

Bodies in Motion: Dance, Movement, Gesture

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ABSTRACT

In pursuit of this interest and broadening its methodological complexity, this present issue of *Martor* proposes a group of studies on the theme of bodies in motion, hence the focus here on dance. This subject brings, in addition to theoretical challenges that arise in scholarly discussion and analysis of the moving body, a discipline-specific prerequisite (a feature shared with ethnomusicological research) that adds an extra level of theoretical and analytical construction, notably that of movement notation.

KEYWORDS

Body in motion; movement; dance; local cultures; ethnic identity; shadow theater.

The study of human motion as both a socio-cultural practice and product is the main focus of ethnochoreology. Emerging comparatively recently as a scientific discipline, ethnochoreology has developed through interdisciplinary research that draws primarily on ethnology, anthropology and folklore studies, making it a particularly fitting subject for our journal. It is not a

subject, however, in which most ethnologists have been schooled, given both its late arrival on the academic scene and requiring, as we note below, special investigative skills. Text books and articles from the later twentieth century distinguished two broad scholarly approaches.¹ These viewpoints were rooted in historical and geopolitical circumstances: North American anthropological perspectives that emphasized contemporary performance and socio-cultural context, and the longer-established European tradition that focused upon dance history and structure.² Although traces of geographical and disciplinary affiliations linger as, for example, in terms such as dance ethnology, folk dance studies, anthropology of dance and ethnochoreology—today, these once strict distinctions have largely dissolved. Consequential mutual influence, inspiration and innovation have resulted in an enriched dynamic field of ethnochoreology that embraces all culturally patterned modes of movement produced by the human body.

Martor journal has already demonstrated interest in the cultural and historical construction of the human body in a previous issue (no. 20/2015), entitled *Bodies / Matter: Narratives of Corporeality* (see Ion and Dobos 2015). This brought together several articles, field notes, exhibitions and book reviews to examine the ways in which the “human body has been visually and narratively represented in different historical and scientific contexts.” As the issue coordinators note in the introduction, it is not a simple topic to approach: “Mediated through language, disciplined by sciences, placed under political control and the medium of social relations, the body continues to escape the rigors of discourses and representations.”

In pursuit of this interest and broadening its methodological complexity, this present issue of *Martor* proposes a group of studies on the theme of bodies in motion, hence the focus here on dance. This subject brings, in addition to theoretical challenges that arise in scholarly discussion and analysis of the moving body, a discipline-specific prerequisite (a feature shared with ethnomusicological research) that adds an extra level of theoretical and analytical construction, notably that of movement notation. In order to conduct scientific analyses of dance, transformation of the dynamic and complex image of movement into a graphic, static image, is essential and choreological research typically requires the researcher to have this additional specialization.

Our editorial choice to focus on dance and movement analysis might be considered risky for a journal of ethnology and general anthropology, perhaps limiting our readership from the very beginning. Our goal, however, is precisely to facilitate broad scientific access to one of the specialized fields of ethnology, that of ethnochoreology. We assume the (editorial) difficulties of this task, knowing the cultural importance of framing the issue of traditional dance among the main themes of contemporary anthropological reflection, of cultural studies and beyond.

Mediated by methods of notation and analysis that date back, practically, to the first half of the 20th century, the scientific study of local, peasant, ethnic dances, generically called “traditional,” “folk” or “popular,” becomes either highly specialized methodologically, when it emphasizes the analysis of movement; or remains on the borders of the field of ethnochoreology, when it focuses more, for example, on the sociological, political, or community dimensions of dance.

The coordinators of this issue wanted to offer a nuanced understanding of some of the aspects of dance in traditional communities/societies and of choreographic practices, whether these are reproduced through community practices, through stage performance, or almost exclusively through media practices. Each of these aspects are themselves fields of ethnochoreology, and, in general, of ethnology. It is impossible to deny the importance that dance, especially traditional dance, has today in the processes of cultural identification or self-identification, (be it related to ethnicity, nation or group).

Through our editorial project, we aim to cross these two research directions by making the theoretical approach to traditional dance more flexible so that it can be naturally integrated into anthropological studies across diverse themes. To our advantage, the four initial coordinators³ of

this issue have experienced long-term scholarly collaboration, each being members of the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance (ICTMD)⁴ for more than 30 years. An additional factor connects not only the editors of this issue but also some of its authors. Several of the contributors teach or have taught on the Choreomundus international MA programme, which investigates dance and other movement systems (ritual practices, martial arts, games, and physical theatre) as Intangible Cultural Heritage within the broader contexts of Ethnochoreology, the Anthropology of Dance, Dance Studies, and Heritage Studies.⁵ The studies included in this issue were written on a similar topic.

