

People Dancing

Dance - Society -Culture in the World and in Israel

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Summary

Chapter One – I Move, I Exist – emphasizes the **significance of movement and dance to the dancer** as well as to a **group of people**.

Man first becomes aware of himself through movement, which constitutes his first connection with the physical and social environment, thus being an instrument of communication.

Through movement we express sensations, feelings, ideas and thoughts.

Movement is an existential impulse. The concepts of “body language”, “movement language” and “non-verbal communication” became prevalent mainly in the second half of the twentieth century.

The beginnings of dance were in the movement of the individual in his personal space. Later, groups of individuals danced together, each one moving its own specific way, but on the common physical basis of the human body. The movement of the feet is the foundation for the movement of the whole body, and for the style of that movement.

The child who dances goes through different movement experiences: he activates his body; he experiences adventures of discovery and develops the capacity to control his body and his environment. Movement enables him to participate in a group and to strengthen his self-image. Communication demands conventional movements, the understanding of shared codes on the basis of uniformity and agreement. The creation of a dance tradition depends on the consent of a social group, in order to become a component in the culture of that society.

Dance is intensely personal, closely linked to cultural identity. To question or belittle other people's dances is to challenge their right to be themselves.

Dance Research can be divided into three stages:

1. **The Descriptive Stage** developed when the importance of dance was recognized as a meaningful component in different cultures. The researchers described dances in different countries, tending to find universal characteristics, which derive from the local features. Consciously or not, they compared what was called “Western culture” to what was referred to as “non-European.”

2. **Comparative Research.** Researchers from different disciplines – mainly ethnomusicology, history and anthropology of culture – discovered the socio-cultural aspect of dance. Means of documentation by recording and filming enabled them to be freed from the exclusively verbal descriptions of academic study, and thus opened new directions in dance research, which became interdisciplinary.

3. The third and current stage constitutes the examination and analysis of dance in **wide cultural contexts** with multi-disciplinary contemporary theoretical tools. This stage is based on the acceptance of the idea that no culture is more important than any other is and that no art is superior to another. The guiding principle of dance study today is the attempt to understand the significance of dance to the dancers. Contemporary researchers are required to understand the complexity of events including dance. They need to examine musical structures, forms and styles which are an inseparable part of the dance in question, verbal texts, forms of dress and adornment and different expressions of material culture, without which it is impossible to understand the interconnecting relations that make up the dance.

Dance research in Israel is relatively young. Being a society of immigrants, with attempts by ‘agents of culture’ to form a national melting pot, it is beginning to realize that pluralism is inevitable. From the 1950s onwards, attempts were made to gather, document and preserve information, but dance research worthy of its name began in Israel in the 1970s. The dance researcher has to document and describe everything surrounding the event, which includes the dance. He should interview the informants and experience the dance in question himself, with the aid of the relevant informant. In addition to recording and filming, it is strongly recommended for all movement and dance research to integrate documentation and analysis using the Eshkol-Wachman (EW) notation system. This movement notation is usually precise and reliable and is able to organize data and attain results of a scientific standard.

Dance – Terms and Definitions

Common definitions of dance reflect historical perspectives and reveal cultural views and beliefs. In the preface to the collection “What is Dance”, the editors debate the boundaries of the concept of dance: are we dealing with dance as a phenomenon particular to human society? In that case how do we relate to ‘dance-like phenomena’ in the natural world? (“Dance of the Bees” etc.) Despite the difficulties involved in such an endeavor, offering a satisfactory definition of dance cannot be attempted without relating to three basic concepts: **art, body movement** and **non-verbal communication**. Thus we offer the following definition:

Dance = the art of body movement as a language of expression and communication.

Dance is one of the arts of the body, and body movement is its basic material. We communicate, express ourselves and create by using a language of movement subordinated to societal conventions and reflecting cultural and aesthetic rules dependent on time and place. The common use of the terms “artistic music” and “artistic dance” to distinguish compositions for the concert-hall and dance-stage from creations in family or community, therefore not considered artistic, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of “art”.

