

## Modes of Continuity and Change in Action Sign Systems

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The term "action sign system" is very apt... signification *is* an action and so must be located in time and space. The defining properties of meaningful action are precisely those not visible in a grammatical-semantic model, the units and rules of which are essentially timeless.... The creation of meaning is above all embedded in human relationships. People enact their selves to each other in words, movement, and other modes of action. All selves are culturally defined, as time and space themselves are culturally defined...The property that language shares with all sign systems is its indexical nature; its maintenance and creation of social connections, anchored in experience and the sense of the real.

(Bonnie Urciuoli 1995: 189-90)

### The Ethnographic Record

The ethnographic record regarding ceremonies and dances is meaningful because formalized systems of action signs tend to persist in the majority of human societies, but it also serves to provide some idea of the *lack* of evidence pertaining to the questions in which this symposium is interested. We will begin, however, with two illustrations of how dances have been "spread horizontally from population to population" as Paul Bouissac put it in his abstract (Symposium January 2003):

The other type of transaction belonging to this class is the payment for dances. Dances are "owned"; that is, the original inventor has the right of "producing" his dance and song in his village community. If another village takes a fancy to this song and dance, it has to purchase the right to perform it. This is done by handing ceremonially to the original village a substantial payment of food and valuables, after which the dance is taught to the new possessors (Malinowski 1922: 186).

Malinowski tells us that "In 1922, the Gumagabu dance was owned by To'oluwa, the chief of Omarkana, his ancestors having acquired it from the descendants of Tomakam by a *laga* payment" (*Ibid.* 291). Unfortunately, we do not know exactly what span of time was involved, but we can assume it was many years, for several generations are indicated. To my knowledge, no one followed up on the original information and we don't know when the dance was originally bought or if it still exists. Nevertheless, such transactions occurred elsewhere in the Pacific Islands:

In the field of amusement foreign contacts have had an indirect effect being responsible for additions to the content more than to changes in the manner of amusement. This applies particularly to dances, borrowed from Anuta and elsewhere and to dance songs, many of which have been composed with reference to other lands and experiences abroad. A specific dance, the *mako fakarakas*, was presented by Pa Makava recently in an adaptation of a Raga dance which he had seen in the Banks Islands..... The motives from the adoption of new cultural elements have been mainly for the desire to secure economic advantage or enhancement of the person. Mere imitation, as such, seems to have played little part; there has been in each case a set of ways of behavior into which the new item has fitted. It is the

proper existence of *this general pattern* that has given cultural value to the items introduced by individuals, made them into objects of general desire, and not merely the unsupported whim of the introducer (Firth 1965[1936]: 35 - italics added).

Firth's observations about the dance in the above context (as well as those made with reference to dances connected with the spirit world, dances of abuse at weddings and at initiations) is significant, for he draws attention to *an established conceptual system* for the dances of Tikopia into which conscious innovatory materials were incorporated. Unfortunately, not all early ethnographers were as clear about dances and ceremonies as Firth and Malinowski.

A source of frustration to movement specialists studying social anthropology is to read "and then they danced" (Rattray 1923), a phrase that occurs two or three times in this highly skilled ethnographer's book. Equally disappointing are ethnographies that characterize (especially) the possession dances of a people as "fits" or "hysterical fits," as Margaret Field did, observing, at the same time, the *lack* of any unbalance or hysteria in their everyday behavior (Field 1961[1937]). On the other hand, one can read about dances tied to political systems (Mitchell 1956) or as vehicles that provide psychological adjustments for Samoan (and other) teenagers (Mead 1959[1931]). Radcliffe-Brown (1964[1913]) was famous for believing that dances represented 'tribal harmony and solidarity,' but one never knew from Radcliffe-Brown's or any of these ethnographies, what the dances looked like, what spatial dispositions were used, how long they lasted, how old they were, who participated in them and why, what moves were used, or how the actions themselves were tied into "tribal solidarity," politics, psychology or anything else.<sup>1</sup>

In fairness to the ancestors of the ethnographic field, however, it must be understood that many modern ethnographers are as frustrating about their treatment of dancing as their forebears, for example, possession dances as "cathartic" (Jennings 1985), or, Alfred Gell, who was preoccupied with the *meanings* of dances insofar as they marked the "logical boundary between dance and nondance, ambiguous though it may become in particular instances" (1985: 192). Although these "boundaries between dance and nondance" puzzled Gell, he noted that moves used in Umeda dances often had *special* meaning.

But here is a paradox, fundamental to the whole question of dance, because what source can these dance meanings possibly have except the patterned contrasts, the intentional clues, embodied in everyday, nondance movement?" (1985: 190-91).

This ethnographer probably would have had difficulty explaining why anyone bothered to write poetry because it refers to meanings that can be found in ordinary speech and everyday life. Ultimately, however, Gell's movement analysis uses a system he devised

for whose crudity I make no apologies, that reduces Umeda dance movements simply to movements of [one] leg, seen sideways on. Of course, when dancing Umedas move the whole body in extremely complex ways, but the leg movements are sufficiently crucial to serve as discriminators between Umeda dance styles for the purposes of the

model. Umeda dances can all be construed as different forms of gait, and can be analysed using techniques derived from the kinesiological study of human walking and running..." (Gell 1985: 191).

Although he did attempt to deal with actual movement data, Gell resorts to kinesiological method, leaving both dances-as-wholes and meaning by the wayside along with the notion of culturally defined persons and spaces—even with regard to moves that are *not* danced.

Adrienne Kaeppler (1985) pointedly asks, "What is it that we have in our heads when we decide if something is dancing or not?... Apparently it has something to do with structured movement that is somehow further elaborated—perhaps by something as simple as having a definite beginning and ending" (1985: 93), further saying,

I propose that one of the tasks of an ethnographer is to study all human movement that formalises the nonformal and to elucidate what the movement dimensions of various activity systems are communicating and to whom. Such an analysis could delineate similarities and differences in the movement dimensions and their contexts as well as how these are regarded and categorised and the components by which they are grouped or separated (Kaeppler *Ibid.* 93-94).

This author then explores the movement dimensions of various activities in Tonga in an admirable ethnography that is both clear and comprehensive. Sharing Kaeppler's distrust of the western category "dance," we turn to John Middleton, who wants

to see dance as part of a totality of social behaviour, and to avoid any suggestion that the question 'what is dance?' can simply be answered by stripping dance of its social aspects and functions so as to leave an irreducible basis of human activity. My aim is not to understand what dance is in itself, partly because I am uncertain whether it is a separate and meaningful category, but also because it is its social context that gives it meaning. . . . *I am concerned to study the Lugbara dance as a way of understanding Lugbara thought and the ways in which they order their experience*" (Middleton 1985: 165 - italics added).

Middleton's fieldwork for Lugbara *ongo* and *abi* (death), *walangaa* (courtship), and other types of dances was carried out between 1949 and 1953. Here, (although readers do not know how the dancers actually moved), they are told what the dances are about, why they are performed, who participates in them and the role the dances play in Lugbara society—a welcome relief from Gell's reductionism.

In his brilliant ethnography, *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers* (1976), Schieffelin says:

If Kaluli social life takes much of its form through processes of reciprocity, it is not surprising that reciprocity should be celebrated by ceremonies that express important human concerns in deeply moving ways. It is in ceremonies such as Gisaro that these wider concerns are focused and made visible. If we are to appreciate them, and what they mean for Kaluli people, we must learn what Gisaro is about. And for Gisaro to yield insight into Kaluli experience, we must learn how to interpret it (1976: 21-28).

My graduate students and I met Buck Shieffelin in 1982 at New York University, where he talked to us about his field experiences in Papua, New Guinea. At one point during his fieldwork, he despaired of finding the "key" to Kaluli society, after having tried all of the standard anthropological approaches. One of his informants told him that he should "come and see the Gisaro." Not being a dancer, Schieffelin was initially reluctant, but was finally persuaded, to go. The Gisaro ceremony (not unexpectedly), provided the key to understanding he looked for:

The first Gisaro I saw was held to celebrate the gathering of pigs for a forthcoming pork distribution. Preparations at the host longhouse at Wasu took two days...The dark interior of the longhouse was packed with spectators sitting on the sleeping platforms behind the row of houseposts that lined each side of the central hall. Light was provided by five or six resin-burning torches held by young men at the sidelines. Everyone was turned expectantly toward the front doorway for the dancers and chorus to enter.

A group of about twenty-five men came in, their faces downcast. They moved in a body quietly up the hall to the middle of the house. There they drew apart to reveal the resplendent figures of the four Gisaro dancers in their midst. After a moment, all whispered "shhhh" and sat down leaving one dancer standing alone (1976: 21).