In this issue, we interpret our theme broadly, encompassing studies of moving bodies in both the past and present, as well as representations of human movement culturally embodied in three- and two-dimensional forms, such as puppetry and graphic imagery. In accordance with the basic structure of the journal, to which our readership is already accustomed, issue 30 is composed of four sections, preceded by an introduction: I. *Dance and cultural practices*; II. *Different bodies in motion*; III *Dialogues and images*; IV. *Book reviews*. The first section is reserved for scientific studies. These are grouped into two parts: one is organized around cultural-choreographic practices, the second is reserved for correlations between dance movement and the diversity of bodies in motion. The studies that make up this first section are extensive and address the problem of dance and movement both from the point of view of the cultural systems in which they are embedded and of the diversity of relationships between corporeality and movement.

In the third section, usually reserved for museology, our journal privileges narratives and visual exhibitions/display, while in previous issues a fifth optional section has hosted texts with a freer structure, interviews, essays and the results of works in progress. The coordinators of this issue have brought together these two editorial objectives into a single section. Under the title *Dialogues and Images*, it focuses on the idea of the graphic and narrative representation of the dancing body. The third article in this section includes the presentation and analysis of drawings of traditional dance included in a genuine visual diary of rural life.

The last section, dedicated to reviews of recently published books on dance and related topics, is testimony to the wide scope and scientific rigour with which dance scholarship is conducted today. The selected volumes for review embrace a variety of perspectives and foci: movement documentation and analysis, choreomusical relationships, historical studies and ethnographic description, analysis and interpretation. Overall, this issue underlines the importance of dance in contemporary society, its continuing, often challenged, and sometimes renewed relevance in rapidly changing societies. In particular, it demonstrates the wider value to scientists of conducting research into the various manifestations of embodied transmission.

In light of the global cultural impact of the 21st century, local inspiration, local knowledge, and cultural heritage are increasingly valued. People living together within globalisation and local cultural influences, in virtual and physical reality, are searching for answers to social and cultural questions that define their identity, both spiritual and physical. The undeniable positive effect of the Covid pandemic has been to reinforce cultural and artistic phenomena placed in online environments, while at the same time the demand for living, person-to-person, “offline” encounters has increased significantly. In this respect, dance culture is considered a priority field.

The first section of our volume moves from theoretical and historical concerns of traditional dance analysis, with a strong focus upon issues of movement notation and dance structure, to studies in which the personal experiences of the dancer are brought to the fore, relating them to larger socio-cultural frameworks. From a theoretical perspective, Csilla Könczei’s opening article (“Can We Find Reason in Dance? Embodied Thought: Exploring Analogies between Dance and Speech Articulation”) is perhaps the most intensive. Its central question is whether meaning or “rationality” can be found in dance, or whether it is merely an instinctive, body-bound activity.



In addition to presenting the historical and philosophical background of this question, the study discusses the results of classical, formal-structural folk dance research. It also introduces the author's earlier research concepts relevant to this topic, in which the structure of dance is compared to linguistic structures, emphasizing that dances are most similar to "poetic language." Könczei argues that recent theories underlining the unity of body and mind (such as António Damásio's [1994] theory of the "embodied mind") open up the possibility of viewing dance as a form of thinking. Some theories—such as Lindblom's (2000) emergent phonology or Browman and Goldstein's (1989) articulatory phonology—describe speech itself as movement-based. These models can also be applied to dance research.

Continuing this vein of formal and structural questions related to the study of traditional dance is the subsequent article, "Dance Syntax in Practice: The San Felipe Dance Group Performs the Cumbia *Cienaguera*" by Marisol Limón Silicéo and Juan Felipe Miranda Medina. The authors present an analysis of one of the favourite choreographies of the Colombian San Felipe Dance Group—the folk dance piece *Cumbia Cienaguera*. Their aim is to examine how the variety and combinations of dance movements can be described by focusing on dance forms, particularly within a community where participants have diverse physical abilities (such as elderly individuals or dancers with prosthetics). The study is grounded in the concept of dance syntax, which the authors define as the rules and sequences by which dance movements can be combined. They model this system using the Finite-State Automata (FSA) theory—a computational method well suited for modelling movement sequences. The authors first recorded the movements using Labanotation, then simplified them using Motif Notation, which captures the essence of movements rather than their exact details. From these motifs, they built automata to describe the possible movement modes and transitions within a given choreography. The movements were categorized into three main types:

- Travelling movements (mM) – when the dancer moves through space,
- In-place movements (mP) – where the dancer stays in one spot,
- Turning movements (mT) – rotational movements performed in place.

