

The Evolution of Dance as a Political Expression

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ABSTRACT

Dance, a universal language of the body, has long served as a powerful vehicle for political expression across cultures and history. This paper traces the evolution of dance from its ancient origins as a social and ritualistic practice to its contemporary role in articulating political resistance, social identity, and cultural memory. Dance operates simultaneously as a form of oppression and liberation, often employed by ruling powers to enforce control and by marginalized groups to resist domination. Through historical context, cultural analysis, and modern case studies including the impact of digital media and social movements this study highlights dance's complex socio-political functions. Examining classical forms, folk traditions, and protest choreography, the paper elucidates how dance embodies power dynamics, shapes policy discourse, and negotiates social boundaries. Ultimately, it reveals dance as an evolving medium deeply intertwined with political agency, cultural identity, and social change.

Keywords: Political Dance, Dance as Protest, Cultural Expression, Social Movements, Dance and Identity, Digital Media and Dance, Folk Dance.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early years of life, people learn to express themselves through the body by mimetically replicating and developing dances observed in others and in their surroundings. For this reason, experienced and untrained dancers are usually expected to be engaged in expressive dances. Dance is generally considered the second universal language after music. In many cases, it reflects habits, views, and relations, constituting a "vessel" of meanings. During the time range under examination, dance appears to be so important that it was systematically used: by the ruling class as a means of enforcement or manipulation; whereas by the people, as a means to resist or express opposition to the policies of the respective ruling class. Ultimately, dance is a means of either oppression or liberation. In such cases, dance carries values and meanings, embodies cultural classifications, reflects social relations and diversifications, and defines integration and exclusion. Professor St. Lynn mentions as follows: "dance goes deep beneath the conscious, confounding academic thought that seeks to disentangle the threads of a tapestry that refuses to reveal itself as anything less than an integrated meta-art, veteran of thousands of years of ceremonies, celebrations, and rituals far too intricate and too ancient to analyze with brute anthropological steel." The contemporary educated person may be familiar with many different ways of dance. In a large number of traditional societies, dance played and still plays a catalytic role in organizing social events such as feasts, festivals, funerals, or gatherings. Not a long time ago, this situation could be also applied to urban areas; some perspectives claim that a city is defined by its dancing diversity. This is the case especially with respect to regional social dance. In the Greek language, the expression "to dance" means both "to have a social ritual, festivity, amusement" and "to move rhythmically to a tune." By and large, people who dance as a form of expression in ceremonial or social stereotypes believe that the dance is a language in its own right. In an obvious way, dance embodies an attitude of combination, understanding, and collective creative action [1, 2].

Historical Context of Dance

"Dance from the earliest times was a very important domain of social cohesion in communities. Dance is indeed one of the very first forms of expression of humans through which emotions and feelings were shared. Its role has changed through the dynamic progress of civilization and societies". In ancient Greece, dance was a basic component of the education of the citizens by the State. In the medieval ages, it

was connected with religious rituals of the Church. In the Renaissance, it became a courtly leisure activity. In each case, it transformed into a vehicle carrying the particular codes of communication of each social and cultural environment. The power of dance and its social and political uses. Traditionally, dance has been viewed in two failed ways. One is that dance is a measuring stick of sociopolitical power, so when dance is supplanted by politics, the social narrative changes as well. The other view is that dance simultaneously influences and is influenced by a variety of political processes. The functions of dance are very close to the one of politics, however, dance is embodied and therefore it additionally identifies modes of discourse that are not accessible to verbal languages. Consequently, dance both constitutes and transforms political expression. It highlights the dialectical interplay between implicit forms of sociopolitical power and hegemonic struggles surrounding them. The vernacular dance act «Gaitanaki» has been called «local dance», despite the fact that it also contains modes of a great extent that are more universal. This brings back the notion of the universal and the particular. The dance of «Gaitanaki» poses a harmonizing force. Its strengths are both visual and musical. The images are organized along a less obvious structure: the social role of the dancers is what brings about the main force of this composition. Each persona in the dance of «Gaitanaki» plays a well-defined role [3, 4].

Dance As a Tool for Political Expression

Dance is a vital means of communication across cultures, reflecting social context and relationships. It embodies human culture, signifying beliefs and meanings, yet is often studied through narrow frameworks that overlook its complexity and socio-political function. While dance can act as a socially disruptive force, it is also utilized within political frameworks to reinforce behavioral norms. Employing feminist theory, dance's political nature is evident, linked to performance scholarship, globalization, and collective memory. Gender performativity illustrates the public exhibition of gender norms in dance, shaping social youth. Civilian dance performances affirm expected behaviors while marginalizing those who diverge from these norms. The performance of these standards influences public perceptions and creates indicators of social membership, leading to policing and negotiation of behaviors. In hegemonic contexts, stereotypes may fuel discrimination, as seen in judgments of others' dancing. Although social identity evolves through interactions with stigmatized groups, representation often reinforces idealized standards, marginalizing those outside normative boundaries [5, 6].