As dancer followed dancer, the songs began to refer to specific places on the host's clan lands and recalled to the listeners former houses and gardens and close relatives, now dead, who lived there. One dancer sang a song that alluded to the dead son of a senior man of the host clan (*Ibid.* 23).

The senior man, who was sitting with the crowd at the sidelines, brooding and withdrawn, suddenly became overcome with grief and burst into loud wails of anguish. Enraged, he jumped up, grabbed a torch from a bystander and jammed the burning end forcefully into the dancer's bare shoulder. With a tremendous noise, all the youths and young men of the host community jumped into the dancing space, stamping and yelling and brandishing axes. The dancer was momentarily lost in a frightening pandemonium of shadowy figures, torches, and showers of sparks. Showing no sign of pain, he moved slowly across the dancing space; the chorus burst into song. The senior man broke away from the crowd and ran out the back door of the house to wail on the veranda. This scene was repeated over and over from dancer to dancer during the course of the night (*Ibid.* 23).

The performance ended abruptly with a single shout at dawn. "The dancers, whose shoulders were quite badly burned, then paid compensation to those they had made weep, and all the visitors trooped out of the house to go home. Since many people wept, the ceremony was felt to have been a good one" (*Ibid.* 24).

From the Kaluli point of view, the main object of Gisaro is not the burning of the dancers. On the contrary, the point is for the dancers to make the hosts burst into tears. The hosts then burn the dancers in angry revenge for the suffering they have been made to feel. To the dancer and the chorus, this reflects rather well on their songs.... The dancers are always volunteers...Gisaro is the most widely known ceremony among the people of the plateau and seems to be historically the oldest. The Kaluli...also perform five other kinds of ceremonies, which differ in the number of dancers, the nature of the songs, the appearance of the regalia. However, most of them have the same basic themes (*Ibid.* 24-25).

A visiting government official remarked to Shieffelin that the Gisaro "is their memory." It is a ceremony that illustrates *the taking of account* among the Kaluli, and it is the taking of account that gives Gisaro its special character. As Schieffelin asserts, "Gisaro is a drama of opposition initiated by the dancers but played out by everyone. Within a structure of reciprocity, the action of the performers and the feelings of the audience are brought into a relation with each other that allows intelligibility and resolution" (1976: 197-98).

We may conclude that dances, ceremonies and rituals provide major structural and semantic insights into human societies. This may be why they persist over many generations and why they are objects of economic value, and/or vehicles of innovation and change. However, as good as the ethnography may be, it rarely satisfies the desire to know how (as Bouissac put it), "these neuromuscular processes and their meanings have evolved or emerged, how they have been preserved or transformed over time, and how they relate to changing technological contexts and cultural norms" (Symposium Abstract, January, 2003).

Ancient, literate cultures provide us with somewhat better diachronic perspectives on dancing, rituals and ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> For examples, see Phillip Zarrilli's splendid book on the dance-drama of Kathakali (2000), Rajika Puri's work on Bharatanatyam, (1983, 2004), and Gina Lalli's on Kathak (2004), but even here, the Bharatanatyam we see and know developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, which

marked the growth of an Indian national consciousness and the development of a sense of common ethnicity that accompanied the struggle for independence from the British. Urban *literati* sought to revive ancient traditions in an effort to promote forms of pan-Indian identity as well as pride in the indigenous, as opposed to colonial, culture" (Puri: 2004: 47).

We know, too, that "it would be difficult to trace the history of Lucknow Kathak<sup>3</sup> with any accuracy beyond the past one hundred fifty years" (Lalli 2004: 20). But sadly, the authentic traditional forms of Indian dancing in the West have, on the whole, been greatly overshadowed by

Classical Hollywood cinema and its dialogue, involving as it does both spoken and body languages, constitutes "the knitted together strength of orientalist discourse" (Said 1978: 6). In fact, "Here, one comes face-to-face with the ideology of Orientalism itself as a fact of [Western] human production" and a projection of Said's "imaginative geography"" (Williams 2004a: 72).

Bouissac hopes that particular attention will be paid to the transformations which occur not only in the forms of the movement but also in their symbolic meanings. Indian dancing and drama provide major instances of the process of change in form and meaning prevalent today; changes we all know are far more prominent in American, Canadian and European popular consciousness than the original, traditional forms that generated them:

According to dance scholar Svea Becker, [Jack] Cole's use of ethnic dance allowed him to observe and comment upon, as well as satirize, American society; but to do this, "he had to go outside of it" (Becker 1989: 11, cited in McLean 1997: 150).

The issues involved are great: 1. “not only how American Orientalism ‘intertwines’ with other forms of oppression but also, for example, the question of how we recognize Orientalism as a practice” (McLean 1997: 150-51) and 2. “Why do dances, ceremonies, and rituals lend themselves to adaptations that bear no resemblance to their originals? Why do so many people the world over have so little appreciation of knowledge and meaning of human actions when they seem to recognize meaning and knowledge in less obviously embodied forms?” (Williams 2000b: 346).

I can no longer support that |Uihaba dance group,” said Xumi N!a’an, “because the school now owns our dance.” Xumi N!a’an is a respected elder who is dedicated to improving conditions for Ju|’hoan people through schooling.... In three short years, the situation with the |Uihaba Dancers has changed dramatically.... The Tswana teachers, who had always had ultimate control over the dance troupe, now began exerting more total control. Recalling her early involvement with the groups, the deputy headmistress says that “assisted” by several Ju|hoansi, she “began by improving upon the traditional Ju|’hoan dance and thereby perfected it.” By 1989, the Ju|hoansi are no longer even “assistants.”...

Is the |Uihaba dance group helping to preserve Ju|’hoan traditions, as the government seems to think? From the evidence in 1989, we are doubtful. The troupe, in fact, may be diluting the healing dance. The dance adaptation, though it has similar movements, has no connection with healing. Without its heart—the *n|om* and the healing—the |Uihaba dance expresses only a shell, a form. When spiritual ceremonies are transformed into ordinary entertainment vehicles or, worse, tourist attractions, the ceremonies suffer. Audiences generally wish to have light, undemanding entertainment (Katz, Biesele and St. Denis 1997: 77 and 79, cited in Williams 2000b).

“Orientalism” didn’t cause changes in the Ju|hoansi case, of course. The major influence regarding transformation and change in sub-Saharan Africa (and in Bali, Thailand, Java, India and Sri Lanka) is the tourist industry.<sup>4</sup>

What I wish to emphasize here is that the tourists voluntarily surrender control. They become passive and dependent, and this is what gives them the feeling of relaxation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines surrender as ‘to give oneself up into the power of another’, as a prisoner, and this expresses my meaning in that tourists relinquish power over their actions for the duration of the tour (Bruner 1995: 237).

Bruner thus provides the main reason why tourism doesn’t benefit the cultures whose identities, ceremonial and dance forms it appropriates, and most of the literature supporting it is pure fabrication, as are many of the dances Bruner describes. Malcolm Crick says it very well:

Some owners of the more luxurious private hotels [in Sri Lanka] were fairly candid about their original intentions simply to make money from the foreigner. Consequently they were quite prepared to state that Tourist Board rhetoric about preserving Sri Lankan culture was nonsense, because one either kept one’s own culture or promoted international tourism, but certainly not both (Crick 1994: 89).

Furthermore, International Dance Festivals and their attendant issues always “fall through the cracks,” so to speak. Although “travel writers seemingly have been everywhere, done everything, and written about it all” (Graham

1991: 30), they emphatically *have not* thus far discovered what traditional dances, rituals and ceremonies are all about (Williams 2000b: 259).

By definition, tourism is about going “away”; time is as good a destination as space. Islands in particular, but also isolated villages, mountains and peninsulas anywhere, maintains the mysterious aura of Brigadoon; your travel through a foggy night ends on a bumpy dirt road, and in the morning you awake in a different world. There are those who feel that in certain places they pass through a gateway into the past—an intense psychic experience only distantly related to superficial nostalgia (Lippard 1999: 159-60).

Some anthropologists have not been immune to the temptations of entertainment and economics:

Bateson and Mead were captivated with the *barong* and, in collaboration with the Balinese, commissioned new forms of the *barong* dance. The famous Bateson-Mead 1937 film, *Trance and Dance in Bali*, which is usually regarded as an early photographic record of a Balinese ritual, was actually a film of a tourist performance for foreigners commissioned and paid for by Bateson and Mead...the *barong* ritual filmed by Bateson and Mead was not ancient but had been recently created during the period of their fieldwork, and the story performed had been changed from the *Calon Arang* to the *Kunti Sraya*, a less dangerous form...*Bateson and Mead changed the dance* [italics added]...and they commissioned the dance during the day, when the light was good for photography, rather than having the performance in the evening (Bruner 1996: 168).

