

## A Knotty Duty: Codifying Dance Knowledge, Plus Nationhood

Basilio Esteban S. Villaruz  
University of the Philippines Dance Company  
University of the Philippines Dilliman

### Abstract

*What do we codify in dance, inside and outside of its performance? There are various viewpoints: to document a phenomenon, to analyze aspects of choreography or performance, to restage a dance and claim its authenticity, even to prescribe such as an unqualified representation of a national identity—as was and is a bent in post-colonial Philippines. Some of these angles are cursorily surveyed in this paper. Mainly, the paper addresses one practical way of knowing dance: by movement notation, its assets and limits. As one practicing this in a system—acquainted with few others—I discuss this mainly as an educational means. Some specific applications are cited, and the wherefores and whereases in such tasks to understand dance in its scope and significance.*

### Introduction

*Knot-theory models the behavior of systems that have the capacity for self-organization, for generativity and autonomy...\*\*\*Associative or Inferential thought provoked by the knot may thus condition spatial cognition because of the textured and deformative properties of the knot.\*\*\*Navigators, hunters, ocean fishers, trackers and traders must operate with complex mental maps...\*\*\*Less practical models are cosmologies, mental models of the universe, where spirits, ancestors, moral and spiritual qualities, together with terrestrial and celestial phenomena are conceived of as all having their proper place in some three-dimensional scheme.*

Suzanne Kuchner, "Why Knot? Towards a Theory of Art and Mathematics"

Little did I know that when I thought of this paper—without the word 'knot'—I was getting myself into a tight one, made up of several strands. In many ways that's how thinking—or doing—gets to be. It gets to be more 'knotty' when you 'string-in' your, and 'along' other people's thoughts. Plus all other images and experiences you've danced or lived through.

The knots Kuchner surveyed—triggered by Alfred Gell's idea on 'agency'—were shown at a Canberra conference in 1998. The knotty illustrations she presented were in clear dimensions, sculptural, in wood and fibers. She alludes to the legendary Gordian Knot that Alexander the Great supposedly cut, summarily did away with. I also recall Penelope's tapestry that she wove daily and unwove nightly. I've seen our T'boli's intricate abaca weave and tie-dyed designs. Many other Philippine tribes also do so in different materials, designs and colors

I take the image of knots for both choreographic and movement notation methods. In the first there is a dance called *qulpo* among the Ionians of the Greeks, and similarly the *klpu* among the Peruvians. A

description shows how a cord tied in knots provides mnemonic cues to space out the dancers. In the absence of a cord, kerchiefs are used.

### **Discussion**

Among the tribe called *Bukidnon* (mountain folks) in my area in the Philippines called Visayas, they have a dance *binanog* imitating the hawk-eagle. Composer-ethnomusicologist Christine Muyco says that in this the mnemonics are chanted words. At the same time when a man and a woman dance together there is the use of a wing-like shawl by the latter. Capturing the man with this shawl, the two are kept tied in space. This binding is also between the dancing and the music to attain what's called *sibud* or performance harmony. Further, the watchers join in what's called *ta-ta* and make *hiyaw* or vocal response, thus completing a social event.

Taking off from these traditional dances, I first describe the choreographic process and then the notating of dance movements.

### ***K-Notating in the Philippines***

Let me start with a few simple stories. But in their contexts, they are not really that simple.

*Story 1:* It took me a year and a half to finish a full-time study at the Benesh Institute of Choreology in London. This was from mid-1978 to spring of 1980, finishing with a project (1980).<sup>1</sup> Not having an adequate idea of how tough it was going to be, it took me at least a term to adjust.

When I got home, I did not really know what to do with it. But Prof. Corazon Dioquino from the University of the Philippines (UP) went to see me while I was holding a ballet class elsewhere. She told me they wanted to start a dance degree at the UP College of Music. With its dean Ramon Santos, we worked for a year on a proposed program for a 4-year diploma. As they were both musicians there were a good number of music courses in theory, history and performance. As I was a dancer, I did the same. With them I put in dance technique and theory, from ballet and contemporary dance to Filipino and Asian dance. Then I stuck in movement notation which they themselves wanted in.

After nearly 35 years and now also with a 5-year baccalaureate degree, UP is the only school that teaches movement notation. Where I used to be its only teacher through every six semesters (now down to four with more hours), today we have a past graduate who studied further with Rhonda Ryman in Canada. Now I simply attend demonstration examinations.