The combination of FSA and Motif Notation offers several advantages: it allows for the systematic comparison of different movement variations and enables us to see not just an "ideal" version of a choreography, but also how individual dancers adapt it to their own physical condition. Furthermore, the combined use of these methods makes it possible to visually represent potential movement variations and their combinations—clearly showing that not everyone dances the same way, even when following the same choreography. The study demonstrates that this analytical method can represent the diversity of dance, emphasizing the inclusivity of dance communities, where each participant contributes to the performance according to their own capabilities. Additionally, the integration of FSA and Motif Notation provides a new tool for the study of folk dance, community dance, and dance anthropology. One of the study's most important messages is that dance is not merely the execution of predetermined steps, but a meeting point between individual bodies and communal creativity—and now, this can also be represented through formal and structural analysis.

In studying the junctures between individual and society, traditional dance may also reveal past and present embodied issues of cultural identity, social gender roles, politics and power,⁶ which may often be played out in the personal lives of dancers and researchers. Raymundo Ruiz González's article, "That Which Remains: The Role of Fonadan Notation in the Establishment of the Mexican Field of Folkloric Dance and its Terminology," is closely connected to such topics. His study examines Fonadan, an important yet now forgotten institution in the research and teaching of Mexican folkloric dance. Fonadan was established in 1972, as a result of the then Mexican government's populist policies. Its aim was the systematic research, archiving, and teaching of traditional Mexican dances. The creation of Fonadan reflected the cultural populism of President

Echeverría's administration, which sought to preserve and promote "authentic folk culture"—often also for tourism purposes.

The article is a compelling example of an embedded researcher's perspective, as the author recounts how he first encountered Fonadan's legacy through his personal life story and explores the role it played in shaping his career as both a dancer and a scholar. Fonadan collected, recorded, and documented dances. It employed the Laban notation system for formal and structural classification, which later had a significant aesthetic impact on how traditional Mexican dance was perceived. Fonadan played a key role in the development of dance schools. The curriculum and notes it produced, along with direct connections to informants (indigenous dancers), helped incorporate folkloric elements into a professional educational framework. Although the institution and its associated archive were dissolved in 1985, its dance notations, terminology, and methodology still live on in educational institutions and in the embodied knowledge of dancers. The author reflects on his own experiences and how these movements and expressions continue to manifest in contemporary dance practice. Fonadan's work contributed to the establishment of Mexican folkloric dance as an academic discipline, though it has also been criticized for "staging" authentic traditions and centralizing cultural heritage. The main questions and insights raised by the study are:

- Can traditional dance be preserved through documentation?
- What happens to communal knowledge when it is institutionalized?
- What does authenticity mean in folkloric dance?

These questions are not unique to Mexican or even South American concerns. Similar questions arise worldwide in the context of rapidly changing traditional cultures under modernity. The author encourages a re-evaluation and further exploration of Fonadan's legacy, emphasizing that this knowledge still exists—not only in books, but in terminology, bodies, movements, and educational practice.

Traditional dances are significantly represented both in the global and local cultural scene: traditional movements, gestures and dances associated with ethnic groups are circulated on the web and take on new meanings in new contexts. At the same time, traditional dance culture is also important in the construction and re-shaping of personal, local, regional and national identities (Liebsch 2001). In her study "Dancing over Crossed Swords: An Ethnographic Case Study on Competitive Solo Highland Dancing," which explores the teaching of Scottish Highland dance, Bethany Whiteside emphasizes the significance of this dance form, often regarded as a key element of Scottish national identity. Through the analysis of a dance class, the author examines the social and cultural roles of the dance. Whiteside employed ethnographic methods: she participated in the classes, observed and interviewed the teacher and students, and used Erving Goffman's theatrical model to analyse social interactions. Whiteside's findings suggest that Highland dance functions both as an art form and a sport, operating within a highly regulated, competition-oriented system.⁷ Based on her observations, the group studied can be divided into two: the older students and the teacher, who support the regulated structure, and the younger students, who grow weary of the repetitive exercises and seek a more creative experience beyond the standardized forms. According to the study, Highland dance in its current form has reached a kind of "dead end": while the strict regulation provides identity and legitimacy for the time being, it also hinders renewal and deters deeper engagement from the younger generation. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis reveals that multiple "realities" coexist simultaneously: alongside the visible rules of the dance class, there are also underlying personal conflicts, desires, and critical perspectives held by the participants.

