

ARCHIVES AND THE BODILY DIMENSION OF TRADITIONAL DANCE KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: For a dance researcher, audiovisual recordings are the most informative part of archives. For various reasons, in Estonia, re-embodiment of traditional dances has been based more on verbal descriptions and less on film and video. Nonetheless, some analysis has been done by today, and some findings on individual, local, and temporary variability of traditional dancing in different parts of Estonia exist, and some clips have been published. Despite of availability of archival video recordings, folk dance teachers usually prefer verbal descriptions, which leads to the loss of a great deal of detailed information. In the article, I explore some of the reasons for this situation, based on my own teacher practice and a case study inquiry among teachers of high school girls' dance groups involved in the process of the 12th Youth Dance Celebration in 2017. In this project high school girls' groups were proposed to learn *Ristpulkadetants* (Crossed Sticks Dance) in an unusual way – as a supplement to verbal descriptions, an archival movie clip was provided to teachers as source material. This made it possible to investigate teachers' interest in the use of film, as well as the facilitating or hindering factors of actual use. About a fifth of the involved teachers expressed an opinion that archival recordings contain information not yet verbalized in descriptions and could help them in adding new qualities to the bodily dimension of their own and their students' dance. As a result of the study, it can also be said that archive videos of a traditional dance are not that available to folk dance teachers as they would like them to be.

Keywords: audiovisual recordings, dance education, dance knowledge, dance research, folk dance, traditional dance

INTRODUCTION

For a dance researcher, audiovisual recordings are the most informative part of archives. Along with drawings, photographs and manuscripts they form abundant and reliable collections of dance knowledge. The bodily dimension of dance knowledge, however, is not stored in archives. Analytically, dance movements

can be separated from the dancer's living human body. In practice, they do not exist as abstractions. In order to understand dancing recorded in archives, it has to be embodied again by a dancer.

In Estonia, re-embodiment of traditional dances has been based more on verbal descriptions and less on film and video. For a long time, little use of audiovisual data was caused by the limited access to them. Today this technical constraint has been eliminated. Digitalized film and video sources of the Estonian Folklore Archives have been available for analysis for about a decade. Some findings on individual, local, and temporary variability of traditional dancing in different parts of Estonia are now there, and some clips have been published.

Today, traditional dances are often taught in folk dance groups. In spite of the availability of videos, folk dance teachers consistently prefer using verbal descriptions. From my personal practice I believe to know some of the reasons: an image, especially a moving picture, is much more informative than a verbal description, its layers open one after another to a specifically focused viewer during several observations only; this takes time and is much more exhausting than a quick look at a schematic notation. Even if the analysis has been done before, detailed information derived from audiovisual sources may be considered irrelevant in teaching folk dancers in a group.

I am very grateful to the Estonian Folklore Archives for the opportunity to address the burning issues connected with the ephemeral bodily nature of traditional dance knowledge. In a sense, our body is all we really have. Living traditional knowledge resides in that body only and makes it feel and act as a human being. Besides the archives as knowledge hubs, we could imagine living human bodies as vivid hubs where particular knowledge is gained, collected and preserved as well as created, produced and developed.

The aim of this article is to discuss the problems arising in the intersection of those two different hubs – when traditional dance knowledge is collected in the field and preserved on the archive shelves, and what happens when the human bodily dimension of the knowledge once lost has to be restored or recreated again, for example, for real dancing in a real body which is not the same and maybe even not very similar to the former one. For that purpose, I followed an example of publishing an archival recording of the performance of a traditional dance for learning, and I am going to analyse this case as well as the surrounding broader landscape of folk dance teaching in Estonia today and its connection with and attitude to the use of audiovisual archival sources.