The two major instruments of transformation and change in the 20th and 21st centuries are connected with the tourist industry and the influence of film choreographers, such as Jack Cole, who have taken inspiration for changing their own movement systems from outside their own culture. Jack Cole is a paradigm example because he not only wanted to experience “the excitement and the discovery of the thousand ways there are to move that are peculiar and different” (from an interview of Cole by Jerome Delameter (1978-81: 193), cited in Williams 2004a: 70-71), but because he didn’t want to be bothered by the fact that the “peculiar and different” ways of moving that so fascinated him were more than mere “moving.” International tourism, economics and the “media industry” are emblems of our times. The question is, how should we deal with them?

### The Recording of Action Sign Systems: Film and Video-Tape

Clearly, the recording of action sign systems on film is a mixed blessing.<sup>5</sup> In her detailed analysis of filmed vs. written documentation of action sign material, Joanne Page (1996) states the problems very well:

Compared with the relative novelty of movement texts, the immediacy with which many, but not all, viewers think video and film images can be translated<sup>6</sup> is extremely seductive. These images seem to promote a sense of instant understanding in viewers. However, it is this very strength of visual records which I suggest hinders as much as enhances greater understanding of movement-based events, acts and actions.

Visual records aren’t necessarily produced to stand alone, although this is often the result as documents are passed through the professional community. Even supported by explanatory discussions, visual records as primary sources remain as

powerful, but only partial, entries into the real worlds of the participants. In many cases, such recordings are sufficient for providing background to other data sought, because they serve to contextualize foregrounded activities. But, if human acts and actions are to assume an integral place within research and cultural representations, we need to ask *how much do visual records reveal and how adequate are they as representations for the analysis of events?* (Page 1996: 173).

Page argues against film documentation as “the *sole* means of documenting movement data” because “the movement images themselves are left alone and implicit, either conceived as transparent windows of data, or conversely as mysterious impenetrable forms of behavior,” adding that analyses of movement-based activities aren’t well facilitated by visual recordings. “This is not because visual records aren’t useful documents, but because they are incomplete” (*Ibid.* 173).

In other words, Page presents movement-writing as a *complementary*, not an *alternative*, mode of recording, making the important point that *movement-writers work from the categories of the participants*, where film-makers do not.<sup>7</sup> Her observations are summarized in the analogy she makes between filmed dances (rites, ceremonies)/movement texts and audio recordings/written musical scores. Moreover, this author says,

(1) A series of uni-framed linearly placed images show one perspective, or sequences of perspectives [owing to the camera’s ‘frame’]. The perspective chosen may be important to the event, but a single perspective may not be sufficient to encompass the critical elements of the performance...

(2) Multiple simultaneous frames, such as split-screen images, increase the number of simultaneous perspectives [but this device] multiplies the issues in selecting perspectives to record...The condensing of the depth dimension particularly distorts reading proximal relations accurately from [filmed] visual records...

Brian Street rightly observes that movement-writing “is not just a neat way of ‘describing,’ but a source of analysis that by its very concreteness and precision generates questions and problems” (1977: 340, cited in Page 1996: 176).

While some anthropologists have had positive responses to movement-writing, some have not:

One of the difficulties that has prevented progress in the field of the anthropology of dance [ceremonies and rituals] being as rapid as that in, say, the anthropology of visual art, has been the need for a notation of dance movement that combines accuracy with some degree of readability for the non-dance expert... Labanotation and Benesh notation both have their advocates, but are equally incomprehensible to the rest of the anthropological profession, who are unlikely to undertake the task of learning complicated systems of hieroglyphics lightly (Gell 1985: 187).

One certainly would not wish to have anthropologists undertake the task of learning movement-writing “lightly,” because doing so involves too many crucial decisions regarding 1. their own alienation from bodily praxis; 2. the reduction of the cultural, *signifying human body* into a ‘biological organism’, and 3. their endorsement of a genuine anthropology of embodiment, the most significant technology for which

will turn out to be, not, as might be supposed, video and film technology (although they are important aids), but the invention of an adequate script for writing human



actions. What is required is a script that will provide the means to become literate in relation to the medium of movement just as we have been able to achieve literacy in relation to spoken language and music. By 'literacy', I mean the ability to read and write movement so that translation into the medium of words is unnecessary for creating ethnographically appropriate description of actions. The breakthrough that is represented by a movement script (in contrast to various forms of mnemonic devices) is that it provides the means to think and analyse in terms of movement itself. In Ardener's terms (1989[1973]), a script provides a mode of registration and specification that enables the apperception of movement events in ways that are otherwise extremely difficult, if not impossible. It enables body movement to be seen as movement flow rather than as 'successive positions', and as agent-centered action rather than as raw behaviour (Farnell 1994: 937).

We will return to Farnell's work later, in connection with sign languages, but for now, we will examine the contributions of two archaeologists whose work has been invaluable to those interested in dances, rites and ceremonies.

### Ancient Dances, Ceremonies and Archaeology: South Africa

The dance and movement worlds in Australia and America recently became especially interested in archaeology and the work of David Lewis-Williams (1989, 1990) through the choreographic efforts of Sylvia Glasser (1996):

I had wanted to choreograph a dance based on a collection of Bushman stories in a book by Dorothea Bleek, *The Mantis and Friends* (1924). I had a vague idea about choreographing a dance using a Bushman theme, but discovered I couldn't understand the stories in the Bleek volume, where people or animals changed into other animals or strange creatures without any apparent reason (Glasser 1996: 288).

Her research into this problem, ultimately incorporating three years' study of social anthropology from 1987-1990, came about because she was honest enough to admit to herself and others that she didn't understand Bushman stories. Colleagues in the dance world suggested that she choreograph a "surrealistic" choreography based upon her own impressions, but, unsatisfied with this solution, she found herself in a meeting with Lewis-Williams where she "became aware of the complex issues surrounding what I wanted to do, and of the many problems about which I hadn't been sufficiently aware" (Williams 2000a: 203).

It is because of Lewis-Williams's work that we have *Tranceformations* (see Glasser 1996), and we have two admirable books regarding the relationship between San rock art and Bushman trance dancing, but the achievement of alternative explanations of Bushman rock art were not gained without struggles and "sometimes, a good deal of bitterness. From the start, controversy and debate have been the order of the day" (Lewis-Williams 1990: 69). It is, I think, worth quoting this author at length:

They [the public at large] believe that, because the art is little more than a record of daily life, anyone can look at it and - without any knowledge of the Bushmen, their life and beliefs—tell what the pictures mean. Inevitably, the art is reduced to amusing vignettes and becomes a vehicle for a writer's ingenuity and a target for his jibes and drollery. There are numerous reasons why such comments distort Bushman rock art. Perhaps the most telling reason is that they result from viewing the art

through Western eyes. Contrary to the adage that every picture tells a story, *it is not possible to get at the meaning of a work of art without some guidance from the artist, or at the very least, a thorough understanding of the culture from which it comes* (Lewis-Williams 1989: 23-24 - italics added).

Not only have public perceptions of so-called “primitive” dancing been distorted, politics, vested interests and personal aggrandizement are never very far from important theoretical issues in academia:

A researcher who dominated rock art research for many decades was the French prehistorian, the Abbé Henri Breuil. He achieved fame at the beginning of the twentieth century through his work on the Upper Palæolithic cave art of France and Spain, and his forceful personality soon made him an authority on rock art worldwide... [He] made many pronouncements on the rock art [of southern Africa]. Some of his views were resisted at the time, but they nevertheless had a lasting impact on people’s ideas about the art, and some still live on in the popular imagination. *One of his most celebrated blunders was his claim that a painting in the Brandberg, Namibia, depicted a woman of Mediterranean origin. Today people still speak of the White Lady of the Brandberg ...even though the painting depicts a male and is an ordinary, if quite striking, San painting* (Lewis-Williams 1990: 69 - italics added).

Many fictions were reproduced regarding Bushman rock art and the prehistory of cave paintings all over the world. Unfortunately, they continue to flourish—“unfortunately,” because fictional statements about prehistoric art are often the sum total of what we possess regarding ancient dances and ceremonies. Scholars and students are fortunate to have the work of Lewis-Williams and Glasser upon which to depend. Because of Lewis-Williams, we can with confidence accept the prehistorical dating of the San Trance Dance (approximately 26,000 years BCE).