In the subsequent section *Different Bodies in Motion*, we include essays which present examples of embodiment which may challenge received notions of traditionality and of the dancer. In her study of the invention of a dance tradition ("Pamporea: Emergence of a New Vernacular. Dance

and Identity Performing with Aromanian (Vlachs) from Romania”), Georgiana Vlahbei builds a problematic that lies at the intersection of three major themes in contemporary anthropology: the dynamics of local cultures, their mediatization, and the phenomenon of migration. These themes are explored through ethnological perspectives on traditional dance—an ambitious and complex undertaking. The author sheds light on the case of the Aromanians, a transhumant European population, speaking a language of Latin origin, but which has never had its own state, nor national culture. Some Aromanians—originating from different territories of the Balkan space—emigrated between the two World Wars to Romania, to form a distinct community, the focus of this present study. The originality of this research lies in analysing the process of creation of a dance now regarded as “traditional”: *Pamporea*. From its very inception—its authorship remains disputed—*Pamporea* achieved worldwide circulation and remarkable popularity within Aromanian communities across the globe. In this essay, Vlahbei illuminates the contexts, behaviours, practices, and techniques that establish, validate and reinforce the dance’s identity value and, implicitly, its classification as a “tradition.” She shows how these processes are amplified through intensive media exposure. Her analysis is supported by significant excerpts from interviews conducted with members of the Aromanian community in Romania.

Moving on to the theatrical form of modern contemporary dance, Márton Hajnal’s study, “Disability and Dance. Possible Theoretical Approaches to Analyse CandoCo’s First Guest Performance in Hungary” presents the findings of an ethnographic research project conducted in an inclusive dance class (where people with and without disabilities learn together). The author used interviews and journaling as methods to explore the practical, social, and emotional impacts of inclusive dance. Additionally, his embodied experience as a participant observer allowed for a deeper understanding of the process. Notably, Hajnal reflects on his own position as a researcher, writing openly about his assumptions and the discomforts he encountered during the study. One of the key insights of the study is that inclusive dance classes are not only artistically valuable but also beneficial from both health and social perspectives: they foster acceptance, empathy, and a shared sense of human experience. Within the context of teaching, disability is not presented as a disadvantage, but rather as part of human diversity. Moving together helps build emotional connections, increases empathy, and creates community. Inclusive dance is not merely art or sport—it is also a social space that facilitates the understanding of “difference.” The study also highlights how dance can dismantle social barriers surrounding the body and notions of normalcy.

Our volume also explores contemporary dance forms that draw on traditional elements. These traditional forms, when placed in new environments and contexts, can often exert a similar emotional and aesthetic impact as before. This is evident, for example, in Ștefana Pop-Curșeu’s study “Le théâtre d’ombres : danse magique de l’imagination. Des traditions orientales au théâtre roumain contemporain” [“Shadow Theatre: A Magical Dance of the Imagination. From Oriental Traditions to Contemporary Romanian Theatre”]. This comprehensive paper explores the history and cultural significance of shadow theatre, from its Eastern ritualistic origins to contemporary Romanian theatrical examples. The author argues that shadow plays should not be viewed merely as spectacles for children, but as complex, symbolic art forms capable of bridging the visible and the invisible, the present and the past, life and death. Shadow theatre has roots in India and China, where it served ritual and spiritual purposes, such as invoking the spirits of the dead. These traditions are especially strong in Indonesia (*wayang kulit*), Cambodia, and Thailand, where performances are accompanied by dance and music. In Europe, shadow theatre gradually lost its ritual character and was primarily used for children’s entertainment or satirical performances. However, contemporary theatrical examples—including Romanian ones—are also discussed in the study. While Western shadow theatre may have lost its sacred dimension, the study argues that it still has a unique aesthetic and emotional impact on audiences. Shadows do not merely survive as nostalgic childhood amusements, but in the

hands of contemporary artists, they gain new, multifaceted meaning and artistic potential—becoming one of the most powerful forms of making the invisible visible, revealing and empowering the motion of the human body in its absence.

Related to this, in the third section entitled *Dialogues and Images*, is the conversation between Romanian ethnologist Laura Jiǵa Iliescu and contemporary dancer and choreographer Silvia Călin (“On Being Available. Conversations with Silvia Călin”), which centres on the relationship between dance, the body, and the mind, as well as the parallels and differences between contemporary and traditional dance forms and their social and spiritual roles. One of the key messages of the conversation is that dance is simultaneously an art form, a path to self-knowledge, and a means of social and spiritual communication. The necessary “accessibility” for this—meaning inner openness, bodily awareness, and presence—can be learned and is essential for an authentic performance.