As to my personal background, I am a traditional dance researcher, concentrating on the historical traditions of dance in different regions of Estonia, and besides that, addressing the revival of folk dance and neo-traditionalist phenomena to be observed nowadays, as well as the history and present of stage

folk dance and folk dance as a leisure activity in Estonia. I am also a practicing folk dance teacher and traditional dance teacher, making a quite clear difference between those two. In the context of this article, the concept of traditional dance can be understood as dances once “learned through unorganized visuo-kinetic transmission” (Bakka 1999: 74), narrowed down to the dances with an imagined or proven relation to peasant culture. I also use the term *folk dance* in this text mainly in phrases such as *folk dance teacher*, *folk dance group*, *folk dancer*, and *stage folk dance*, all referring to a specific but quite popular field of leisure activity, based on learning and performing traditional or stage folk dances in fixed organized groups with more or less professional guidance.

DANCE KNOWLEDGE IN THE ARCHIVES AND PUBLICATIONS

For a dance researcher, audiovisual recordings are the most informative part of archives. Along with drawings, photographs and manuscripts they form abundant and reliable collections of dance knowledge. Dance knowledge, as a theoretical construct, has been claimed to consist of articulated knowledge and bodily knowledge. Those two “are usually interwoven or complementary modes of profound dance knowledge” (Parviainen 2002: 22). According to Parviainen, the articulation of a phenomenon that happens only in bodily awareness cannot translate the bodily knowledge into a literal form but it can only indicate the existence of bodily knowledge. The existence of bodily knowledge is indicated in archival manuscripts as well as in drawings, photographs or audiovisual recordings. Hence, the bodily dimension of dance knowledge itself is not stored in archives because analytically dance movements can be separated from the dancer’s living human body; in practice, they do not exist as abstractions.

In order to catch the bodily dimension of dance knowledge, recorded in archives in whatever format, it has to be embodied again by a dancer – so can the bodily part of former knowledge be restored to some extent, and I argue that audiovisual sources with moving pictures provide plenty of opportunities for that, more than verbal notations, drawings or even photographs could. This has been shown, for example, in Norwegian traditional dance research where traditional dance analysis has been done on the basis of film and video material during several decades already (e.g., Bakka & Aksdal & Flem 1995) and the results are now actively spread in society (Bakka 2011; Bygda Dansar 2017). It is relevant to mention the Norwegian experience here because this has also been an example and source of inspiration for Estonian researchers and dance students (Estisk 2015). Bodily knowledge, as it is found in various practices such as any kind of dancing, playing a musical instrument or medical care, has

been addressed as “living knowledge transmitted from a body to a body very often through learning-by-doing” (Parviainen 2002: 22). This is more than true in the context of traditional dancing. Many problems we face in traditional dance revival movement in Estonia come from the gaps in the bodily dimension of traditional dance knowledge, which, in turn, are caused by interruptions in direct knowledge transmission from former traditional dancers to us.

Traditional dance research often relates to revival practices where questions about knowledge transmission in modern and contemporary conditions become especially visible. In Estonia, for about a century, re-embodiment of traditional dances has been based more on verbal descriptions and less on film and video. Verbal notations and descriptions of dances have been published in numerous books (e.g., Raudkats 1926; Põldmäe & Tampere 1938; Toomi 1947, 1953; Torop 1991, 1995; Rüütel & Kapper 2015) and actively used by folk dance teachers throughout the 90-years’ history of the Estonian Folklore Archives. Some photographs are also printed next to the descriptions but the main part of knowledge is still derived by teachers and re-embodied by dancers on the basis of written word, accompanied by sheet music and sometimes graphic depiction of a schematic floor pattern, movement trajectory or dancers’ position to each other. Books are the main source of information for folk dance groups, and nowadays they constitute an important section of the environment where traditional dances are re-embodied. The individual bodily dimension, missing from book knowledge, is added by dancers and their teachers according to their present living human bodies’ knowledge coming from outside the relevant dance tradition and even from outside of the traditional society.

WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE CAN AUDIOVISUAL RECORDINGS PROVIDE?

