

FROM FOLK DANCE TO FESTIVALS - WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT

This article was inspired by some notes made from an academic paper seen in the offices of Iony Barrand at Boston University. Festivals in this context are the secular celebrations in general not just Folk Festivals.

One has to start with what is Folk Dance. Curt Sachs suggested a spectrum of definitions of dances from Primitive, seen as communal and sex segregated, through Folk, restricted to couples of opposite sex, to Civilised, meaning both court and modern. This does not fit our common experience. We have to concede that popular folk dance is non-ritual, non-professional, unself-conscious, anonymously choreographed and normally sexual. It has been known variously as country, community, social, barn or ceilidh dancing. Even then professional dance companies in other countries do adapted or paraphrased folk dances and provide a continuation of folk style on the stage and ordinary people accept such performance as folk. But there is also the form of dance which does not fit these categories, which because of this difficulty is often in the UK called "ritual", even though the ritual content is to all intents and purposes non-existent and the general public does not distinguish between them seeing the common element of dressing up and performing something in public.

Each form of dance could have two existences, the first as an integral part of the community and the second when it is no longer such but the property of a few interested people. Within any first existence, folk dance depends on a one-to-one relationship of transmitter and receiver, and basically upon oral transmission, even when the detail is obtained by emulation and trial and error. In its second existence it is more fixed and less dynamic, it is extracted from the dramatic context that gave it its original justification and is not part of the larger complex that remains in oral transmission. Often it is a recreative process with specialist teachers, manuals, aids and a notation system. Even if there has been continuity it will be equivalent to a revival at this stage. We assume that there was a proper first existence for ritual dance but this could be challenged.

A definition of folk dance has to recognise such comment. It can be expressed as a vernacular dance form performed in either its first or second existence as part of a little tradition within the great tradition of a given society. It is to be understood that such dance is an affective mode of expression which requires both space and time. It employs motor behaviour in redundant patterns which are closely linked to the structural features of the music. Note - this definition does not include the concept of authenticity or the passing through generations and can be the product of change and innovation. Maud Karpeles said in her preface to Sharp's Sword Dance Books that it is well known that traditional art forms never remain static.

Today we are wedded to print and people are trained to work from the written word and this can dominate the aspects of a subject that we think about. It causes one to miss that folk dance has still some dependence on oral transmission. Seldom

does formalised motor behaviour occur without it being part of some context, the understanding of which is passed orally. That is, folk talk about dance and its setting, which they do not do about everyday gestures that are learned by unconscious mimicry. To appreciate these other aspects fully we need rigorous studies of the dance event and its social background instead of just observing and recording "steps" and "stylistics". Examining the total requires looking at what happens between dances and in the audience.

A Festival will include ceremonial acts, but not all behaviour is ceremonial. It might include prescribed behaviour. Traditional festivals can persist maintaining essentially the same format long after their original meaning has been forgotten. The enduring significance of the festival is not in its apparent purpose but in the fact of the celebration itself. Mid-summer bonfires were once a signal for the community in a hundred to assemble. The social side persisted after the Normans had reorganised the legal structure of the country into manors. As the original purpose of the bonfire was forgotten, the people involved thought up other justifications, which have served to confuse anthropologists. There may be other utilitarian justifications, for example bonfires are also an opportunity to burn accumulated rubbish, or even the unusable bits from the annual animal slaughter.

Secular celebrations in recent centuries have been organised institutionally so that the occasion is a respite from work or holiday and an opportunity for witnessing a spectacle such as a procession, games, dancing, speeches, band concert or fireworks. There has been strong tendency for community festivals to be transformed. The UK has national public, formerly called Bank, holidays. The USA does not have national holidays as each state sets its own, but as in England not all are of equal popularity. It is noticeable that the fiddling with the traditional dates has changed the character of the days even in my own lifetime.

A Festival is a large group celebration where one has a right to participate by virtue of being a member of the community, and often it is this participation that confirms that one is a member of that community. Such festivals are to be contrasted to limited participation celebrations involving small sub-groups such as are found at rites of passage as a person moves from one stage of life to another.

A festival seems to provide an occasion for people to rejoice together, to interact in an ambience of acceptance and conviviality. Sometimes the general participation feast is the only time in a year when members of a community come together. It creates a bond between participants, they identify with each other so it is a feature which is a prime device for promoting social cohesion, for integration of an individual into society or a group and maintaining them as members through shared, recurrent, positively reinforcing performances. Hence the emphasis by communities today on carnivals, fêtes and other participating entertainments. As festivals diminish, the individual lessens identification with society and replaces it with identification with a sub-group.

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A traditional festival is not a place to learn something new. It is rewarding to the performer, generating positive emotional responses or expressing a positive emotional condition. The festival is a shared sequence of experiences based on symbolic interaction. Participation, for example by wearing of a traditional costume, implies an allegiance and some subservience and devotion to the community.

The modern Folk Festival is a complex interpretation of its participants perceived needs, including involving the community in which it is run by publicity beforehand building anticipation, public displays in an arena, on the street and in the pubs. But it is a reaching out by those involved not a natural growth from the local community. Folk Festivals usually provide workshops to pass on technique and dances which are otherwise difficult to transmit. The existence and format of the Folk Festival tells much about what has been lost from community life

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