*Story 2:* All this time and since the idea of notating dance in the 1930s was done by Francisca Reyes Aquino, now a national artist, this remains as such in the Philippines. Then a physical education teacher in the university, she started an extensive field work in folk dances. Consequently these came out in nine books (later with contributions from others), in verbal notation, illustrated with formation and arrow-directions (like in other dance books), and music scoring by several musicians. Since her time to today,

many other dance teachers in the country follow her method like a bible. Tied with the system she somehow inscribed the idea of 'authenticity'.

*Story 3:* In a conference I set to honor Aquino's birth centenary in 1999, the issue of authenticity swept up anew. This was around a ritual dance called *subli* in Batangas, a Tagalog province. From there Aquino had inscribed an 'original' one that had long been the only known version. The *subli* is done to drumming, starting with a prayer of devotion. But Aquino asked a composer to set a lively triple-time accompaniment to make it more engaging.

But it so happened that a much-later researcher showed many other versions from various places in Batangas. She came out with a handsome book describing and photographing the versions, scoring the chant, plus asking this writer to notate one version in Benesh. To this day this researcher finds occasional vilification from the disciples of Aquino—for undermining her 'authentic' version.

Except in UP's dance program (1980), no other in the Philippines scores dance beyond the Aquino system since the Thirties. That's how steadfastly loyal are folk dance teachers in the Philippines.

### ***Dancing Out the Knots***

In dance-work, there are two experiences I here describe. One, that in choreographing.

Here you actually weave or knot moving body parts or several bodies together in time and space. You also do this with the dynamics of both music and dancers, and sometimes with the propulsion of a plot. These all unfold before an on-looker's eyes, ears, pulse and kinesthetic sense.

Choreographing a dance takes all these considerations to bring out a dance. You deal with real bodies trying and sweating it out to bring out a theme, from simply 'going with' the music to 'telling a story.' You take one or try out several routes or strategies to get through. We are told that the famous Jerome Robbins took many, thus further taxing the dancers' indulgence. But whether you're like the famous him or not, you also do knot and unknot, and knot again what you did undo. Then you review how you 'got along' with the dancers' bodies and the music's scheme, what you 'got in' of the story or theme, and finally 'got' from these altogether in studio time and space. And when you move to the stage or another place, you may have to knot and unknot again to suit a different performance space.

In a way, choreographing—especially in these post-post times—is fixing what looks unfixed, or unfixing what looks too fixed. To further complicate the performance mode, dancers might also carve out nuances and tempi from their own capacity—which can sometimes be better than what a choreographer originally intended. Dancers' own injury, temperature or temper may further 'subvert' what a choreographer had aimed for.

Furthermore, when the dancing is to live music the musicians may not always achieve the choreography's intended mood or tempo. That's another strand to deal with. Perhaps too, the sponsor's or the audience's own expectations—which can hype up or play havoc on a dancer's or choreographer's ego.

Such are the knots to tie together in such public and performance art as the dance. Such as what the old John Dewey thought of art as experience, as educational, or in today's social studies, as 'cultural'.

I think of the three acts of choreographing, performing and viewing dance as tying things together, each stage a mode of cuing or consolidating things. When we look at a live orchestra, it's also from a 'reading' a musical score that plots various instrumental parts together. This also recalls Gell's understanding of agencies to play out various cultural strands.

### ***K'noting Out the Dance***

On the other side of my experience is writing a dance score. This looks very much like a music score. (In more aleatory music, this can look far from traditional parallel scoring.) As notator you 'orchestrate' roles or parts together horizontally (in Benesh system) or vertically (in Laban system). These are all scored out in time and space, in varying dynamics and different gestural textures. You look at a one-dimensional map with inscribed tempi and amplitude—as though you were seeing a dance unfolding on such flat surface.

Of course it is *not* the dance. It somehow designates the dance. If you are a good notator and a good reader of a score, you see the dance *in it*, and you virtually see the dance *out there* as rendered by bodies in time and space. You read or write a dance score as best you can, so that you can stage the dance at its verity or best.