Chapter Two – I Dance, I Belong – treats Ethnic Dance as representing society and reflecting culture. The term **ethnic dance** can be defined as the dance of a particular ethnic group, which inhabits a common territory and shares a common history, symbolizing the group’s internal identity, strengthening its feelings of belonging and uniqueness, and representing it vis à vis other societies. In the past it was labeled “primitive dance”, “tribal dance”, “peasant dance” and “traditional dance”. The dances are usually accompanied by traditional music, characteristic of the group. In traditional societies ethnic dances are an integral part of events or ceremonies related to the year-cycles or the life cycle. The context of dance – who dances what, why, how, when, where, and with and for whom are part of a group’s cultural heritage.

An example of such an ethnic dance in its socio-anthropological context is given here: The **Wodaabe**, a nomad tribe of Central Africa, mainly Niger.

The functions of the dance are:

1. To break the routine of nomadic life in **central celebrations**, offering a framework for **leisure and entertainment**.

2. To mark central events in the **year-cycle**, such as the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the dry season.
3. To mark events in the **life cycle** – from birth to marriage.
4. To enable different age groups, young and old, as well as sub-groups of the ethnic group, to **encounter**, contemplate and get to know one another for flirting and choosing a mate.

Types of Dance

Ethnic dance may contain a myriad of possibilities and forms according to the society it represents and the culture it expresses. It is the basis of all other types of dance. Some of its features are common to all of them while others distinguish each one of them.

Ethnic dance and **ritual dances** have most in common.

Ritual dance has numerous functions: preventing or withstanding disasters and spurring on the forces of nature, like rainfall and fertility; praising and glorifying the divine and healing the sick. Ecstatic dances, another type of ritual dance, yearn to make a complete separation from the physical and the rational in order to obliterate their day-to-day personality and reach heights of spirituality which will bring men closer to their god.

Folk dance emphasizes the national aspect of dance, while preserving many traditional features. It manifests the essential need to dance. It is primarily a group's form of expression; it enables the individual to merge with the group and enjoy being a participant in the group experience. Folk dancing represents a particular cultural tradition; it strengthens the national aspect of the group and its sense of belonging.

Social dance, as opposed to folk dance, is unrelated to national context and crosses geographical boundaries. While giving expression to the basic impulse to move, social dance is subordinate to the social context, which shapes this impulse. A large public who dances in groups characterizes it. There is a mingling of the sexes and sometimes couple dancing. Today it reflects the existence or non-existence of status stratification. The individual often presents himself as performer to the onlookers or to those dancing with him. The traditional context has been broken down in discotheques today.

Stage dance, often mistakenly referred to as “artistic dance”, is a forum for the individual artist's personal expression, emphasizing the status of the individual dancer as an artist. It can demonstrate a particular stylized, artistic movement tradition, but can also serve as medium

for protest against an existing traditional framework. Every movement or dance style is culturally dependent, so that deciphering aesthetic codes depends on the context in which they were created.

Chapter Three treats ethnic dance in Israel within its cultural context in two perspectives: the synchronic – up-to-date data available to the researcher during the time of the research, and the diachronic – the historical perspective, which compares data with past information. The historical perspective begins with the **Dance in the Bible**. There are many verbal descriptions of dance in the Bible, but they do not teach us how the dance was performed or what made up its content. Therefore, this field remains the domain of linguistic researchers.

Dance in the Jewish Diaspora. The dispersion of the Jewish people in the Diaspora after the destruction of the temple constitutes a significant turning point in its history.

This chapter surveys dances from the Jewish life-cycle and year-cycle and brings typical examples from various communities of the Diaspora: Babylon, Poland, Caucasus, North Africa, Kurdistan, Spain, Greece, Yemen, Bukhara, Persia and Ethiopia.

Traditions of Ethnic Dance in Israel can be divided into three categories:

The **first category** includes dances of communities, which were danced in the Diaspora outside Israel and preserved as unique dance tradition. The two main traditions of this category are those of the Jews of Central Yemen and of some Hassidim communities.

The **second category** includes dances of the countries in which the Jews were living, which were adopted by them during their sojourn in the Diaspora. In Israel these dances continue to be part of the community tradition and are a symbol of the communal identity. In this category we find mainly the dances of Jews from Kurdistan, north and south Yemen, parts of North Africa, Ethiopia and Jewish communities from the Caucasus.