#### Ancient Dances, Ceremonies and Archaeology: Greece

We are also fortunate in having Lillian Lawler’s work to use for guidelines should researchers or students attempt investigations in that area of human movement study:

In 1964 Lillian B. Lawler, Visiting Professor of Classics at the University of Iowa, had published in Iowa and in London, two books which appear to have been the culmination of her major writings on [the] dance. They are *The Dance of the Ancient Greek Theatre* (1964a) and *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (1964b)... In these two works and in Lawler’s other two major writings on ancient Greek dance, i.e. ‘The Dance in Ancient Crete’ and ‘Terpsichore’—she refers to many of her journal articles<sup>8</sup>.... These, along with her major writings, constitute a corpus of research on ancient Greek dance which is invaluable (Rovik 1991: 159-168).

Lawler herself considered archaeological sources to be of primary importance, but she also points out that no sources are so capable of serious misinterpretation because artistic conventions and cultural concepts are not the same as those which followed them. That is,

the student must never forget for a moment that Greek art is often deliberately unrealistic, and is concerned with ideal beauty, design, balance, rhythm, linear schemes, and stylization, rather than with an exact portrayal of what the artist

saw in life...the observer must understand and allow for technical limitations especially in the work of primitive artists, and for artistic conventions found in each of the arts, throughout the whole span of Greek civilization. These are not easy facts for the amateur to grasp, and a great many amazing errors have been made by writers on the dance who have tried to interpret representations in Greek art without knowing how to do so (Lawler 1964b: 17- italics added).

Rovik (1991: 159) provides present-day students with sources for Lawler's critical assessments of interpretations of Greek dancing, pointing out that Isadora Duncan, Maude Allen, Jacques Dalcroze, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn—all cult figures of the [then] contemporary Western dance world (and, to some, the "ancestral figures" of today) were mainly self-serving, based solely upon imagination and fiction. There was no attempt to reconstruct the dances. They aimed to capture the spirit of ancient Greek dancing or to encourage a trend of "back to nature," getting away (as far as possible) from the ballet. However, "Reconstructionists among dance historians aim, as far as possible, to "restore by scientific scholarship the actual choreography or movements of [a] particular dance" (Lawler 1964a: 24).

The notion of reconstruction brings us, again, to the notion of records and, eventually, literacy. In an interesting and informative essay on the subject of reconstruction, Archer and Hodson (1994: 115-16), provide a "Select Bibliography" at the end of their essay that is worth examination.<sup>9</sup> Prior to the preservation of dances and ceremonies through film and video-recording, these action sign systems were passed from one performer to another and/or from one generation of ritual performers to another by oral transmission.

The systems of Raoul-Auger Feuillet and Pierre Beauchamp in the eighteenth century, or Arthur Saint-Leon, Friedrich Zorn and Vladimir Stepanov in the nineteenth, developed ever more precise ways of notating body movement, patterns in space, and time values in relation to music. These efforts culminated in the system of Rudolf Laban and that of Rudolf and Joan Benesh in the twentieth century, coinciding with the emergence of film and video technology. All the same, the presence of a ballet's original dancers, or their successors, is still taken by many as the guarantee of authenticity, notwithstanding progress in recording dance by camera or notation score (Archer and Hodson 1994: 100).

For an extended discussion of the history of movement-writing systems, including the systems mentioned above, see Farnell (1996a: 855-879), where "at least 87 movement writing systems have been used in Europe and North America since the fifteenth century. Many were invented to record one specific movement system, such as an idiom of dancing or a gestural system, and disappeared from use when the movement system itself changed or disappeared. It is only in the mid-twentieth century that generalized systems have emerged that are adaptable to wider needs" (Farnell 1996a: 855).

Of these systems, 'Labanotation'<sup>10</sup> is the most comprehensive and widely used. It is a fascinating subject in itself, but its importance to this symposium lies in the fact that it "provides a means with which to record "talk" from the body—to record the agentive production of meaning using the semiotics of body movement. *A movement script, therefore, offers much more than a new methodology for inquiry into human movement.* The possibility of movement

literacy opens up important theoretical alternatives to objectivist talk *about* the body or phenomenological subjectivist talk *of* the feeling of body movement"<sup>11</sup> (Farnell 1996a: 878 - italics added).

### Sign Languages

The man who "started a quiet revolution in 1960 when he first demonstrated to the linguistic community that a sign language used by Deaf people was not a speech surrogate or a secondary code but a fully grammaticalized discursive system" (Farnell 1996b: 61) was William Stokoe, who left many valuable documents behind, but one in particular that explains what he believed to be the main problems with sign language analysis (1996: 45-60). That these problems are, perhaps, more persistent—and more recent—than we would like to believe is a sad fact that accompanies any discussion of sign languages, ceremonies, dances or rituals, for the problems have a common origin in deeply rooted attitudes toward 'language' in general. Despite the emergence of a "sign language linguistics" which was one of the results of Stokoe's efforts, however, "The assumption among many linguists is that vocal material is the basis of natural languages and only vocal material should be the basis of theorizing about them" (Farnell 1996b: 61):

For example, in the most recent edition of John Lyons's classic text, *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction*, the author finds nothing wrong with the suggestion that, 'sign language', 'body language' or the 'language of bees' would be considered by most people as a metaphorical use of the word 'language' (Lyons 1981: 2, cited in Farnell 1996b: 61).

Similarly, in a 1994 edition of a university textbook, there is a subsection entitled *Non-Languages*:

Other kinds of human communication [besides speech] are sometimes called language: body language, or kinesics, is one example. The way we use our bodies in sitting, standing, walking, is said to be expressive of things we do not say. It probably is, but that does not make it language (Bolton 1994: 6-7).

This naive restatement of a popular pseudo-psychological model of 'body language' in a college textbook reveals the depth of the problem. The assumptions behind this statement are that physical action is purely instrumental and/or the universal direct external expression of internal feelings—a kind of natural emotional incontinence (Farnell 1996b: 62).

Farnell asks, "Is the distinction between language and non-language valid? And if it is, where does the boundary lie?"

To answer this with any cogency we have to return to fundamental theoretical definitions of what it means to be human. The notion of action signs in semasiological theory, for example, presupposes a view of human beings as meaning-making agents (Williams 1982). Given this premise, we can say there are action sign systems that are fully linguistic, in the sense that they utilize a discursive and propositional syntax just like spoken language utterances. Examples would include sign languages and co-expressive spoken/gestural systems. Some dance traditions (e.g. Bharata Natyam and Hawaiian and Tongan dance forms) also make great use of linguistic narrative form through action sign poetry.

All these forms might also be labeled 'expressive' as indeed they are, but should not on those grounds be categorized in opposition to 'instrumental' actions or 'practical skills'. The kind of action signs we perform everyday while washing, eating, dressing, and so forth, are clearly different from those involved when using a sign language or gesturing while speaking... Such acts as the latter are not 'linguistic' in the sense of being part of a propositional system, but they are best viewed as linguistically-tied because they are still meaning-centered signifying acts, and are performed at the discretion of a language using actor according to cultural constraints (Farnell 1996b: 69).

It is Farnell's conclusion (with which I concur) that the *lack* of adoption and development of the technology of movement-writing (except by a comparatively small group), "has more to do with politics and the power of social and educational institutions than with the linguistic merits of any particular system" (*Ibid.* 70). However, "politics and power" are not the only forces to which the emergence of movement-writing has been subjected.

### Sign Language(s) and Evolutionary Theory

The work of an historian, Douglas Baynton (1995, 1996), reveals that Darwinian evolutionary theory redefined the very nature of being human in nineteenth century western thought, with consequences reaching far beyond academia. For example, 'Social Darwinism' (one of the "spin-offs" from Darwin's theory) was not without its political uses as a means to justify sexist and racist assumptions about 'human nature', but, since such reinventions are part and parcel of cultural politics, *the constructions of human movement related to human beings* brings into bold relief what kind of creature we expect to enact the human drama (Farnell 1996c: 312).

Baynton describes how evolutionary discourses that defined human bodily movement as "animal-like" and "primitive" provided justification for educational theories and policies that denied deaf people the opportunity to be educated in their native sign languages, reminiscent of the rhetoric of "civilizing the savages" that led to a ban on American Indian languages in government boarding schools (see Farnell 1995: 29-40). The same ideas affected any indigenous peoples who were encouraged to "assimilate" into dominant cultures.

While Baynton's discussion . . . is confined to one of the problems [Deaf] sign-talkers had during a recent period of history in the U. S., his argument applies to other groups of people as well [i.e.] ballet dancers (Williams 1995b: 44-81), Australian Aboriginal dancers (Williams 1991) and Ghanaians (Williams 1967, 1993), among others—which is to say (using commonplace 19th century evolutionary terms) that both of us talk about the movement systems of "savages" and "primitives".... What, then, do dancers and sign-talkers share? "Evolutionary theory fostered a perception of sign languages as inferior to spoken languages, fit only for 'savages' and not for civilized human beings" [Baynton 1995: 139] (Williams 1995a: 175).

