dance movement, and how does it appear in urban settings such as from the subcultures everyday life to the dance house practice. In the future, I will examine these groups' motivations for acquiring this folk knowledge. How can they profit from that knowledge beyond the stage?

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