Audiovisual recordings provide hints to observers and analysts whose aim would be to restore the traditional bodily knowledge: film and video recordings reflect details of individual body positions, hand holds, neck and head hold (all that is very seldom described in detail in verbal notations), also partners’ positions to each other and their change over time during a single dance (e.g., due to spinning direction), step length, step direction, timing and *svikt* (vertical movement of the gravity centre of the body; see Blom 1981; Bakka & Aksdal & Flem 1995). With these scant data it is possible to, first, copy the filmed dancers, thereby experiencing cognition, sensation and feeling, similar to those the movement caused or included for the filmed dancers, and second, find logical connections between movements and their visual appearance.

In the Estonian Folklore Archives, dance films have been stored since the 1960s. It is mainly former peasant dances that were already going out of fashion at that time and were kept in the memories of older people or some exceptional communities only, where peasant traditions lasted longer. In the Estonian Film Archives there are also some excerpts containing dances from the 1930s, and later examples can be found in the Estonian Public Broadcasting Archives. The oldest dance recording in Estonia originates from Setomaa (Pääsuke 1913). For a long time, scant use of these audiovisual data was caused by the limited access to them. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that there was no access to the films preserved in the Estonian Folklore Archives. By now, technical constraints have been eliminated – digitalized film and video sources of the Estonian Folklore Archives (ERA DV 110–119) and other Estonian archives have been available for analysis for about a decade. They have been used for analysis to a small extent in student works and for learning purposes.

Besides the poor technical conditions of that time, there arose another reason during the Soviet period for scant or no use of audiovisual sources in dance research as well as revival activities. As I have suggested before (see Kapper 2016), it was the detailedness and diversity of the information contained in film and video. As we know, for presentational purposes, in general, but especially during the Soviet regime, traditional dances were standardized and stylized to meet the dominant aesthetic and political requirements. The individual and improvisational characteristics of traditional dance, well revealed in film and video recordings, also directly refer to the generally uncontrollable nature of folklore (see also Giurchescu 2001: 117). Their real content did not support the attempts to set norms and formal standards necessary for stage folk dance. Therefore, it was unnecessary or even inadvisable to see or analyse those sources. Thereby, an important opportunity to maintain and develop bodily knowledge in traditional dancing was left aside, while dancers' bodies were subject to the demanding workout for the unified stage folk dance.

By today, thanks to the access provided by the digitalization, some analysis of traditional dance examples on film and video has been done and first findings about the individual, local, and temporary variability of traditional dancing have been published (Rüütel & Kapper 2015). The volume of a book with first video-based *descriptive* (not *prescriptive*; see Nahachewsky 1995) dance notations refers to a problem that we face when tackling the video-based analysis with an aim to restore the bodily dimension of dance knowledge – it is the amounts of information included in an audiovisual recording, and the difficulties in its articulation.

By today, some of the audiovisual recordings preserved in the Estonian Folklore Archives have also been published in their original format, on DVDs,

such as dances from Kihnu (Kapper 2010) and Saaremaa islands (Rüütel 2014). One detailed attempt to restore the ephemeral dancing knowledge on the basis of verbal descriptions was done by some dancers in Hiiumaa in 2013, and was documented and also published recently as a DVD (Kõmmus 2017). During the period of the research project presented in this article, only one video clip was published online by the Folklore Archives. It is unfortunate because, as life has shown, a DVD publication is not enough anymore. Today we witness the situation where people expect everything they would need to be available online. In the case of books there is yet a habit (or we can even call it a tradition) of using them (at least among folk dance teachers when speaking about teaching traditional dances), but it is different with film and video. No “tradition” of using the VHS or DVD could develop before we had the Internet and YouTube, thereby the latter seems to have become a handy tool even for researchers. Recently, I was finishing an article for a volume edited by a Norwegian colleague. I was writing about Estonian *labajalg*-dance (flat-foot dance). As it is going to be an online publication, my colleague asked me to add a video link to the text because “YouTube videos are not representative” (he knows my material well enough to be correct in that). What does it show? Even dance researchers find YouTube as one of their first everyday tools in looking for some information. Why should we think that it is different by ordinary folk-dance teachers or folk dancers, which means, any people? If we want archival dance knowledge to be spread and re-embodied, we have to make it easily available.