To be read parallel to this score is the music score. They share not only tempi but also dynamics (accents, suspension or flow, pianissimo or fortissimo, diminuendo or crescendo, etc.), repeats (from *da capo*), structures, styles, etc. A parallel reading of the music score also shows the qualities and range of instrumentation: voices, strings, winds, percussions, and how many of these weave in and out of each other or come together. When you choreograph with a music score, you are already intimated with these qualities and range in a musical landscape. And thus *partner* well with it.

Why does a dance notation score have such movement-textual utility? First, you see the design of the movements from high to low, locations and trajectories, and qualities in force and flow. Second, you see the dancers' relations to each other, from one or two to a whole corps, moving together, in unison, canon or counterpoint in both time and space. Third, you see the sculpting of movements out in space—confined or expansive—so that you see the total dimensions of a dance. Fourth, in the score you see detailed articulations and dynamics that an idiom or style requires, thus also recognize a dance's historical or cultural source. These are things which help us specifically contextualize a dance.

Educationally, a score reveals these dimensions of a dance as a whole, intimating a range of knowledge that parallels or amplifies kinesthetic knowing. Plus how a dance fits in or compares with other dances in technique or style, in historical or cultural progeny

All these may also be seen in films that document dance. Similar to reading a dance score, viewing a film actually requires a lot of previous (or later) knowledge that one instance of looking may not show. It

assumes a lot of givens. It is not a neutral source because you will also see a range of interpretations from various performers or performances—that 'intervene' in knowing a dance.

A particular performance may stem from a circumstantial given, like a recorded music's tempi and dynamics. I remember how one of our notation tutors explained how Hans van Manen's work to a Beethoven *Hammerklavier* music was choreographed to a specific recording so that it could only be danced to such recording. Similarly, I had done the same to a recorded Vivaldi concerto; when it was danced to a live orchestra in London, it was so slow that the dancers could not cope. (Earlier, I had cued the conductor at a rehearsal.) In the extreme, certain performances on film may show dancers taking liberties with the choreography, not just because of injury.

While in contrast the notation score is more neutral than a film, one dance scoring is not always the ultimate. Even in classical dance—East or West—there are differences in schools or styles. I have restaged Fokine's *Les Sylphides* from a score done for London's Royal Ballet at a particular time. I checked a film of the ballet as danced by the American Ballet Theatre. In various parts it had different tempi, steps and dynamics. I also checked on another film on the Royal Ballet; indeed that was the version seen in the score I used. The same can happen in folk dance, depending on when and where this was done live or on film, which bodies—young or old, etc.

This is parallel to the problem we had when a researcher showed *subli* in many versions. For years many thought there was only an 'authentic' one. A further irony about the resentment vented against her was that she was, by marriage, an adopted Batangueña. (Aquino was from another province.) That was one reason why she chose the place for her field project to complete a graduate requirement.

### ***The Social Knot***

One oft-quoted characteristic (some say what's 'natural') among Filipinos is their sense of community, starting with family to residency, from regionality to 'nationality'. These are all positive values. Yet it also has its adverse effects in the sense of intransigent loyalty, designated by language and ethnicity. In today's fad over street dancing, virtually each town and city, province and region, now has its own to project its identity. Sometimes divisiveness is still around despite an encompassing theme or cause for celebration (religious or industrial), due to styles in dancing or costuming, staging or accompanying.

Some locales would claim superiority due to their older tradition, and charge others of just inventing one to project their own 'identity'. When certain steps and devices seem to have come from somewhere else they are also deemed stylistic bastards.

On the other hand, even where specific steps and themes are prescribed, as in the worship of a Christian saint, the dancing and costuming styles can still run haywire into several tribal representations of the non-Christians. (The latter's motifs and dressings are now widely appropriated by Christians in festivals.) When this happens in a very prestigious street dance event as in Cebu, competitors conveniently slant their mode of representation to the host's focal theme or identification.

### ***Nationalist Agenda in Dance***

The first national artist in dance was Aquino. Starting in UP and urged by its president Jorge Bocobo, she scoured the countryside to unearth so many dances from the regions. It was the president's agenda of cultural recuperation in the '30s—against the sweep of American incursions. Bocobo also included archeology, history, literature and music. (At that time, the American government sent to US many students as *pensionados*. Aquino herself went to Boston University.)

Among Aquino's many books, she produced nine on Philippine folk dance. For generations these served as definitive dance manuals in the physical education program, from the grades to college. Later she also served in the Bureau of Education which further pushed their general use.