The oralist movement in deaf education in America, "was symptomatic of a new understanding of human history—and of the place of sign language in that history" (Baynton 1995: 140). He refers to the end of the 19th century, forcefully reminding us how so-called 'abstractions' in the form of theories

about the nature and character of humanity are transformed into sets of beliefs and ideologies that affect what nations and institutions think and do, and what those who are in them think we *ought* to do, individually and collectively. The Hopi Snake dance is the well-known "classic example."

Ethnographers "saved" the Snake dance, in part, by rendering it as a text. To make their texts, ethnographers, the writers of culture, used the tools of [conventional] literacy and image making: paper, pens, pencils, paints, cameras, and phonographs. They published their findings in books and journals, in which Hopi culture appeared as bits of data, artifacts, ruins—collected for study and display (Fabian 1983: 120). But in this textualization, the presence of the Hopis was lost. *Hopis did not exist as subjects but as objects of exchange or as signifiers available for moral and allegorical interpretation* (Clifford 1986: 113 - italics added). By positing a disappearing Indian, the ethnographic representations of the Snake dance seemed to serve the interests of Indian assimilation through "civilization." (Dilworth 1992: 25).

It is important to draw attention to the facts that 1. the "textualization" in Dilworth's account *loses the Hopi presence* and 2. these people became "signifiers" for the ethnographers' moral and allegorical interpretations, *not* the Hopi interpretation of their dances and ceremonies (cf. Dutton 1979: 204). Needless to say, perhaps, the "texts" that are mentioned do not include movement-writing.

Clearly, theories of human nature are directly and practically connected with social, educational and other kinds of policy. The literacy of movement, which would establish the medium of movement (at long last) on an equal (not the same) basis as conventional language, has had an extraordinary history of survival in the total picture.<sup>12</sup>

### The Credibility of Movement-Writing<sup>13</sup>

While literacy is commonly taken for granted with reference to spoken languages, it is not taken for granted regarding human movement. The reasons for this are three-fold: 1. Laban's script is widely believed to be just another complicated mnemonic device, primarily iconographic in nature; 2. Laban's script is widely taught as "dance notation" as if the major requirement for learning the script includes prior ability to perform Western classical or modern theatrical dancing. As a result, non-dancers who have attempted to learn the system have had negative experiences, and 3. The script has been (and still is) so strongly associated with dancing, the system is misunderstood since the same pestilential intellectual prejudices regarding Deaf signing and the Hopi Snake dance apply.

Even a nodding acquaintance with the history of attempts to develop systems of recording dances and sign languages would partially dissolve the first problem. While it is true that there are a few systems for recording movement that are little more than memory aids and there are those (notably Sutton Movement Shorthand), that are primarily iconographic, Laban's script doesn't fall into either category.

As for the second problem: while no one would deny that dance notators earned lasting gratitude because they kept Labanotation alive after its initial

publication in Vienna in 1928 by narrowing its scope to the recording of dances, yet this limited its potential. It is the case that Laban's script *isn't* exclusively tied to dancing but can be applied to many forms of movement.<sup>14</sup>

The question of whether or not Laban's script is a legitimate writing system was first addressed by Nelson Goodman (1969), and later by Williams (1972, 1996a), using Goodman's seven criteria: 1. contextual compliance, 2. syntactic and semantic disjointness, 3. finite differentiation, 4. constituent and contingent properties, 5. compliance with reality, 6. requisite antecedent classification of a 'work', a system, etc. and 7. identity of behavior (see Williams 1996a: 77).

The scope of this essay does not permit detailed examination of these criteria here. Suffice to say that notably absent from [most Western] cultural taxonomies of the body is

kinesthesia, our sensory awareness of the position and movement of the body. I ask the reader to please close your eyes and lift your arm—move it around and ask yourself how you know where your arm is located [in space]? This is kinesthesia, literally 'movement' (kinetic) + 'sensitivity (aesthesia). It is this kinesthetic sense that provides information on the whole repertory of our motor actions, from the raising of an arm, to walking, even to the turn of the eyeballs and swallowing. . . . in the discourse of Western natural sciences kinesthetic sensations are registered by receptors in the muscles, tendons and joints of the body. As the muscles function when we move bodily parts, various patterns of pressures on these receptors provide essential information for the guiding of motor action.

The perception of spatial movement and orientation of the body as a whole also involves a fluid filled receptor system located in the vestibules of the inner ear. More than balance, this structure provides the means by which we are aware of being tilted, shaken or whirled about, and how, most of the time, we know "which way is up"!

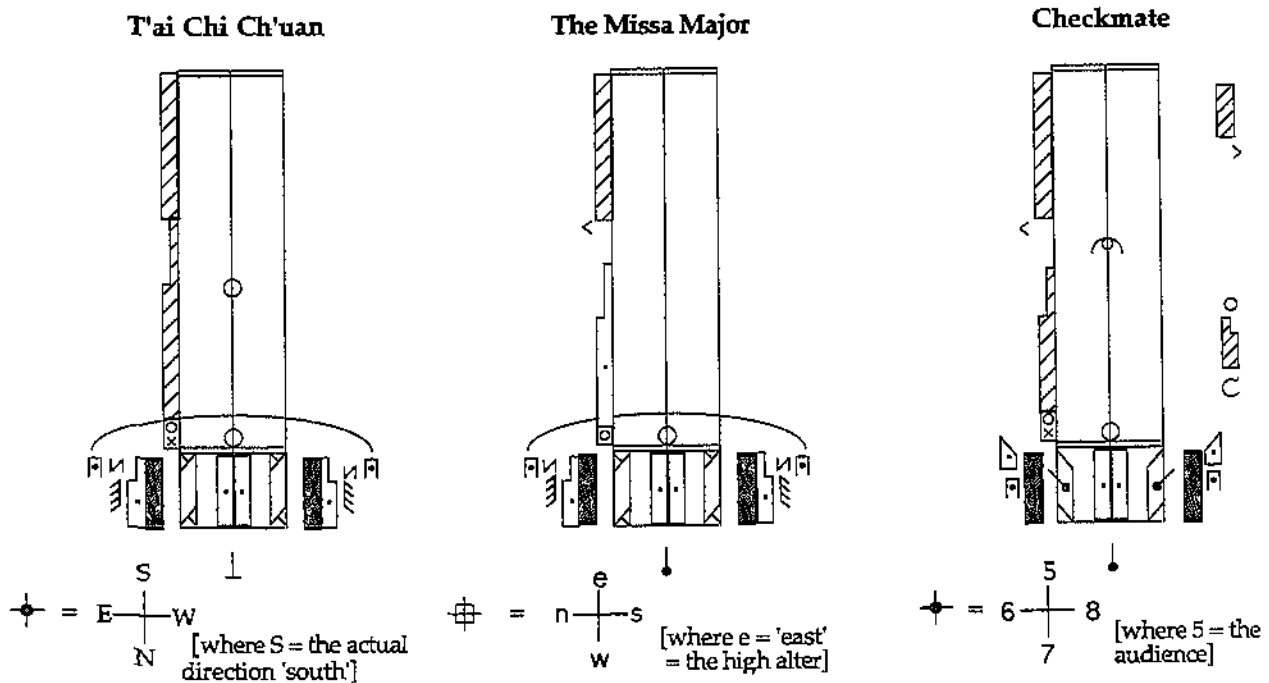
The exclusion of kinesthesia from the Western taxonomy of the senses—this (ab)sense, as it were—is particularly interesting because scholars of perception as diverse as Descartes, Dewey, Gibson and Merleau-Ponty all acknowledge body movement as the unexamined ground of *all* sensory perception (Farnell 2003: 134).

We learn from Farnell that it is impossible to understand or to represent human actions without taking into consideration *the spatial characteristics* of the action signs that are involved. These remarks are relevant:

But a still better example would be that of the application of 'above' and 'below' to the earth. Here we all have a quite clear idea of what 'above' and 'below' mean. I see well enough that I am on top; the earth is surely beneath me! (And don't smile at this example. We are indeed all taught at school that it is stupid to talk like that. But it is much easier to bury a problem than to solve it.) And it is only reflection that shows us that in this case 'above' and 'below' cannot be used in the ordinary way (Wittgenstein 1958[1953]: 111-112, para. 351).