The **third category** includes non-Jewish residents of Israel, such as Arabs, Bedouins, Druses, Circassians and Armenians. Their ethnic dances are particular to each group and have a lot in common with dances of people of the same nations in their country of origin or in other exile countries.

Examples of each category are here given in detail: for the first category – Dance as Tradition and Identity for Yemenite Jews; for the second category – The Dances of Kurdish Jews and Dance in Hassidism; and for the third category – Dances of Arabs, Druses, Circassians and Armenians in Israel.

Chapter Four - The World dancing its Way

Folk Dance is also referred to as Peasant Dance or National Dance. Folk dance was an appropriate framework for realizing social and cultural functions in a rural society when ritual elements, which formed a significant part of traditional ethnic dance, were neglected. In contrast to ethnic ritual dance, folk dance has no ceremonial aims. Even when an individual artist creates a dance, when the wider public shares it, it becomes adopted by this public and serves the function of folk dance. Folk dance has the power to express the customs and character of a nation.

Irish folk dances are an example of the flowering of folk dance today and transcend their geographical location and their function. Here is given a description of these dances in Irish traditional society and in the world of commercial entertainment.

In Israel the **Hora** dance became a component in creating a new society. The Zionist vision and the need to become rooted in the land in a new social reality matched the national collective drive to shape a new form of Israeliness. Since the establishment of the State of Israel and even before the state was declared, the Hora was accepted as a symbol of Israeliness, in spite of its Balkanize origin. Here comes a detailed description of the Hora dance.

Several elements played a significant role in the creation of folk dance in Israel:

1. Social ideas about “new folk dance”, influenced by Rudolf von Laban: large displays of movement based on simple dance patterns, which incorporated masses.
2. The Zionist-socialist view shared by artists and members of the movement who were personally involved in or aware of Laban’s activities.
3. The desire of “agents of culture” to fill the vacuum in the cultural life of the society after having tried to separate from the tradition of dance in the Diaspora.
4. The relative isolation, the yearning for simple communal dances, which would strengthen the feeling of the collective, release tensions and symbolize a new life.
5. The initiative of individual choreographers to demonstrate their ability to create, dance and make others dance.

Great gatherings of folk dances were organized in Kibbutz Dalia in 1944 and then in 1947, 1951, 1958, 1968. These gatherings reflected the ideological goals of their organizers – to meet and dance together, to see and be seen, and to affirm their identity through dance. The dances were manifold: dances created for festive pageants in the agricultural settlements; ethnic dances of different Jewish traditions and of Arabs, Druses and Circassians. This

movement was institutionalized by creating the Department for Folk Dances in the Center for Culture and Education of the General Federation of Labor. Following the gatherings in Dalia were those in Zemach and in Carmiel. In the 1960s attention was directed to ethnic dance traditions existing in different settlements by creating the Project Israel Ethnic Dance, established in 1971 by the Ministry for Education and Culture and the Department for Folk Dances in the General Federation of Labor. This led to a renewed awareness of ethnic traditions of dance in Israel.

Here is given a detailed example of the **integration of Jewish-Yemenite tradition in Israeli folk dance.**

Social Dance - Entertainment and Status

This section reviews the contexts and particular features, which characterize social dance. Ethnic dance always included features of social dance, but social dance crosses geographical boundaries. Court dances, going through many changes, became the bases for social dances as ways of spending the increasing leisure hours. This chapter summarizes the history of dance in Europe from the social and cultural point of view.

Social Dances – Communication and Protest

In the second half of the twentieth century, as means of communication break through geographical and national borders, the wide public adopted new fashions. Dance has always been one of the most striking expressions of the concept of gender. Today it also reflects a rebellion against racial divisions and offers an opportunity to protest against social, religious and political institutions. Social dance pertinently reflects the pace of change undergone by a society. Alongside social dance, which does not exhibit strong forms of protest, in nightclubs and discotheques today, we can find dances which are characterized by the features of “teenage rebellion”. Their protest sometimes adopts ethnic elements from the realm of music, adornment and style of movement. However, social dance in the twentieth century is mainly characterized by change and by the desire not to be the same as the previous generation.