Aquino also inspired other folk dance teachers to follow her example. They also adopted her system of notation. These all served very well in propagating the currency of folk dance through the educational system. To this day it is still her system that prevails. But much later another researcher somehow modified it and called it by her own name, causing outcries from those loyal to Aquino. One knot that got unknot.

If such minor modification caused some division in folk dance—currently seen in two to three separate organizations in the field—how much more when introducing another? Moreover, a more tedious if exact kind and of foreign extraction? When the UP College of Music proposed a dance program in 1980, there was an attempt to consolidate it with another college. But with the former college's proposed load in music courses, plus movement notation, both colleges went separate ways. To this day folk dance researchers ignore any other dance notation but Aquino's. Furthermore, ballet companies conveniently copy from filmed versions, or come up with a hodgepodge of these.

Add to that the small yet pointed incident with Aquino's followers regarding the 'discovery' of other versions of the *subli*. To them the ethnomusicologist who did that undermined the authenticity of Aquino's version, with its composed waltz-time accompaniment.

### ***Where are the K'nots?***

Those who understand dance (and music) know the dances of a country (now called a nation) come from many places and peoples. The oft-hailed variety in choreographic expression (from folk to ballet and contemporary dance) lends prestige to a country's cultural projection in the national and international scenes. This variety all work together for good! Since Aquino's time, folk dance is still part of the nationalizing agenda in the Philippines. Yet, as seen in an incidents described above, this asset of diversity-in-unity could be undermined by dance practitioners themselves. Partly this is due to limited ethnographical or cultural perspective. A more nuanced interwoven notion of nationhood is not always found in general, even among educators.

One little example is the persistent resistance against a more comprehensive movement notation system. Many think that the film is more reliable, and thus there is no need for another mode of documentation.

Yet in Philippine theses in folk dance they still require Aquino's mainly verbal system of notation. Despite the long use of it, essentially it remains the same since the 1930s, but now enhanced by a film and hopefully a better description or contextualizing. This I see when I sit in one college's panel for graduate theses.

Indeed in practice, both notation and film complement each other. The latter has such immediacy and vivacity that there is no substitute for such function. But to get verifiable or comprehensive understanding, one must also see several films of a dance to know differences or versions that may be true (or 'untrue') in the field. In notation, there may also be different 'versions' according to where and when these were done.

May I repeat some assets in movement notation from the educational viewpoint.<sup>11</sup> I can only speak of what we do in UP. Our dance degree requires the students to do four semesters of dance notation. There used to be six, but when the program grew from diploma (four years) to the baccalaureate level (five years) and students had to take more courses, the teaching of notation was reduced to four—but with increased the class-hours.

The students do read and write to be able to execute dances from scores, or for examinations. All these extend the range of their dance repertoire in various techniques or styles. Beyond this, learning dance notation gives them insights into dance techniques, styles and idioms. They have to analyze movement, thus interiorize and exhibit their understanding of the dance and specific dances for interpretation.

Moreover, notation writing or reading demands musical understanding, with which movement must weave in. In the university the dance majors' musical studies include intensive music theory that has Dalcroze's eurythmics, singing and playing of musical instruments, and a lot of music history—mainly by listening. They have a music minor, often based on earlier musical training, and plus a music ensemble class. In compositional work, going beyond their own dance improvisation and composition, they often collaborate with music majors including composers who want their pieces to be danced.

### ***Which Nationality to Tie?***

Inasmuch as folk dancing was not only taught as an educational tool but also as an agency for national identification and projection, largely it remains an important aspect of nation-building.<sup>12</sup> Thus the primacy of the Bayanihan Philippine National Dance Company that earned its earliest fame abroad at the Brussels International Exposition in 1958. Yet unfairly it remains the only one to enjoy a national subsidy. The law that made the Bayanihan national promises to name and provide other groups—some older than Bayanihan—the same privilege in due time. Which after several years has not happened.

Of late, Ballet Philippines (BP) also aspired for the same national exceptionalism. Already BP has the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP) as its home-base, as school and theater, plus the centre's subsidy. BP also asked for a national subsidy, but twice that provided for Bayanihan. But where folk dance groups that objected to Bayanihan's singular privilege were timorous, in ballet there was strong and open opposition to grant just one company that privilege.