How and in what ways a movement-writer's perceptions of "above" and "below" are radically changed is skillfully explained by Farnell and Durr (1981: 226-241) for the benefit of those who do not read or write movement. Pertinent to our discussion, however, are three bows, written in Laban's script below.

### Three Bows



In her exegesis of three bows, Williams explicates emergent performativity. The basic question is the *identity* of a physical action. There is no more reason to assume that the three bows are equivalent than there is to assume that three homonyms have the same meaning. There are three different sets of constitutive relations and so *three semasiologically different acts emerge*. This point is likely to be missed if the analyst makes a falsely iconic equation. The three bows are not only parts of different systems but are performatively very different. *Each bow unfolds a different reality*, a universe peculiar to its own system.

In each case, a body is no simple physical object, but a person acting from a particular point, creating signs that define a self with respect to other selves (Urciuoli 1995: 194 - italics added).

Urciuoli's points (p. 15) cannot be overstressed, but how can we summarize the main comparative features of three stretches of movement-writing in the key signs?<sup>15</sup>



**T'ai Chi Ch'uan**  
E = [S,W,N,E]

1. Uses actual geographical space and directions with South as the dominant facing in China and north in the West. Tied to an ancient Chinese cosmological system based on the *I Ching*, it is a form of Taoist meditation.

2. The initial bow is to the Tao. The movements are smooth and flowing with no break or pause occurring throughout. The aim is control of the *chi* (energy) of the body. Also used as a self-defense technique. It is from Shao Lin; the "soft" school of movement.

3. The conceptual space of the exercise technique is based on a compass with an actor standing in the center. There is no relation set up with another group as audience or congregation. In China, T'ai Chi uses the 'real' directions of N, S, E and W.

**The Latin Mass**  
L = {e,w,n,s}

1. An embedded liturgical space, using the cardinal directions, not necessarily corresponding to a geographical set. In the Mass, the high altar is liturgical east. The rest of the set derives from Christian theological concepts.

2. The bow is to a monotheistic Divinity. The actions are 'ordinary' in the sense that they could be performed by anyone. Celebrants are mediators between the congregation and a tripartite Divinity. Actions are dignified and performed deliberately.

3. The conceptual space of the Mass is based on a scheme of assigned cardinal directions: {e,w,n,s}. The celebrant is a mediator between Divinity and congregation. The liturgy is a public act of worship related to an institutionalized religion.

**Checkmate**  
F = {5,6,7,8}

1. An embedded space based on a performer-audience relation where actual geographical directions are irrelevant. Spatial arrangements of the ballet are taken from a chess game. The choreographer uses the game as an allegory.

2. The bow is to another character in the ballet and is an apology in the context of a code of honor that is central to the plot of the ballet. Like T'ai Chi, the moves are part of a formal idiom of human body language and could not be performed by everyone.

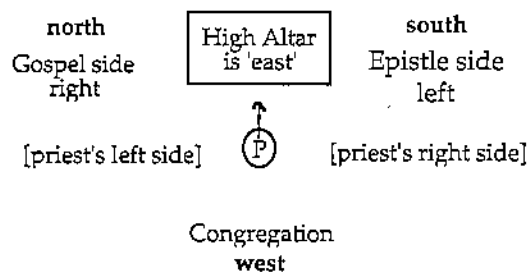
3. The conceptual space of the dancers in Checkmate is twofold: it involves (a) the spatial schema pertaining to the stage and (b) the pattern of moves of each character in relation to others. The ballet is classified as an art and an entertainment.

There are many more differences among the E-space of T'ai Chi, the L-space of the Mass and the F[orm]-space of the ballet that could be discussed, of course (Williams 1995b). Our purpose here has been to illustrate how three *visible* 'bows' depend for their system-specific meanings on several *invisible* spatial, orientational and deictic features of the whole systems to which they belong.

### Transformations of the Dominican High Mass: Theology

Pope John XXIII announced the convocation of the second Vatican Council, subsequently referred to as Vatican II, in 1959. Preparatory work occupied the greater part of the next four years, formal sessions began in October 1962 and after the death of Pope John in 1963, continued until 1965 under the pontificate of his successor Paul VI.... The form of the Mass before Vatican II had been settled by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), hence it is known as the Tridentine Mass. According to its rubrics the officiating priest stood with his back to the congregation facing [liturgical] east and the entire Mass was said or sung in Latin. The changes after Vatican II, in addition to several less significant ones, required the use of the vernacular instead of Latin and, as Dr. Williams characterises it, the 180° shift of the presiding priest from a position in which he stood with his back to the congregation to a position in which he faces it across the altar (Pocock 1994: i-ii).

In fact, the spatial alteration of the Mass changed the role of the Catholic priesthood in ways that are discussed in detail in Williams (1994).<sup>16</sup> The problem lies in the "priestly space" of the Mass:



The priestly space of the Tridentine Mass,  
where  $L = \{e, w, n, s\}$ .

In the old Mass, celebrants had no problem with their orientation to the liturgical space diagrammed above. They faced the altar of a transcendent Divinity, just as the congregation did. The priest was identified, in terms of his mortality, *with* the congregation, although he was placed in the position of a mediator *between* them and the Divinity. He was in some sense a mirror-image of the Divinity. Confusion about the priest's orientation and identity arose because turning him around raised the question of *who is celebrating the Mass*.

Turning the priest around meant that his right side corresponds with liturgical north and his left with liturgical south. Where he had been *in persona Christi only at the moments of consecration* in the old Mass, it now seemed that he was representing the Christ figure throughout the Mass.

There was much personal confusion (many priests had literally to re-learn all of the moves they performed in the rite), but theologically, the move had serious consequences: the Divinity now became *immanent*, not *transcendent*. That is, in post-Vatican II Masses, the priest is located (as if in da Vinci's painting), in the visual position of *being* Jesus, and in some odd sense he is being a "host," as at a dinner table.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the friars told me they simply celebrated 'new' Masses as if they were in the same relation to the altar as they had been in the old rite (as if liturgical west were still behind them) so that the congregation "just happened to be in front" of them. They maintained their concepts of transcendence, and proceeded as if nothing had happened. They had fewer personal problems with the changes, but they were aware that their congregations didn't have the luxury of choice, nor did some of their colleagues, who were unsuccessful making the conceptual and practical shifts.

In the old Mass, it was possible for a priest to celebrate the *sacramentum convivium* decently, even though his emotional commitment or personal involvement in any given celebration of the rite might vary. Because the space in the old rite was open (the transcendent model), it gave all who were concerned "somewhere to go" psychologically. In the old rite, God could be thought of as "out there" or "up there" for those who think in literalistic spatial terms. In

many of the new rites, the Divinity is suddenly projected “down here” or “in between” the celebrant and the congregation. The Divinity was now in the midst of the situation and there was (and I think, still is) an uneasy suspicion that neither the clergy, nor the congregation—far less the vernacular languages—could cope.

While in theory, the priest is still a steward and a mediator between Divinity and humanity, the spatial change has clouded or even removed him from these roles. He now represents Jesus in a quite different sense. *Turning the priest around closed the space and generated confrontation.* The spatial relationships in the old rite did not do so.

### Transformations of the Dominican High Mass: Role-Playing

Although profound confusion was generated by the spatial changes, *the basis for the confusions was never identified.* Spatial disorientation may affect different individuals to different degrees, but it is undoubtedly an important factor in knowing *who* we are and *where* we are, and (in a Mass) *what* we are doing.<sup>18</sup> Following Dumont (1987)<sup>19</sup> we understand that human spatial concepts themselves have hierarchical characteristics that must be taken into account if we are to understand how cultural differences, continuity and change occur—even in movements (and whole systems) that appear superficially to be the same.

On the whole, priests were extremely self-conscious about gesture in the proliferation of “new” rites, and so were their congregations, many of whom expressed their dismay in editorial columns of newspapers in Britain, where they alluded to “liturgical bingo” and similar sarcasms.

Public ceremonials exteriorize certain concepts, ideas and beliefs that have reference to spiritual, psychological, intellectual and political survival among their participants. Inevitably, the implications of changes of the magnitude that took place in the Mass have both the invisibility (and the respectability) of the unexamined. Pocock says:

All human action is significant and the more highly that significance is valued, the more likely is it that the action will be precisely laid down and predictable, the less valued the more random.... Once we pay attention to what people are telling us, the idea that significant acts *do* what words cannot becomes more and more compelling. What concepts divide only action can join and action alone can sever the logical, analytical, classificatory or other habitual associations of concepts....*The implementation of nice ideas without regard to their embodiment has unpredictable and irreversible consequences* (Pocock 1994: v - italics added).