Chapter Five – Dance – Symbol and Significance

From Traditional Ceremony to Stage Performance

Stage dance is an encounter between active choreographers and performers and a less active audience. Stage dance is learned dance and is planned and performed at a professional level of expertise. It is meant to display a high level of performance skill in movement. The

choreographer mediates between the movement material, the performers and the message he wants to convey.

Here examples are given of the origins of stage dances in the island of **Bali** in Indonesia, in **India**, where the gods themselves also dance and in the **French court** of Louis XIV as the source of **Classical Ballet**.

In the **twentieth century**, works of stage dance concentrate on the creator, the author, and the choreographer. The choreographer, like the audience and the performers, expects a professional performance, a display of virtuosity, but also the expression of a meaningful statement.

Dance – Personal Statement and Cultural Artistic Identity

The human body and its movement language are the starting point for the choreographer today. The technical mastery of dance integrates movements and gestures from daily life with sophisticated stage accessories, which can create almost any illusion, offering a mixture of imagination and reality. In contemporary dance, the personal statement, unique style and individual shaping of any particular stage dance are at the heart of choreography. The choreographer brings his own personal world, his home traditions and his schooling to the work he is creating. The common characteristics of modern choreographers are:

- An extensive knowledge and experience of methods of movement and dance.
- A broad education and knowledge in the basics of music, its forms and styles.
- An awareness of stage design – decoration, lighting, costume, accessories.
- They are aware of their personal heritage and refer to it or quote it on stage.
- They are socially involved, sensitive to human rights and find creative ways of expressing their commitments in their artistic work.
- They are teachers-artists, aware of the importance of the tool – the human body – in the realization of their work.
- They are excellent directors who know how to involve the performers in the creative, emotional, sensual and contemplative experience.
- They consider the uniqueness of every individual and his particular capacity for movement and expression an important tool to foster and to integrate in a work of stage dance.

During the 1950s, **Noa Eshkol** and **Abraham Wachman** articulated the basic models for movement notation (EWMN), using the term ‘movement’ rather than ‘dance’ on purpose, thus enabling new forms of thinking and creative work. The notation is based on a mathematical geometric model, which translates the meanings of the body’s movements into abstract

values symbolized by numbers, letters and other graphic symbols. The E.W. notation has proven itself a very important tool in movement education. The compositions are usually intended for chamber groups and are performed in pure forms like unison or canon. This school of movement has its own small and select audience of devotees who follow closely the performances of these compositions. Dance according to the E.W. movement notation is an experience where there is no attempt to flatter the audience.

Artists as Shapers of Culture – Festive Pageants in the New Israel

In the pioneer society of the New Eretz-Israel, artists were deeply involved in the struggle for economic and social survival, in creating a ‘new society’, in shaping the culture of a society in the making. Several choreographers who began working in dance in Eretz-Israel worked according to Laban’s principles. Several characteristics are common to dance artists who began their work locally in the 1930’s in the agricultural settlement:

- Social consciousness and commitment expressed in the subjects of the dances.
- Creating dance with dancers who lacked professional training.
- Creating dances in the outdoors and in unconventional conditions and settings.
- Different styles based on primary movements that any dancer could perform.
- Openness to local influences and ethnic traditions.

The **pageant** is a folk celebration shared by the entire community and the artists are meant to be an inseparable part of the celebrating society. Its subjects are drawn from ancient sources such as the Bible and on the local landscape and the cultivating of the land. All the members of the community participate in the performance, the planning and the preparations. Festive pageants seemed an appropriate format for a society striving for equality and social justice. The format, form and features of the pageant could become permanent and could be re-instituted the same time the next years for events in the year-cycle (festivals, holidays) or life cycle (mainly weddings).

Dance - Identity, Image and Gender in Israel

Dance is a central tool in consolidating our social and personal self-image in society. Dance reflects perceptions of gender, which can be passed on from generation to generation. Dance serves as a challenge to social, cultural and religious consensus and also as a channel for expressing new points of view. In all human societies the general perception of culture is split into male culture and female culture. In traditional Jewish culture men and women dance

separately, and their style of dance illustrates cultural gender differences that make up their movement language.

Here is given a survey of how the dance tradition of Jews from Yemen was integrated into Hebrew culture in Israel from the perspective of gender. The conception of gender is always being tested in the creation of stage dance and in Israel's multi-cultural environment; there is never absolute consensus.