Cultural Significance of Dance

The following presentation is a revised version of a paper that was first given at the National Marie Curie Initial Training Networks (ITN) Conference on the theme of the Multi-dimensional Impact of Storytelling and Dance on European Cultural Identities. It has both a theoretical and an ethnographic orientation, distributing the African indigenous dance theatre tradition into its manifold aspects, constructing, amongst others, aesthetics, models of performance, modes of expression, and vernacular dramaturgies. Considerable efforts are made to interrogate and engage with what is termed a 'functional discourse' in Anthropology and the Theatre Arts. Several anonymous interlocutors, audience members, and scholars provided valuable and perceptive suggestions for the improvement of revisions to the text. However, what is meant by the term 'cultural'? The etymological origins of this term can be traced to the Latin verb *colere* (to cultivate, to tend, to till). Culture, therefore, can refer to the species-specific mode of behaviour that man acquires through symbolic means. Such a notion of culture emphasizes the capacity of all human beings to take things as symbols, and the behaviour that such a transformation invokes. Culture is functional; it is a value system within which things are defined as good or bad; e.g. there are good and bad dances. In cultures where imitation is openly appreciated and considered as a powerful persuasive act, the categories of goodness (and badness) can be equated with criteria of imitativeness. However, in both of these cases, dances which are not or do not seem to abide and respond to standards of comparative judgment would fall outside any explicatory cultural discourse, and resort to an a priori level of naïveté or abjection [7, 8].

Modern Dance and Politics

Modern dance as a living and evolving expression will be explored in its various incarnations across choreography, performance, and textual forms of translation and encoding. Dance influences political culture as it is influenced by such aspects of the topical political domain. It is also very much as political as those rehearsed patterns or expressions of assertion and inquiry, parted from explicit. Yet in a somewhat broader and appraising sense, dance can be called political in its expression of ideas regarding political events, experiences, norms, or rights. The classical 'styles' of classical bharatanatyam, kathakali, kathak and odissi are the most well-known exemplars of Indian classical dance in the subcontinent and abroad; they currently constitute a diverse corpus of performance practices. The classical 'styles' are re-embodiment of dance traditions and practices that go back several centuries, but their history is much more complex than such polarized narratives would imply. In contemporary India, classical dance is one

of the most complex examples of dance performance that is both a continuing political discourse and contemporary art practice. Circumambulation of the nation from the perspective of dance naturally leads to examine how the re-making of Indian 'classical dance' too has been part of a wider project aimed at the re-making or re-shaping of Indian culture which has coincided with establishing the post-independence Indian nation and new ideas of Indianness. In its formulation and exercise, dance has been almost a homophone for culture, and thus, polity too. The rediscovery of the classical tradition was linked with the nationalist project of impressing upon newly independent India its 'great' past and of reclaiming it, against colonialism accused of pillaging it. A counterfeiting of the grandeur of this past, through sheer endeavour and effort was deemed the only option for establishing notions of Indianness, and also recreating India as a civilizational land. The value of the nation's culture could be defended through the act of rescuing it from oblivion. This view was also consistent with that period's Modernist socio-political ideologies that believed in the power of civilization to bridge gaps between cultures and peoples [9, 10].

Dance in the Digital Age⁷. Case Studies of Dance as Protest

As the Internet has grown, so have communication tools. Social networking sites and corporate websites have facilitated the documentation and sharing of dance, showcasing new works and rehearsals. Communication has greatly expanded, with tweets allowing for politically-based expressions within a 140-character limit, reshaped into protests through popular hashtags about issues like police brutality against African Americans. Retweets enable individuals to connect with broader audiences, allowing conversations to flow worldwide. These tools have sparked numerous protests, which are quickly documented online. Dance reflects this trend, with contemporary American styles like street dance transitioning from community validation to corporate recognition in a fame-obsessed society, especially evident in competitions and television. The choreography of protest has evolved, moving from personal and collective expressions to individualized gestures. For instance, during a presidential debate, a candidate's cheerleading past led to a humorous, knowing response from the audience through his expressive body language. These gestures, once personal, have grown into more expansive expressions. However, the competitive dance industry has also fueled an explosion of individualistic expressions, notably termed "dance fail" or "shame," often attempting to ridicule the absurd and achieve virality [11, 12].

The Influence of Dance on Policy Change

In the 1980s, protest groups expressed themselves through the lens of AIDS, incorporating it into contemporary movements. Dance often gets overlooked in cultural policy decisions, which primarily focus on text, leaving choreography in a challenging position. A valuable research avenue could involve a retrospective on cultural policy changes since AIDS's rise, exploring how dance has responded to these shifts. Collecting primary sources from dance troupes would establish a credible research foundation for analysis across various academic fields. The role of dance in societal change would be defined and examined for its influences and possible repercussions. Political choreography's social messages are complex and defy linear expression, as dance is inherently subjective and open to interpretation. Additionally, policies surrounding sexual representation in art have evolved since the AIDS crisis, affecting dance as a medium. Choreographers must consider how their work's politicization has shifted alongside changes in cultural norms and the disparity in funding sources compared to textual performances, influencing how they express political agendas [13, 14].