During the period between presenting the first version of this article and finishing it, traditional dance videos from Saaremaa (Rüütel 2018) were also published online as a special issue. I suggest that publication on YouTube would raise the user numbers more quickly and provide easier access to the material, as well as spread the knowledge in a more efficient way. Besides all the trash we can find online, publishing of archival traditional dance clips on YouTube could also be a balancing power which could at least raise questions among folk dance teachers, amateur dancers, and enthusiasts.

Today, folk dance groups are often the environment where traditional dances are taught. The problem that has attracted my attention in connection with archives is the fact that in spite of the technical availability of audiovisual sources, professional folk dance teachers consistently prefer to use verbal descriptions in teaching traditional dances.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR THE SCANT USE OF AUDIOVISUAL RECORDINGS BY FOLK DANCE TEACHERS?

Being a practicing dance teacher myself, I believed I knew some reasons why folk dance teachers consistently prefer using verbal descriptions. Being aware how much more informative an image, especially a moving picture, is, and how its layers open one after another to a specifically focussed viewer, during several observations only, and also knowing how much time it takes and how much more exhausting it is than a quick look at a schematic notation, I honestly believed that these are the reasons for preferring books with short schematic scores. I had also noticed that even if video analysis had been done before, and then presented to the reader in detail, like in the book *Kihnu tantsud* (Dances from Kihnu) (Rüütel & Kapper 2015), the abundant information derived from audiovisual sources was just considered irrelevant in teaching folk dancers in a group. I was an example myself when using short keywords only to make notes for myself when preparing a dance class. But I certainly had the bodily knowledge in me, derived from recordings during the visual and embodiment analysis process.

It is important to mention that detailed information obtained from audiovisual sources is never completely ideal. For example, based on discussions with local dancers, several versions and details were left out from the book *Kihnu tantsud* during its editing process. Almost everything considered random or accidental or even undesirable or just “wrong” by community members was left out. Nonetheless, the amounts of information remain considerably larger than in the schematic *prescriptive* notations usually employed in folk dance teaching, and many details are also considered irrelevant in teaching in many cases. Last but not least, the ability to notice important aspects in video-recorded dancing may also be lower than expected.

Thus, being a practicing teacher myself and having done consulting work with colleagues in the processes of Dance Celebrations (2011, 2014, 2017) and the folklore festival Baltica (2007, 2010, 2013), I believed I knew part of the reasons for the scant use of audiovisual sources. Anyway, to find also other viewpoints or to confirm my ideas, I turned to my colleagues, folk dance teachers, in Estonia. I made use of the opportunity to show some archive films to a group of rather experienced folk dance teachers, let them analyse one clip in brief and then discuss the problems they could see with the use of audiovisual recordings in folk dance teaching (Kapper 2017b, private collection). The group consisted of about 20 active teachers from various age groups and with different backgrounds, from a BA in choreography to decades of working experience and self-teaching. The main conclusion we arrived at together was that folk

dance teachers fully understand the importance of careful watching, analysis and embodiment of archival videos because this can provide new information that is not present in verbal descriptions. But, at the same time, the same folk dance teachers claimed that archival videos are not available for them. This was in September 2017. According to them, this is also the main reason why they do not use videos in their everyday work when teaching traditional dances. They also emphasized in the conversation that it was not the time-consuming nature of video-based analysis and embodiment or the number of details derived from videos. It was just availability, they said. If they had them at hand, they would use them.

Intelligibly, those were the ideas expressed in an open conversation with colleagues, with their own face and name and in an environment where people had gathered to be educated, learn something new and gain new experiences. In real everyday work there may still appear other reasons such as lack of interest, because the bodily knowledge developed on the basis of audiovisual recording may not be directly applicable in teaching stage folk dance (which is the main activity of most folk dance groups today) or even counteracts in this process, for example, creating confusion among less experienced dancers.

