Dance in 9th century Java: a methodology for the analysis and reconstitution of the dance .

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This short essay presents a case study – that of the dance reliefs of the Prambanan complex in Central Java, aiming to steer the discussion around an important aspect of any archaeological investigation of dance. Rather than focusing solely on contextual issues, such as the nature and function of dance at a particular point in time and in a specific socio-cultural context, the Prambanan case study questions how to engage with the archaeological dance record from a dancer's point of view, in other words in terms of movement reconstitution and its re-embodiment. It is almost tautological to say that dance is practice based and performance oriented. However it is often the case that it is precisely this aspect of dance which is neglected in archaeological accounts and no methodologies are being developed to deal with such issues. My work on the Prambanan dance reliefs attempts to bridge this gap.

A brief history of candi Prambanan

Prambanan is a village located at about fifteen kilometers from Yogyakarta. It boasts a now famous temple complex known as *candi* Prambanan (*candi* being the Indonesian word for temple) or *candi* Loro Jonggrang, from the name of a mythical princess associated with the complex. *Candi* Prambanan is in fact made up of more than one complex – the Loro Jonggrang proper, the *candi* Sewu complex and the smaller temples of Bubrah and Lumbung. All these are within the Taman Wisata Prambanan, an archaeological park which is a major tourist attraction in the island of Java, second perhaps only to Borobudur, also in Central Java, and a major source of revenue for the local inhabitants.

The area surrounding the Prambanan complex is historically one of the most important regions of Java. The Prambanan complex was unparalleled in its heyday in the ninth century CE.. It had over two hundred temples built within a system of concentric courts. The whole area surrounding Prambanan is regarded as sacred to this day. Ruling dynasties in succession built numerous temples in the area with the result that this is where one finds the highest concentration of Hindu/Buddhist temples in the whole island.

Towards the middle of the tenth century the royal court moved from Central to East Java, for reasons that are as yet unclear. This has been seen as an indication that the whole area was abandoned following a disastrous earthquake , though there is not sufficient evidence to support this theory of massive evacuation. In the sixteenth century a major earthquake, this time documented in the writings of the time, devastated the complex.

Rediscovered in the nineteenth century, Prambanan attracted the attention of Sir Stanford Raffles who had enthusiastically begun to record the antiquities of Java during his brief military campaign in the island. The complex subsequently underwent several restoration phases and work on it is still going on. All the sixteen temples in the inner court have now been completely rebuilt and on my last visit to the complex in 2001, the reconstruction of the temples in the outer courts had begun.

The Siva temple is the tallest, situated in the middle of the inner courtyard and flanked by other two tall structures, *candi* Visnu and *candi* Brahma. Occasionally *candi* Siva is referred to as *candi* Loro Jonggrang, because of the Durga statue it houses in the north facing chamber, which is said to portray princess Loro

Jonggrang. This generates some confusion between the main temple and the complex. *Candi* Siva 's main chamber contains a colossal statue of Siva Mahadeva; the other chambers have statues of Ganesa, the elephant headed god, of Agastya, the Saivite guru *par excellence* and the already mentioned Durga in her Mahisasuramardini aspect – killer of the demon Mahisa. The temple is famous worldwide for the reliefs on the inner side of the balustrade, which depict the *Ramayana* story. Of Indian origin, the *Ramayana* or story of prince Rama is well known in the whole of Southeast Asia, where it became a symbol of ideal kingship. The narrative continues on the panels on the inner side of the balustrade of *candi* Brahma.
The outer side of the balustrade of *candi* Siva has sixty-two reliefs which depict dancers and musicians in action . Each relief is a self contained, short dance sequence whose movements can be identified and reconstituted using the codifications found in the Indian work *Natyasastra,* a Sanskrit text on dance , music and drama dating back to the fifth century CE.