The Role of Dance in Social Movements

The connection between dance and political agency is clear when looking at the history of dance in 20th-century America and Russia. The dance of ordinary people often expresses the way they see themselves about the political ruling class; a similar notion rings true of the ruling classes in each of these countries. Just as Kolontai viewed the revolutionary dance in Russia as barbaric and laudable, we can see how the ruling body in each of these countries appropriated needed entertainment and festivity for themselves, and for the perception that their states held some social purpose. This appropriation is not limited to ballet or art dance, though this is often the context for such discussions; rather, it is shown through the appropriation of the folk and the practice of dance by the state through State Dance, folklorization, and teaching of the folk. Dance is not a purely aesthetic spectacle, but is always already political, and discussions of dance with this in mind bring important voices and readings to the literature. Acknowledging this political nature invites inquiry into the way such conversations carry over into the memorialization of the folk in the wake of violence and the transformation of folk practice by the State. Moving forward, it is important to acknowledge a few limitations to these arguments, and simultaneously, opportunities necessary for further investigation. Notably, the history in the preceding section is heavily Euro and American-centric; moving forward, it is essential to look outside of these boundaries and acknowledge discussions outside of these boundaries. Additionally, while this history

engages in looking at the way the folk would be used in celebration of the State, it does not engage in the way this approach would serve in coercing historic injustices, including genocide. Lastly, while this overview ends by looking at the way the folk would be used as a corrective for the State, an important consideration is to look at indigenous and other forms of dance entitlement, and the ways such folk might be considered a threat to the State and violence meted out for this reason [15, 16].

Challenges and Critiques of Political Dance

On March 7, 2015, a quiet protest emerged on the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Bridge in Selma, Alabama, drawing about five hundred individuals who arrived via a government-provided bus. This gathering took place near where Civil Rights demonstrators faced violence during “Bloody Sunday.” After four days, President Obama observed the scene, reflecting on the significance of the historical backdrop. Photographers, historians, and writers engaged with the moment, raising questions about how a site of violence transitions into a commemorative event. Key inquiries included how the phrase “gathering on the bridge” could serve as both an opening and closure of a historical narrative and who holds the authority to stage such events. The spontaneous visual moment became choreographed, shaped by photographers and writers who influenced its representation. The participants did not control this framing nor request a specific interpretation. Obama's gathering was not a public event; instead, they struggled with how to convey the significance of the bridge, known for its historical witness rather than directed narratives. This led to the commodification of history and ushered in a new era requiring a deeper engagement with cultural interpretations and the politics surrounding knowledge. It was crucial to understand and participate in these dynamics, embracing a politics of precarity that scrutinizes the underlying elements of the spectacle. Ultimately, politics, power, and knowledge are intertwined with both visibility and the actions of those involved [17, 18].

Future Directions of Dance as Political Expression

Dance performance serves as a potent cultural tool with social and political implications. The Gatani folk dance exemplifies this, revealing its transformation within cultural, social, and political contexts. This study focuses on the Gaitanaki dance tradition in Analipsi Thermou and Æochori Nafpaktias, Greece, exploring periods of freedom, land ownership changes, and community differences. Initially documented in 1905, Gaitani has been influential in anthropological studies. This distinctive choreomusical form is reserved for patriarchal families with land near Saint Mary's church, symbolizing an offering against drought. The Gaitani performance promotes local discourse and transforms the landscape into a community heritage act. However, its significance has evolved. Following the 1994 fieldwork, sociopolitical and cultural changes have altered the land-ownership system, prompting a shift towards a neoliberal dance economy. Today, Gaitani could foster new cultural commons or be threatened by post-pandemic industry profit motives. The Gaitanaki's movements and songs are not consistently interpreted over time, nor are their meanings always anchored in social reality [19, 20].

CONCLUSION

Dance remains an indispensable mode of political expression, capable of conveying complex social narratives beyond the limitations of verbal language. Its evolution from ancient ritualistic and courtly performances to contemporary protest and digital-age activism underscores its dynamic adaptability and enduring cultural significance. Dance not only reflects the sociopolitical context in which it exists but also actively shapes political discourse, social identities, and collective memories. It serves as both a tool of state power and a form of resistance, often embodying tensions between inclusion and exclusion, oppression and liberation. As digital technologies and globalization expand dance's reach, new opportunities and challenges emerge, requiring ongoing critical engagement with its political dimensions. Future research and practice must continue to explore dance's transformative potential in addressing social injustices and fostering cultural commons, affirming its vital role in the politics of embodiment and expression.

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