One of those was Philippine Ballet Theater (PBT) which is a seasonal company at the CCP—meaning only for performances. PBT also has subsidy from the CCP—but much less than BP's. A third objector was Ballet Manila (BM) which is purely private. Its own two theatres stand beside the CCP, with its broadcasting and fun-rides industry. BM is singularly stable and independent.

Still other objectors were non-mainstream or 'independent' groups, mostly in contemporary dance. They survive through their respective studio schools and erratic sponsorship, yet operate professionally. They also work as a network, collaborating in several annual projects.

Amid these, BP proclaims itself as the national flagship company. This claim reinforces its prestige and privilege in the country, so that it is first to represent the Philippines at home or abroad. They also often get a big slice of the production subsidies from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and easily from other national institutions.

This kind of jockeying for status parallels how dance is taught in the Philippines. The folk dance has always prevailed through the physical education that stemmed from the work and influence of Aquino and her disciples. To this day this has sustained wonderful and long-lasting results through the educational system. Perhaps much of Philippine folk dances might not have survived without that system, plus the activity of the Philippine Folk Dance Society (PFDS) which Aquino herself founded. PFDS has published several volumes on newly-researched dances.

At the same time, today there are only two schools that explicitly have dance degrees (not in physical education). One is at the College of St. Benilde in De la Salle University in Manila. The college basically structures an integrated program, like BFA/MFA abroad, where different departments interface with each other. Beyond classroom demands, its dance program has a young performing group that complements and stretches far the competence and experience of the dance majors. In a consortium with BP, other dancers may opt to dance there.

The other is in UP where courses are spread out through different colleges. Its basic bindings happen in the College of Music, with dance and music working hand and glove. These two thrusts are knotted together, with dance notation as a plus. To fulfill further ends like that of College of St. Benilde, UP also has a 27-year old UP Dance Company (UPDC). But in a state institution like UP, its bureaucracy could summarily take away long-standing provisions for the students. Because of a last chancellor, the productivity of UPDC has been much hampered.<sup>1v</sup>

While hyping up an isolated course in the Philippines, in dance notation, and showing its advantages as a practical and analytical tool in dance education, *this* also emphasizes what's lacking. To show what threads are still left unknotted, that otherwise could further a fuller teaching and understanding of dance.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally the full study took three years, with adjunct courses in art, music, mathematics, etc., but as a result those who left off from work consequently lost their jobs. Thus, the institute cut the years to half.



<sup>2</sup> Many dance companies rely on scores and films for their repertoire building. There is also medical/clinical use for movement notation, as what one Benesh notator Julia McGuinness-Scott developed in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hann writes: '...It is time to demote culture from its quasi-mystical status as the discipline's [anthropology's] master concept. ...Culture is best understood as *congealed sociality*, a transient patterning of clusters of behaviors and ideas. Contrary to nationalist rhetoric and to the main thrust of so much of twentieth-century anthropology, human sociality has rarely, if ever, become so congealed as to form discontinuous blocks congruent with entire populations.' Fox, R. & King, B. (eds.). (2002). *Anthropology Beyond Culture* (p. 273). Oxford: Berg.

<sup>4</sup> A UP-regent approved group like UP Dance Company lost the aid to its student artists in 2012. The chancellor's office removed it. With nominal and legalistic reasons to do so, he and his subalterns made UPDC 'unofficial'. That was to forget 25 years of serving the academic community, including colleges other than of music and other UP campuses nationwide. That administration did not understand how the performing arts are taught and nurtured beyond class hours. The existence of UPDC was valid through five previous chancellors but not for the sixth, Cesar Saloma. He also found no way to help revalidate UPDC's standing. It still exists, inasmuch as its college depends on UPDC for performances. But student artists no longer have allowances. Yet before getting on stage, there are rehearsal hours to polish a performance. For performances out of campus, the university is no longer sympathetic about the studio use. As though the country's 'premier state university' need not relate to affairs outside the Quezon City campus.

Years before 2012, when the dance program was instituted, the college had a private group (Dance Theatre Philippines) supported as a resident company. Beyond the dance majors, DTP took as members other students. I was then DTP's artistic director, and later of UPDC which I organized in 1987. UPDC provides dance majors performance experience beyond the classroom. It has performed through much of Asia, and members have joined as guests in other UP groups' tours in Asia and Europe.

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