The Dominican friar-preacher only enacted one role with regard to the rite of the Mass which was mediated by the notion of his stewardship. In contrast, actors and dancers enact many roles during their professional lifetimes. There is a well-recognized difference between a sacred vocation and a secular profession, just as there are differences between liturgical and dramaturgical models of events.

Actors and dancers do not act *in persona* the kings, queens, divinities (and others) that they represent in the semantic spaces of dances and dramas. If they did, we should doubtless find them forming political alliances, declaring wars, or visiting disaster or benevolence upon the world in their spare time. At least, they might behave like ambassadors of the personages whom they represent. An actor who has played the role of a priest will not, however, be asked by members of the audience to preside over a funeral, a baptism a christening or a marriage—or to celebrate a Mass. Similarly, a Catholic priest will not be asked to understudy the roles that actors and dancers perform on stage.

One of my informants, ordained in 1975, was the first member of the Dominican Order in the English province to join the Order who did not encounter the Latin rite in any form. He underwent seven years' novitiate. He was not trained in how to say Mass at all. When asked how he learned to celebrate Mass, his reply was, "One is there every day, so you pick it up as you go along." Effectively, there is no more formal liturgical training.

There was disagreement among younger priests about the old rite: some were happy it was a thing of the past, some were not. In the Oxford and Leicester communities, I was told that one of the main problems with the Missa Major was the complications, the "involvements" of it, which pointed to priests and liturgists who were over-scrupulous about celebrations of the Mass. The interesting thing is that those who are happy with the demise of the old Mass are convinced that they are involved with "what we are doing" rather than "external rubrics," as if "doing" is somehow unconnected with thought processes. The fundamental problem in my view is that *changes in the old rite of the Mass were made without any regard for their embodiment.*

### Other Kinds of Change

Vatican II did not, I think, *intend* for its liturgical changes to produce a social environment conducive to the triumph of Protestantism, but that is what I believe it did. The form of the Dominican Mass I researched had persisted for (roughly) four centuries (1563 to 1963). It (and the old Benedictine rite) had longer histories of survival than most ceremonies and rituals in the Western world with the possible exception of those pertaining to monarchies. The Council's changes were laid down between 1959 and 1965, and, as Pocock tells us, "One word more than any other is associated in popular memory with Vatican II and that is the Italian *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date)" (1994: i).




















The result was a monumental restatement of Catholic teaching—and the virtual obliteration of Dominican (and Benedictine) liturgies. Thus, another factor of change must be added to the list of Tourism and Orientalism that we have already examined: "Modernization," which is frequently carried out, following what I think of as a 'law' of *unintended* consequences. Likewise, American Deaf communities had modernization forced upon them by people who believed they were acting in the best interests of a group who were classified as "animal-like," (therefore "primitive"), who must become "modern," (therefore fully human).

Anthropologically speaking, modernization has a “flip side” (noted in connection with the case of the Hopi snake dance): “Preservation” oftentimes forms the basis for national (Native Americans and Australian Aborigines) and more localized (Ju|’hoan traditions in Botswana) policies of assimilation. Here, the question of literacy again becomes relevant.

### Literacy Again

Farnell has said, “By ‘literacy’, I mean the ability to read and write movement so that translation into the medium of words is unnecessary for creating ethnographically appropriate descriptions of actions” (1994: 937). It is a strong statement, but one I fully endorse for good reason. We give lip service to the fact that we cannot really translate into words what movement accomplishes with regard to understanding, just as we say that the medium of movement *does* what the medium of sound only *says*. At the same time, skeptics will maintain that word descriptions can do the same job as human action *if we are detailed and careful enough*. But, is this really the case? Do spoken language terms provide sufficient information to allow auditors or readers to *perform* the action sign(s)? An example that Farnell uses from Boas (1890) is instructive.<sup>20</sup> He is describing a gesture used on the northwest coast of British Columbia:

BOY, ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS OF AGE: open hand raised in front of breast to the height of the chin, palm turned toward face (Boas 1890: 639, cited in Farnell 1994: 955).

- 1) Does ‘open hand’ mean  the hand  stretched  with the fingers together  ?  
Or,  the hand not stretched but with the fingers separated? Or,  the hand stretched and fingers separated? And are such distinctions constituent or contingent features of a sign? Given what we know about the symbolic importance of distinctions between right and left hands, does it matter which hand is used? And what about the symbolic values attached to all the other dimensions— up/ down, front/ back, inside/ outside?
- 2) Does ‘raised’ mean  along a straight vertical path, or  towards the chin, or  away from the ground, Or simply  upwards?
- 3) Does ‘in front of the torso’ mean  centrally placed? Or , to one side; and if so, which side, that which is the same as the active arm or its opposite?
- 4) Are the fingertips facing  (upwards),  (sideways), or  (forward left diagonal high)?  
Is the palm just facing toward the face  or addressing the face  ? Does it maintain a relationship to the face throughout  ; or merely end in such a position  ?  
(Farnell 1994: 995 -956)

If we attempt to perform this sign as written above, it becomes clear that there are so many ambiguities in the description that accurate reproduction is impossible. Only someone already familiar with the sign could reproduce it. The description is simply an aid to memory. Otherwise, the example serves to illustrate a different perceptual apparatus that is acquired and developed as one becomes movement-literate. Working from the word description only, several problems emerge.

And, suppose we are sign-talking about a boy about fifteen years of age who is going to school, stalking a deer or riding a bicycle? How does any single action sign such as this move from one part of a whole 'sentence' or thought to another?

I am tempted to continue with examples of the *methodology* of movement-writing; to plunge into detailed explanations of Laban's script and its uses, in an attempt to persuade readers that the ability to read and write movement is justifiable in terms of the time and effort required to make literacy possible. Yet, doing so would lead us away from the insights suggested by the inscription that precedes this paper, i.e. "signification *is* an action and so must be located in time/space;" "The creation of meaning is above all embedded in human relationships;" "All [human] selves are culturally defined, as time and space are culturally defined."

### Literature, Culture and Evolution

On the whole, we have moved away from describing human beings (whether 'bodies' or 'minds') as mechanistic, biological objects, just as, on the whole, we have abandoned dualistic modes of discourse that separated bodies from minds. In general, I think, we would accept the post-Cartesian statement that "it is our acting that lies at the bottom of our practices" (Wittgenstein 1977: 204). However, we neither expect—indeed, we *know*—that we could not have evolved culturally, technologically or in any other way thus far without spoken language literacy.

Incongruously, we seem to believe that we can further evolve as a species (or as scholarly disciplines) without movement literacy—without the similar kinds of understanding about human actions (and action sign systems) that we possess with respect to speaking and language.

We seem to think we can advance by remaining *nonliterate* with regard to the medium of human action—that we can do without the means to reconstruct, read, write, analyze, think or perceive in terms of action signs themselves and the written symbols that represent human actions and the space/times in which they exist. Granting that the task of reading and writing human actions is complex, it is, for all that, not insurmountable. What seems insurmountable is the vast accumulation of popular (and scholarly) misconceptions that have arisen about the human signifying body and its actions *because* of nonliteracy. "Darwinism" for example,

sees the living process in terms that emphasize competition, inheritance, selfishness, and survival as the driving forces of evolution. These are certainly aspects of the remarkable drama that includes our own history as a species. But it is

a very incomplete and limited story, both scientifically and metaphorically, based on an inadequate view of organisms; and it invites us to act in a limited way as an evolved species in relation to our environment, which includes other cultures and species. These limitations have contributed to some of the difficulties we now face (Goodwin 1994: xii).

Darwin's theory is one of the most successful and popular theories ever to have emerged in the sciences. "No aspect of human life is untouched by Darwin's theory of evolution, modified in various ways to apply to economics and politics, to the explanation of the origins and the significance of art, and even to the history of ideas themselves" (Goodwin 1994: vii), but

What Darwin did was take early-nineteenth century political economy and explain it to include all of *natural* economy. Moreover, he developed a theory of sexual selection in evolution...in which the chief force is the competition among males to be more appealing to discriminating females. This theory was meant to explain why male animals often display bright colors or complex mating dances (Lewontin 1991: 10).

The notion of "display" is still at the foundation of many people's assessments of human dancing, but even more discouraging to someone studying human action sign systems is the evolution of mechanical models of human beings. Edmund Leach (1961/1966), reminding us of mechanical models and social anthropology, remarked "Radcliffe-Brown was concerned, as it were, to distinguish wrist watches from grandfather clocks, whereas Malinowski was interested in the general attributes of clockwork," but the story didn't end there, inside or outside of social anthropology:

Trapped by the machine model, we have passed through a succession of fashionable metaphors in different technological eras. Once the brain was a telephone switchboard, then it was a hologram, then it was an elementary digital computer, then a parallel processing computer, and now it is a distributed processing computer (Lewontin 2000: 74-75).

