

THE PHYSICAL PRACTICE OF DANCE AND SPORT AS CULTURAL EXPRESSION

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Abstract

Dance and sport are both considered prehistoric forms of human physical activity. Cultural scholars agree that values and belief systems may be reflected through physical practice and the way individuals within a culture move. Given the current situation of globalization, in which various cultures mix with historically unprecedented regularity, the study of cultural dances and sport activities might inform us about those cultures. Perhaps, much in the same vein as de Coubertin attempted to use sport as a means to bridge cultural differences through the Olympic movement, the sharing of cultural dance and sport might encourage harmony among those with vastly differing cultural backgrounds. This manuscript explores ways in which connections between physical cultural practices of dance and sport have historically reflected cultural values, thereby providing an additional perspective for the importance of human physical activity as a means of studying and understanding human culture.

INTRODUCTION

Dance and sport are cultural phenomena. Both involve the medium of bodily movement and require a certain level of athleticism, permeate all levels of society, and hold deep cultural meanings. Thus, the physical practices of dance and sport can, and do, serve as a means of cultural expression. In this manuscript, we attempt to delve into the means of cultural expression via sport and dance, especially as these physical activities relate to the principle of Olympism, and how sport and dance, often in tandem, are representative of culture through physical practice.

The Olympic Games are the largest sporting event in the world. In 2016 at Rio de Janeiro, over 11,000 athletes representing 207 countries competed in the XXXI Olympiad (IOC, n.d., a). One of the main purposes of the Olympic Games is to promote international relations as well as cultural awareness. In fact, the principle of *Olympism* is defined thus:

Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, olympism seeks to create a

way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. (IOC, n.d., b)

The founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, coined the term Olympism in 1896. The fundamental premise of Olympism is “blending sport with culture...” to build a better world (IOC, n.d., b, p. 11). The Olympic Games are meant to bring about cultural awareness and to build camaraderie among the athletes. Interestingly, dance can be viewed in this very same vein. Dance is a culture's way of communicating its values, beliefs, and heritage. But, what specifically is culture? And, how are a culture's values represented through cultural practices?

Culture, Ideology, Tradition, and Orature

Cultural identities are constructed through a myriad of experiences, social interactions, and shared practices. For our discussion concerning culture, we draw primarily from two authors, Williams (1976) and Hutnyk (2006), who, interestingly, both wrote works entitled “Culture.” Williams, in his attempts to articulate the origin and evolution of meanings of the word *culture*, admits that it is one of the most complex and complicated words in the English language. However, he manages to list three broad definitions of *culture* as a noun; the definition that most closely connects to this discussion asserts that the term *culture* “indicates a particular way of life, whether of people, a period, a group, or humanity in general” (p. 90). Thirty years after Williams published his chapter on *culture*, Hutnyk, an anthropologist, re-addressed the manner in which we use the term, particularly in light of scholarly usages. Perhaps a reflection of Hutnyk's postmodern perspective—a perspective in which decentering is encouraged—Hutnyk concurs with Williams's opinion concerning the difficulty of pinning down a clear and simple definition. Hutnyk writes, “any easy model of culture is delusional in its simplicity” and “is so fragile it should immediately be toppled” (p. 351). Problematising the concept of culture even further, Hutnyk argues that in scholarly circles, the term is often a matter of interpretation.

So, we acknowledge that the term culture in and of itself is problematic. Thus, for our purposes within this paper, we use the term *culture* as it is defined simply by the Cambridge English Dictionary (n.d.): “The way of life of a particular people, esp. as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their moral and religious beliefs.”

Any discussion of culture also must include discussion of ideology, for the concepts of culture and ideology are linked closely. Some might argue that a specific culture would not exist without its defining ideological pillars. Althusser's (2001) theories surrounding ideology are relevant here. Ideological systems exist ubiquitously throughout cultural practice, and these

ideological threads weave throughout the ways in which cultural identities are constructed. As a means of instilling common beliefs, groups of individuals that self-identify as members of a specific culture or community share traditions that fulfill significant ideological functions.