Approaches previously considered as typically cultural anthropological began to make their impact felt in “classical” circles of dance folklore in the 1980s. Alongside the earlier geographic-historical and the related structural approaches of European dance studies, the questions above have now become important fields of investigation for ethnochoreology.

Incorporating emic sources can offer a new perspective on ethnographically tracking changes in traditional dances. An example of this is the study “The Devil’s Images: Dance Scenes in Naïve Paintings.” The two authors, Beáta Gatti and Sándor Varga, examine the visual memory of a Hungarian inhabitant of a village in Transylvania, Romania, particularly through the depiction of dance culture. The self-taught artist’s paintings and manuscripts present traditional dance scenes from a unique, internal perspective. Created in a naïve style, the works intricately combine autobiographical elements, local history, and communal memory. These paintings function as memory narratives, simultaneously serving as visual stories, historical dance documents, and personal testimonies. The images act as alternative historical sources for understanding local lifestyles, clothing, social roles, and dance life. While they provide rich information, the authors emphasize that, due to their idealized nature, these depictions should only be used in historical dance folkloristics with appropriate caution.

Our final section in this issue fittingly opens with an incisive review of a ground-breaking publication by our late colleague János Fügedi. As an internationally esteemed dance notator and ethnologist, the reviewer is particularly well positioned to appraise this monumental guide to the system of Kinetography Laban in which Fügedi reveals his sterling skills as dance educator, analyst and innovative documenter. This reviews section brings to wider attention recent monographs dedicated to the specific genres of Argentine tango and the English Morris dance, an edited collection of essays on various dance practices in north-east India, and a longitudinal study on the dance culture of a village in Romania.

In this issue of *Martor*, we have aimed to publish a diverse yet coherent body of knowledge related to traditional dance, which, at the same time, is able to respond to the social, cultural, and artistic issues of our time. We intend, nonetheless, to preserve our specific scientific image, established by our predecessors and matured in the European scientific and social context: we also want to present our approach based on evidence from analysis of social context, functions, and dance movements. We hope that we will contribute to developing a sensitive scholarly approach to the problems of dance, which is capable of interpreting contemporary cultural processes without losing sight of historical explanations, and which draws its conclusions from analyses based on a thorough knowledge of the material. We want to make it possible for ethnochoreology with a focus on historical and formal issues and for the dynamically transforming dance anthropology to meet in a way that allows them to maintain their specific identities, to avoid falling into the traps of fashionable populism, while respecting precise scientific criteria, and to be able to provide important impulses for each other and other disciplines.

NOTES

1. See Royce (1977); Giurchescu and Torp (1991); Kaepler (1991). For contrasting approaches to fieldwork in dance, see Buckland (1999). For a retrospective survey and analysis of the literature and field, see Grau and Gore (2006).
2. The East European formal-structural approach does not refer to the type of structuralism used in social anthropology (see Könczei 2020), nor do those devised by the American anthropologist Adrienne L Kaepler and by the Norwegian ethnochoreologist Egil Bakka. For an overview see Kaepler and Dunin (2007).
3. Unfortunately, this project was completed by only three of the editors who initially formed the team, the fourth, the ethnochoreologist János Fügedi, passing away on 31 January, 2025.
4. A scholarly organization which aims to further the study, practice, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of music and dance of all countries.
5. The Choreomundus programme was established by four Universities: Norwegian University of Science and Technology Trondheim, Norway; Université Clermont Auvergne, France (coordinator); University of Roehampton London, United Kingdom; University of Szeged, Hungary. In 2025, the National

and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, joined the consortium, while the University of Szeged and the University of Roehampton were granted associated partner status. The programme is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The programme aims to provide practical skills to observe, analyse, document, and evaluate dances. It equips students to analyse dance as knowledge, practice and heritage and to promote different modes of knowledge transmission adapted to local contexts. A broader aim is to equip students for global challenges and cultural encounters. For more information see: <https://choreomundus.org/consortium/> Two of the studies in our volume were written by alumni of the Choreomundus programme (Juan Felipe Miranda Medina and Raymundo Ruiz González).

6. The relationship between dance, identity, and politics has increasingly come into the focus of dance researchers recent years. A thematic section of the 2020 issue of *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* was specifically dedicated to these topics (Rakočević 2020; Iosif 2020; Varga 2020; Mellish-Green 2020; Eitler 2020).

7. Sándor Varga articulated similar problems in one of his writings concerning the stage folk dance movement in Hungary (Varga 2024).

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