To better understand the situation, and hopefully move towards solutions in the future, I had addressed the same and similar questions already before the above-described conversation, inquiring of the teachers of high school girls' dance groups involved in the process of the 12th Youth Dance Celebration that had taken place in the summer of 2017. Dance Celebrations are huge folk dance events with mainly new original stage choreography (in national style, i.e., partially based on traditional folk dance elements) and involving tight competition for performing places. This time, during the one-and-a-half-year process of the celebration, each age group also had to learn a traditional dance form which was then danced together at common rehearsals – before the real competition, proposed as a relaxing and entertaining joint activity. The target group of my inquiry, the teachers of high school girls' groups, was selected because of their very special chance to use that very archival recording I mentioned before – the only one that had been published online then.

THE CASE OF RISTPULKADETANTS

About a year before the celebration, in 2016, high school girls' groups were proposed to learn *Ristpulkadetants* originating from Saaremaa, performed by Marie Harjus (62 years old) in 1961 (ERA DV 117 < Mustjala parish – H. Tampere 1961). Both verbal descriptions and this movie clip were provided as source

materials (Tiis 2016). With my inquiry I wanted to find out to what extent they used the video source and what they generally thought of this opportunity.

The video was published by the Estonian Folklore Archives in the “virtual cellar” of the Estonian Literary Museum (Kivike 2016). Everything was technically perfect. There were two options to open the file – as MP4 or AVI –, there was no requirement to log in to see the material, the link to the database was printed in the book of dance descriptions (Tiis 2016), and it also opened through a QR code printed next to the verbal description in the book. Once opened, the link could be shared via any smart device and anyone’s favourite communication channel or social network. The video link was referred to at a teacher training seminar (Kapper 2016, personal collection), and it also included a short introduction of the dance version presented in the video clip.

The filming in 1961 had been done just professionally – there is only one person in the frame and every detail of her movement can be followed, unlike most clips we have, in which it is often quite tricky to track one dancer or a couple for a longer period of time. It is 36 seconds long and consists of three episodes; in the first one the dancer is presented in full height, then the footwork is shown separately and, in the end, there is another elderly woman in the frame watching the dance and probably commenting on it. The film clip is mute. What is even more interesting is the person filmed – it is the same woman who had shown and/or described another version of *Ristpulkadetants* to collectors a quarter of a century earlier, in 1936, when she was 25 years younger (ERA II 128, 258/9 (1) < Mustjala parish, Ninase village – Marie Harjus, 37 years – R. Põldmäe and H. Tampere 1936). One of the collectors, ethnomusicologist Herbert Tampere, is also the same for both sources. The dance versions presented in those two sources are different from each other even in their main step pattern, hand positions of the dancer are also different, and smaller details cannot be compared as they are not recorded in the verbal description.

High school girls’ groups learned the *Ristpulkadetants* and danced it together at first joint rehearsals in January and February 2017. In Tallinn, where the joint rehearsals began in January (Kapper 2017a, private collection), there were four high school girls’ groups only but they all performed the version suggested by the verbal notation in the book of dance descriptions (Tiis 2016). As I had no opportunity to see the joint rehearsals of high school girls’ groups all over Estonia, I asked the stage director of these groups to remember what versions were danced and she suggested that “there was everything”, including individually created versions that were not provided anywhere, and those that were partly the version from the verbal description and partly from the film (Helin-Mengel 2017, personal communication). This might refer to a relatively even use of both sources as well as little use or little attention to any of

them. The latter is also possible because this was not a competition dance but one just for dancing together; moreover, a short demonstration of both dance versions was provided at a teacher training seminar, too. So the version really performed by girls at the joint rehearsal did not exactly show if the video had been used or not.

