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Establishing lineages through discursive and choreographic practices

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DANCE, SENSES, URBAN CONTEXTS

Dance and the Senses · Dancing and Dance Cultures in Urban Contexts



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ESTABLISHING LINEAGES THROUGH DISCURSIVE AND
CHOREOGRAPHIC PRACTICES: ODISSI DANCERS' REFERENCES TO
MAHARI & GOTIPUA DANCES

Odissi dance is officially considered as the "classical dance" of the Indian State Orissa (renamed Odisha in 2011). This paper explores practitioners' claims that their dance is rooted in former dance practices by two different groups of performers who were linked to an important local pilgrimage centre. Ethnographic data shows that Odissi practitioners do not specifically try to reproduce the modes of performance of their reference groups. Furthermore, they show a keen interest in highlighting the novelty of their own dance creations. It actually appears that for them, the creative act itself is grounded in references to former performers and their practices, which contribute to establishing Odissi's genealogy.

Keywords: dance; Odissi; India; lineages; choreography

Till the fifties of this century Odissi in its degenerated form was confined with the Maharis (Devadasis) and the Gotipuas (boy dancers). It was then called Mahari Nacha (Mahari's dance) and Gotipua Nacha (Gotipua's dance). [Patnaik 1990:i]

This statement exemplifies the points of views of Odissi practitioners, a dance form that emerged on urban stages of India after the independence of the country in 1947 and is officially considered as the "classical dance" of the Indian State Orissa (renamed Odisha in 2011). Practitioners link their dance to twentieth century practices by female temple servants (*maharis*) and male child performers (*gotipuas*) in an important local pilgrimage centre dedicated to the divinity Jagannatha. They consider these to be an expression of a dance form supposed to have been performed in local temples in antique times.

Debates on Odissi's inheritance

Though Odissi has not triggered as much academic attention as the better known Indian classical dance form Bharata Natyam, academic writing has tried to make sense of these forceful claims by its practitioners. Yet in the present state of affairs, positions taken up by different authors confront the reader with contradictory considerations.

One point of view is represented by Lopez y Royo who, recognising the mythical nature of Odissi dancers' representations, considers that linking Odissi dance to performance in temple rituals constitutes "a breathtaking manipulation of history" [Lopez y Royo 2007:157]. It is an undisputed fact amongst practitioners that all Odissi choreography has been elaborated from the 1950s onwards. Yet Marglin, who has done extensive research on the *maharis* in the 1970s, does not dismiss the idea of Odissi practitioners having inherited their dance tradition. Though she recognizes that "the nature of the performer" [Marglin 1990:212] as well as the "cultural content" [Marglin 1990:212] of the dance events that used to take place in the temple

are "radically different" [Marglin 1990:212] from those of Odissi performances, which take place on secular stages much like western theatre dances, she asserts that the "dance vocabulary" [Marglin 1990:221] of Odissi, comprising of "body posture, hand postures, head gestures, and facial expressions" [Marglin 1990:221] is identical to that of the *maharis*. Banerji's analysis follows this perspective too. While emphasising that "the tradition or philosophy that produced mahari dance" [Banerji 2012:31] cannot be reproduced by Odissi dancers, she does consider that "its elements are now preserved in Odissi's repertoire" [Banerji 2012:31]. However, the point of view of Rodier stands in stark contrast to these considerations. Having had the opportunity to watch an aged *mahari* dance during her fieldwork in the early 2000s, she concludes that the "improvised and exalted freedom of her movements had no resemblance whatsoever with Odissi"¹ [Rodier 2004:16].

What is striking is that Marglin's perception of a similarity between the two dances is coherent with that of Odissi practitioners, while Rodier's is not. In fact, the two diverging interpretations show "the importance of cultural convention in shaping the reception or 'reading' of art objects" [Layton 2003:447]. Considering that "[p]erception and perceptual consciousness are types of thoughtful, knowledgeable activity" [Noë 2004:3], it appears important to examine through which considerations and activities Odissi practitioners construct their perception that their dance is a continuation of practices by *maharis* and *gotipuas*. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in the 1990s and 2000s in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of the State Orissa, which is at present the main centre of Odissi dance activity, I shall revisit from an emic perspective the question of the relationship between Odissi dance and the practices that are represented to be its precursors.

How do Odissi practitioners engage with *mahari* & *gotipua* dances?

Forgetting the "roots"?

Marglin analyses one of the rituals that used to take place in Jagannatha temple until the second half of the 20th century, thus providing us with precious insights into the past activities of female temple dancers. She writes that the dance was "an enactment of cosmic and earthly forces" [Marglin 2003:5], which had "efficacy in bringing about the practical results of protecting the realm and bringing about prosperity" [Marglin 2003:5]. During that ritual, the *mahari* was considered to be *calanti devi* (the walking goddess) [Marglin 2003:4].

Reading her detailed descriptions, one is tempted to state that Odissi practitioners seem to have forgotten their "roots". Unlike Marglin, they do not attempt to uncover what made the efficacy of *mahari* dancing. Actually, Odissi dancers are not really concerned with the above scholarly descriptions. It would even seem difficult to disclose certain aspects that arise from Marglin's detailed reconstructions of the dance events in the temple in an Odissi dance class, as they comprise a sexual dimension that does not fit the moral codes of ordinary daily life. In fact, Odissi practitioners imagine their own *mahari*. This *mahari* does not possess the power of bestowing blessings onto the population. Rather, it is by inhabiting, during a stage performance, the role of a devotee seeking divine blessings that the Odissi performer tries to

¹ My translation.

commemorate temple dancers. Indeed, dancers may underline their devotional feelings, and consider them to be equal to those of a temple dancer.