This brings us to the notion of *tradition*. Hobswam (2012) argues that tradition is manufactured; traditions, as sets of practices that are symbolic or ritualistic in nature, are invented with the purpose of perpetuating “certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (p. 1). So *tradition* might be defined as a set of repeated practices, valued by a culture, which fulfill specific ideological functions.

Roach (1995) asserts that, in the continued study of language and culture, there are a multitude of cultural texts that are not written, but living. He asserts that *orature*, which he defines as a “range of cultural forms invested in speech, gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, customs, rites, and rituals,” must be combined with literature for a true representation of a cultural or a historical reality. Insisting that literature and these other practices “have produced one another interactively over time,” (p. 45) Roach argues for the importance of both and gives a compelling rationale for studying cultural practices beyond what is written in the literature. Additionally, Taylor (2003) argues that the body is a living archive of culture...and this supports our argument that physical practices, such as in dance and sport, can be analyzed as a means of reflecting cultural ideologies.

Examples of Dance and Sport as Cultural Expression

Consider the Māori’s haka or Brazil’s capoeira as excellent example of physical practices that might be considered dance or sport or a combination of the two as cultural expression. The physical practice of dance and sport, often working in tandem such as with the haka and capoeira, are interesting examples of culture being displayed through the medium of physical activity.

The haka is a traditional “war dance” that originated with the Māori of Aotearoa, or modern-day New Zealand. The haka is a group dance, characterized by physical posturing, the stamping of the feet, rhythmic shouting, and vigorous movements and facial expressions. The traditional purpose of the haka was to be a signal that warriors going into battle were strong and were ready to enter into battle. It served as a means of intimidation and was performed by men only.

Haka today are performed still mostly by men, but a few involve women and even children (Te Kete Ipurangi, n.d.). Today, haka are performed for numerous reasons such as welcoming dignitaries, recognizing great achievements or significant occasions as well as at funerals in honor

of the departed.

With respect to sport, the haka is now recognized around the world because many of New Zealand's sporting teams perform a haka before athletic contests. One of the most famous athletic teams to popularize the haka is New Zealand's national rugby union team, the All Blacks. These performances are viewed as a source of national pride and are the perfect example of sport, working in tandem with dance, as a true measure of cultural expression. An excellent example of differing Polynesian war dances, or haka, can be seen in this stunning video of the Tongan and New Zealand rugby union teams performing war dances before a rugby match in 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyZEUeAoFKE>

Capoeira is considered part of the “intangible cultural heritage” of Brazil by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Specifically, the “capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian cultural practice—simultaneously a fight and a dance—that can be interpreted as a tradition, a sport and even an art form.” Capoeira originated from the Brazilian slave trade roughly some 500 years ago. Its history was one of oral traditions, passed from one generation to another, and involved a mix of various African cultures, to include dance, food, sport, and other rituals. Today, capoeira, a once outlawed activity of “physical and spiritual empowerment” is viewed as a cultural phenomenon and a national sport (Capoeira Brasil, n.d.).

Capoeira is a Brazilian martial art that combines elements of dance, acrobatics, and music, usually referred to as a game. Considered by some as a symbol of the Brazilian culture and a symbol of resistance to oppression, capoeira definitely changed its image and became a source of pride to Brazilian people. An example of capoeira may be seen in this video clip from a film titled *Slave to the Rhythm*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6H0D8Valli0>

CONCLUSION

While these are only two examples, once we begin to consider physical practices such as dance and sport as cultural expression, we realize the opportunities for investigation are endless. One might explore the implied cultural beliefs concerning gender based on the fact that both the haka and capoeira are traditionally performed by men. Consequently, how might this exploration differ when investigating forms that are traditionally performed only by women, such as the Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam? What might these gendered performance practices imply about the cultures that created and perpetuate them? Scrutinizing the physical practices of different

cultures reveals ideological structures that may otherwise be unapparent, which in turn leads us toward de Coubertin's goal of cultural understanding.

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