Therefore, that spring, in May and June 2017, when the second round of joint rehearsals was also over and all tensions were down, because decisions had been made about who was allowed to participate in the main rehearsals and performances of the celebration, I inquired the teachers of high school girls' groups about their experience in teaching *Ristpulkadetants* to their students with the help of this published video. The inquiry was sent out by e-mail to the addresses the teachers had given to the register of participants in the dance celebration process, and it consisted of a link with eight questions. The answers were collected anonymously. Respondents, however, were encouraged to add their names and preferred contact data in case they were interested in a further discussion on the topic. Three teachers used this opportunity and shared their experience in more detail, generally coinciding with the ideas from the experienced teachers' group that if the videos had been more easily available, they would have loved to dive into them in search of new knowledge to be embodied.

In the process of the Dance Celebration, there were 42 groups of girls with a total of 51 teachers. I got answers from 21 of them. From those who answered, 10 teachers said that they had opened and seen the video of *Ristpulkadetants*, five of them several times and five just once. Different devices were used (smartphone, desktop computer, laptop) but the main method of finding the video was searching the database according to the reference given in the book. Only one teacher had used the QR code.

I also asked them if they suggested that their dancers watch the video, and all the 10 teachers who had done it themselves also said they did. Four of them watched it together with the girls, and one teacher said they learned the movement together with girls by the video. Five teachers just suggested that the girls watch the video in their free time. The teachers who did not use the video themselves did not recommend it to the girls either. To access the video, the girls needed just one first impulse from the teacher because the link was not available in any public place. The book of dance descriptions, with the link and the QR-code, was distributed to teachers only; these books are not sold in bookstores and arrive in libraries later, when the learning process of the corresponding celebration is under way or already completed.

The rest of the teachers, 11 people, who answered that they had not seen the video, justified their answer in two main ways – by reasons related to technical aspects or by lack of will or interest. The respondent could select several

reasons, therefore the total number of reasons is higher than the number of respondents who did not see the video. The answers can be grouped as follows (number of answers in brackets):

1. Reasons referring to technical possibilities or user skills:
 - I do not have a smartphone (2);
 - I failed to use the QR code (1);
 - it was difficult to find the video in the database (1).
2. Reasons referring to lack of will or interest:
 - I did not notice the video link, I did not know there was a video (3);
 - I did not consider it important because I had the description (1);
 - I did not have time for that (1);
 - it is easier to teach by a description (4);
 - I did not need the video because I knew the dance before (5).

As we can see, these anonymous answers do not exactly coincide with the results of the discussion with the other group of teachers who were thinking rather theoretically – if there was access, then I would – and sounded rather positive at least in the lively discussion. The anonymous answers as grouped into the above two main kinds of reasons show that there is a stronger connection with the will or interest in the possible information contained in the video (total 14) than with technical availability (4).

CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Conclusions about both teacher groups I have referred to here seem, to some extent, support the idea that in general there is some interest at least among some (maybe about 20% when speaking on the example of high school girls' group teachers) folk dance teachers in using archive videos. The interested teachers see the aim of using videos in the opportunity to get more detailed information about traditional dancing and build the bodily knowledge necessary for enjoyable and successful performance. Those people express the feeling that videos contain something that has not been verbalized in descriptions and this could help, first, in adding new qualities to the bodily dimension of their own dance knowledge, hopefully followed by a further development in their dancers' minds and bodies. Both groups also say that the videos are not that available to them as they would like them to be.

What can the archives and researchers do here? Should we boost the online publishing of archival recordings? What about special issues (such as Kivike 2016 or Rüütel 2018) versus or in cooperation with YouTube? *Retk läbi Setomaa*

(A Journey through Setomaa) (Pääsuke 1913) was published on YouTube by the National Archives of Estonia in 2014 and has been watched about 9,000 times by now, and the same film is also available on other channels. Anyway, I can argue that most folk dance teachers are not aware of the fact that traditional Seto dancing can be seen, learned and taught on the basis of this film. So, something needs to be changed in the users' minds before we can move to the construction or reconstruction of bodily knowledge with the help of archives. Probably folk dance teacher education and myself as a university lecturer should be blamed here; on the other hand, these are also possible resources to be used to put new approaches into practice. I am grateful to the Estonian Folklore Archives for their work in preserving and publishing the valuable materials for further and broader use.

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