Undeterred by the failure of mechanical models then or now to explain anything important about human beings, and seduced by "The reigning mode of explanation at present [which] is genetic" (Lewontin 2000: 16), there are those who currently pursue visions of "memes and meme complexes (or 'memplexes'). In *Viruses of the Mind* (Chapter 3.2), I [Dawkins] developed this theme of religions as mind parasites, and also the analogy with computer viruses" (Dawkins 2003: 117).

The thought (not a "meme") of conjoining the idea of replication with culture, is interesting, but there are better ways of discovering how replication exists in human culture than the introduction of yet another vague, contradictory notion of "cultural units."<sup>21</sup> The best of these ways lies in the direction of movement literacy against a background of what spoken language literacy has achieved regarding human life on earth thus far.

Literacy preserves previous generations' knowledge, learning, inventions and much more. Nothing that has been called "progress" or "civilization" would have been possible without widespread literacy and the fact that our knowledge of the structures and patterns of conventional languages came

about through literate comparisons of written texts laid side-by-side. It is reasonable to assume that if we could compare texts of human action sign systems, we would reach comparable revelations about human life and culture.

Written texts revealed such rules, standards and models of spoken language that we possess. Written movement texts can provide epiphanies of understanding due to comparison and the nature of movement-writing itself. Written music has furnished us with profound insights into scales, structure, harmony. Written texts of action signs provide the same conditions for analysis and understanding, because "The Laban script becomes a mode of registration in and of itself, a means to apperceive and conceive of movement without the necessity of translating into spoken language terms but in ways that offer the same kinds of awareness of the medium that spoken language literacy provides" (Farnell 1995: 24). Elsewhere I have said,

Movement texts undermine the ways we normally think about human acts and actions because they force us, cognitively, to put images of human bodies into events and into our thinking about events. When you are confronted with a movement text, you can no longer live solely in a notionally abstracted world of words alone (Williams 1996b: 122).

But, on the whole, human movement lacks literacy. Unfortunately, the non-literate do not see the invisible structures that govern cultural performances of moving, human persons. I also believe that movement-literacy among scholars in the sciences and the humanities would throw light on the human evolutionary process, which is, after all, an evolution of complexity.

Like the medium of sound, the medium of human movement is not infinite. There are 'finite state grammars' of human actions just as there are 'finite grammars' of speech. Although different in many ways, the parallel mediums of sound and movement are made up of known "bits" that are constantly in use and they constantly change. The whole signifying body, calculated on the basis of eighty-six degrees of freedom set out in Williams (1976a and 1976b) is capable of 41 billion, 194 million, 137 thousand, 6 hundred permutations in space. No human action sign system "on the ground" exhausts all of this potential. To discover significant elements in any given sociocultural system of body language, we need to start with the physical and logical possibilities and impossibilities of the human body in four-dimensional space.

The notion of "all theoretically possible human movement" in semasiology, for example, is fundamental to comprehending how and why meaningful human action (thus cultural replication) occurs.<sup>22</sup> It isn't necessary to resort to genes, "memes" and computer viruses to comprehend the process. In other words, I am convinced that whenever movement literacy enters the picture, then (and only then) does real understanding of continuity and change in patterned human movement across time come into its own. Without movement literacy, our comprehension of human culture is limited to our present state of knowledge—wholly dependent upon spoken language literacy.



In spite of the "limitations of any script, as well as the history of relations between literacy and power,"<sup>23</sup> and

For those who would cry "scriptism," let me simply say that advocating movement literacy is not a legitimizing strategy but rather a proposal for new creative language and a ferocious critique of the dominant culture. The hegemony imposed by traditional linguistics in determining that only those things which can be written down are to count as 'linguistic' is not a motivating factor here. It is my view that the atomistic nature of analysis is a temporary but necessary component, and indeed creates a discourse of its own, but it is not an end in and of itself. It is employed in the service of piecing together again so that a deeper appreciation of the whole is thereafter possible (Farnell 1995: 25).

Given the conditions of movement literacy, we could fully understand that "signification is an action and so must be located in time and space" (Urciuoli 1995: 189), in a more radical fashion that we have imagined possible up to now.

**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> For a more comprehensive view, see Williams (2004b).

<sup>2</sup> "Literate" in the sense of small groups of people who are literate in contrast to masses of people who are not.

<sup>3</sup> The Sanskrit word *kathak* (story-telling, composition) is similar to *kathaka* (narrator; one who recites), both referring to a tradition of dramatic recitation utilizing gestures and musical accompaniment of religious teachings still practiced in the temples of India. There are four main schools of Kathak dancing: Lucknow, Benares, Jaipur and (later) Lahore.

<sup>4</sup> Another idea, examined later, is the drive to "preserve" various traditions that, interestingly, often results in "modernization."

<sup>5</sup> Remembering, too, that films are endowed with an aura of *permanence* that the performed dance or ceremony does not.

<sup>6</sup> [Page's Note]: Chapman concisely contrasts the differing values that we in Western culture tend to place on spoken and seen information. The former is perceived to require translation, the latter is perceived to be universal in its visual message (1982: 133-34). The cultural boundedness of interpretations is sharply presented in Michaels (1986) and further discussed in 'Hollywood Iconography: a Warlpiri Reading' (Michaels 1994: 81-86). Burnett (1990) lucidly discusses the translation of visual images in ethnographic contexts.

<sup>7</sup> There is a notable exception to this in anthropological literature: see Worth and Adair (1972), where native informants were given cameras and instruction, and they became "film-makers."

<sup>8</sup> [Rovik's Note]: 'The Dance in Ancient Crete' is in *Studies Presented to David Moore Robinson*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis, 1951: 23-50) and 'Terpsichore; The Story of Dance in Ancient Greece' is in *Dance Perspectives* 13 (Winter 1962).

<sup>9</sup> One would wish to add to this list a brilliant work (Baxandall 1972) on painting (and dancing) in 15th c. Italy. Unfortunately, space prevents comment upon it in this paper.

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<sup>10</sup> Or, the Laban Script (see Williams and Farnell 1990).

<sup>11</sup> See Farnell (1994) and Varela (1993).

<sup>12</sup> Had Stokoe been deaf, for example, had he promoted his writing system among the deaf community at Gallaudet University as a means to develop literacy in their native language, had it been recognized and welcomed by educators of the Deaf and prominent members of the deaf community at the time, and had there been considerable financial resources poured into producing teaching materials and training teachers, who knows what the results may have been? At present, however, the American deaf community considers written English their second language, and as such, the only writing system they want (Farnell 1996b: 70).

<sup>13</sup> The author first defended the credibility of movement writing in Chapter 2, Section 3, of a B.Litt. thesis entitled *Social Anthropology and [the] Dance* (Oxford, UK, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> For relevant discussion and examples, see Farnell (1994) and Williams (1996a).

<sup>15</sup> The “key sign” is the symbol group to the reader’s left at the beginning (the bottom) of the written staff, e.g. 

<sup>16</sup> Because the complete ethnography is easily available, I will not repeat it here. It includes evidence regarding the origins of the Mass (see Williams 1994: 1-3) and the rationale for the liturgical directions (Williams 1994: 42-43).

<sup>17</sup> The intricacies of the linguistic shifts surrounding the word ‘host’ will not be discussed here.

<sup>18</sup> For many Catholics, these changes seemed sudden and arbitrary, but according to my informants, Vatican II simply pulled together and formalized changes already taking place locally in several parts of the world. See Hastings (1966) and Abbott (1966).

<sup>19</sup> Dumont suggests, “Let us suppose that our society and the society under study both show in their system of ideas the same two elements A and B. That one society should subordinate A to B and the other B to A is enough for considerable differences to occur in all their conceptions. In other words, the hierarchy present in a culture is essential for comparison (Dumont 1987: 7).

<sup>20</sup> Many used the same method of describing signs that Boas did, for example, Clark (1885).

<sup>21</sup> One is reminded of the Lévi-Straussian idea of “social phonemes,” that was (fortunately) abandoned (see Ardener 1989[1971]: 31-35 - the “phoneme debate”).

<sup>22</sup> The actual number is exponentiated to 10 to the 28th power. Translated into arithmetical terms, the result is 79 octillion, 228 septillion, 162 sextillion, 514 quintillion, 270 quadrillion with 15 zeros attached; that is 79, 228, 162, 270, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000. That is how many moves the human body is capable of making, thus the notion of “all theoretically possible human movement.”

<sup>23</sup> See Goody 1977a, 1977b; Harris 1980 and Herzfeld 1987: 39.

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