Articulating continuity and creation

Odissi dancers actually consider that little was left of *mahari* dancing when Odissi emerged. According to them, in order to develop their dance practices, practitioners drew inspiration not only from the dances of the *maharis*, but also from those of the *gotipuas*, from ancient temple sculpture, and from ancient texts on dramaturgy and dance. So dancers are conscious that their choreographies were created neither by the *maharis*, nor by the *gotipuas*, but by the dance masters of Odissi. In their eyes, asserting that their compositions are a continuation of the traditions of the *maharis* or of the *gotipuas* is therefore not incompatible with this statement made by a second generation dance master during a dance class in the 1990s: "Nobody knows what the *maharis* used to dance in the temple."²

In fact masters are keen to highlight their contributions to the Odissi repertory. However, while teaching their dances, they make sure to link specific movements, musical patterns or literary elements to what they call the traditions of *mahari* and *gotipua* dancing. These references legitimate the creative act of the present by creating "genealogical and discipleship connections to earlier times and people" [Neuman 1990:147]. So the figures of the *maharis* and *gotipuas* actually constitute the starting point of Odissi's genealogy as demonstrated in the Odissi repertory and are supposed to define the performance style of specific dance schools.

Like other Odissi exponents, Bhubaneswar based third generation Odissi master Aditya³ considers creating new choreography to be a key element of his activity. This is exactly what in his eyes inscribes him into what he asserts to be a tradition held up by his "forefathers [...] for thousands and thousands of years" [Aditya 2009]. Composing new choreography is important for him in many ways. Since in Odissi, composing dance implies collaboration with the musicians who are specialised in Odissi dance music, it is a means of integration into the Odissi practitioners' relational network. Further, it is essential for his recognition as a member of the new generation of dance masters. During our discussions, Aditya represents his choreographic efforts as a way of carrying on where the most famous master of Odissi, Kelucharan Mohapatra, who died in 2004, left off, and thus perpetuating the *guru-shishya-parampara*, the master-disciple generational "chain". So, in Aditya's eyes, creation means preservation.

Yet, a few measures have to be taken for this exercise to be successful. Aditya is very concerned not to "jump the boundary" of "tradition". He asserts that his creation has to uphold the "typical things" of the dance, "obey the laws and regulations of Odissi". It is essential for him that choreography must not appear "like a modern choreography". It should not be "mixed", that is, intermingled with elements from other dance forms: "Not Chhau⁴, not ballet, not Western things, not creative dance, not that style". This is because "Odissi has its own beauty. So I don't want to destroy that".

² Undated communication, anonymous, Bhubaneswar, 1990s.

³ I have chosen to maintain the anonymity of my collaborators in the field. Aditya and Meera are, therefore, fictive names.

⁴ The term *chhau* is used for a number of dance forms, some of which are being practiced in Orissa. They are considered as "folk" and not as "classical" dances.

Refining the "rough" dances

Asked what the "typical" elements of Odissi are, Aditya cites "the lyrical movement", "the body movement, [the] neck movement, the eye movement, the *chauka* and *tribhanga* and how we [...] change [from] one movement to [...] another". Listening to him conveys a sense that the postures, movements and steps are stable elements of the dance tradition.

Tribhanga (a kind of asymmetrical *demi-pli *) and *chauka* (a pose like a *demi-pli *) are seen to be emblematic of Odissi. Yet, Odissi expert dancer Meera thinks that *tribhanga* was not part of the *gotipuas'* movement vocabulary. She even thinks that in her own school of Odissi, which claims to have inherited the *gotipuas'* dance, she is the one who introduced it. She clarifies that in fact the dances of *gotipuas* and *maharis* were perceived by Odissi practitioners to be "too rough" to find appreciation with the audiences of classical dances⁵. What transpires through her statement is that Odissi dancers do not view themselves as having simply retained the modes of performance of the *maharis* and *gotipuas*. They actually claim to have enhanced practices that were perceived to be a "degenerated form" [Patnaik 1990:i] of an invaluable dance form that may have been practiced in ancient times. They therefore consider transformations that have taken place through their choreographic activity to have reinforced the beauty, authenticity and identity of *gotipua* and *mahari* dances. From the point of view of Odissi dancers, these processes of conscious modification have not affected *gotipua* dancing – rather, they have made it more original.

Shaping the present by evoking the past

For Odissi practitioners, references to dance practices from the past are essential in the process of dance composition. Yet while representing their dance as a continuation of former dance practices, they carefully represent the dances of *maharis* and *gotipuas* as inferior to Odissi choreography. This superiority is not just grounded in aesthetic considerations. Establishing Odissi as a classical dance constituted an attempt to introduce dance practices into higher prestige groups of the local society.

However, the preoccupation of Odissi dancers with *maharis* and *gotipuas* has triggered new interest for them. Some revivalist groups of *gotipuas* have emerged, who claim to safeguard these dance practices from extinction, with some Odissi dance masters even becoming patrons of a number of these. And while the dances of the *maharis* have been said to be extinct after Jagannatha temple ceased to consecrate girls to the temple services in the second half of the 20th century, an Odissi dancer who went to learn dance with one of the last surviving *maharis* has opened a dance school and started performing what she now calls Mahari dance.

Examining Odissi dancer's claims of having inherited the dances of the *maharis* and *gotipuas* from the insider's point of view shows how discourses on dance, dance practices, and power relations between different groups practicing dance are interwoven. It thereby appears that Odissi dancers' ways of engaging with *mahari* and *gotipua* practices constitute a dynamic process through which a variety of goals could be achieved – the most prominent of those being the official recognition of Odissi as a "classical dance of India".

⁵ Undated personal communications and [Meera 2009].

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