The dance reliefs of candi Siva
The sixty-two reliefs alternate with other reliefs, seventy in number, showing celestial beings in groups of three in a standing posture. By having three figures in most of the sixty-two dance reliefs performing segments of one entire movement we see the use of an iconographic animation device. Such small dance sequences, shown in fifty of the sixty-two reliefs , can be taken to be representations of a *karana* movement. (The nomenclature used here is that found in the *Natyasastra).* A *karana* is a small movement sequence which forms the basic unit of a now obsolete technique of dance but also, and perhaps more importantly, it offers a valuable tool for the analysis of dance movements, due to the way the dance unit is conceptualised. The *Natyasastra* is a seminal work because it gives an account of the dancing and acting body - conceived as one and partitioned across the text in the way it is described - which does not superimpose a dance model external to each dance form that is being considered but offers the opportunity to create a relevant dance model out of the dance itself. Through a study of the *Natyasastra* it is possible to retrieve a concept of dance technique which incorporates a set of criteria through which one can "extract" the characteristics of "a system of bodily actions" (O'Shea 2000:82) and the way these are systematically joined.
Thus the *Natyasastra* classifications and codifications of movement can be applied cross-culturally to a variety of dance forms, without necessarily having to postulate a derivation of such forms from ancient Indian dancing. The technique can be organised out of breaking up the dance body of each dance form, segmenting and fragmenting the dance actions (and corresponding body parts which initiate the action) of each specific dance and slotting them into a category, corresponding to a *karana,* arranging each category on the basis of three body elements: the upper and lower body and the body's position in relation to a central axis (and any deviation from it). The reassembled dance actions constitute a dance phrase which in turn becomes a dance unit, susceptible of further subdivision – a dance *karana* . In practice, I have used this model for a theory of corporeality of the 'Prambanan dance', organising the analysis around the concept of technique, centred on the dance *karana*. By arranging the movements into *karanas*, I have in fact used a tool which emerges from the dance itself - here I specifically mean the dance movements of the Prambanan reliefs. This occurred as the dance was being re-embodied: the re-

embodiment was led by the segmentation process and subsequent co-ordination of the limbs' movements.

Karanas are not static poses; they are movements. However, the Prambanan reliefs show us poses, movements frozen in time . These are in themselves insufficient to reconstruct a dance sequence. This is where the concept of *karana* can be usefully applied to the pose. Through an analysis of the smaller movement elements visible in each relief it is possible to understand the movement dynamic of the sequence and assign to it a specific *karana* which is based on that movement dynamic. Once the sequence is matched with a *karana* – in other words, "identified" as a *karana* - it is possible to supply the missing movement and the sequence can be re-embodied. This of course does not constitute a whole dance; however one has the movement vocabulary of a dance and can proceed to use such movement vocabulary in new choreographies, if so desired.

A linguistic and literary analogy might help to understand this process: let us think of dances – choreographies – as being literary compositions such as poems. These 'poems' of 9th century Java are irretrievably lost. What we have however is a series of words, even phrases – the small dance sequences – which of course can be strung together to make new "sentences". These "sentences" will never be the original "sentences" of the original dance compositions. The reconstitution of the dance movements seen in the Prambanan reliefs does not amount to a reconstruction of the dance forms of ninth century Java. But it is a reconstitution of some of its basic dance "vocabulary".

The reliefs showing musicians give us some clues as to the kind of musical instruments employed. There are flutes and drums. The reliefs do not show us the context of the dance: the focus is entirely on the dance figures. It is the *Ramayana* reliefs that give us some clues as to the context of dance performances. In one of the *Ramayana* reliefs we see a street dance in connection with the celebrations for the coronation of prince Bharata, thus we can infer that dance was performed at major festivities. From other dance reliefs found at other temples in Central Java such as Borobudur we can infer that dance had a role to play in a ritual context. Some of the Borobudur reliefs show dancing activities near a *stupa (*a Buddhist burial mound with a relic of a holy perso, such as the Buddha himself)

Analyzing dance

One question springs immediately to mind: can the *Natyasastra* be of help in analysing all kinds of dance? Here one needs to exercise some caution. Conceptually the notion of technique retrievable from this work is not tied to any specific dance form, because the technique arises from the form itself. However, I would be wary of advocating the *karana* as a universally valid tool for analysis, without having the opportunity of testing it further. One thing that certainly helped the analysis of the dance of the Prambanan reliefs was the awareness that there was an affinity between Indian dance and Javanese (and also Balinese) dance, in the way the dancing body is constructed around the articulation of joints (in relation to one another), and in terms of alignment and medians . For example, the *Legong* dance of Bali uses extreme deflection of the hip from a central axis and extreme angularity of the arms to be held at shoulder level with a sharp bend of the elbows, the forearms facing forward and the hands thrust upwards, perpendicular to the respective wrist joint. Deflection of the hips is also found in Indian dance, especially in Odissi.

Culturally, ancient India and ancient Java were very aware of each other and Indian high-culture was imported and consumed in ancient Java. Thus reference to the

Natyasastra system seemed to be contextually appropriate in this research. Nevertheless, scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan have highlighted the analytical properties of the *Natyasastra* and its potential use in a cross-cultural context (Vatsyayan 1983a;1983b). It remains open to further enquiry and research how far this can be stretched and how useful such an endeavour would be.

References

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